

Table of Contents

Copyright

<u>Character Page</u>

Chapter 1: Arthur's Hometown

Chapter 2: A Silent Scream

Chapter 3: The Second World

Chapter 4: The Long-Lived Bird

Chapter 5: Laurie the Parrot

Chapter 6: What Laurie Wants

Chapter 7: The Guide

Chapter 8: Dame's Cure

Chapter 9: I'm not Jealous, I'm just Venting

Chapter 10: Randall and the Robin

Chapter 11: Bitter Potato Trees

Chapter 12: To the Castle Barracks

Chapter 13: The Bitter Potato Squad

Chapter 14: What Arthur Fears

Chapter 15: Lara Lefort Comes to Visit

Chapter 16: Lara Lefort's Worries

Chapter 17: Dale the Cat

Chapter 18: Deep in Arthur's Heart

Chapter 19: The Messenger Pigeon

Chapter 20: The White Cat of Mistral

Chapter 21: Competitive Annie and the Kind Goats

Chapter 22: Chestnut Cream

Chapter 23: Pork Stew and a Snowstorm

Chapter 24: The Guide Fox

Chapter 25: Onion and Cheese Soup

Chapter 26: The Darleys & Co. Doctor

Chapter 27: Snow the Cat

Chapter 28: Dale under Siege

Chapter 29: Beef Soup and the Golden Deer

Chapter 30: The Health Tonic

Chapter 31: Greta's Winter Blanket and the Pot Customer

Chapter 32: The McCrossin Family's Cough

Chapter 33: How Olivia Met Rob

Chapter 34: At the End of Dale's Stroll

Chapter 35: Homeward Bound

Chapter 36: Meetings and Partings

Side Story 1: It Goes Both Ways

Side Story 2: What Enola Wants

Afterword

Other Series

Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary Vol.2



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SOUP NO MORI ~DOUBUTSU TO KAIWA SURU OLIVIA TO MOTO YOUHEI ARTHUR NO MONOGATARI ~ Vol.2 by Syuu

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Chapter 1: Arthur's Hometown

ARTHUR was born in a country town on the edge of a lake. He and Olivia arrived there four days after leaving Soup Forest in a carriage.

Vacant buildings tend to fall apart quickly, and this house was horribly decrepit. A huge hole gaped in the roof of the one-story building, and weeds sprouted inside. They likely grew thanks to the light and rain coming in from the hole.

"It's been ten years," murmured Arthur, peering in through the entrance, the door hanging crooked on its broken hinges. "Seeing it now makes me realize how small it was. I feel kind of bad bringing you all the way out here just to see something in this shape, Olivia."

"Don't."

Olivia's response was so short Arthur turned around to look at her and saw her eyes closed and hands clasped in front of her chest in prayer. "Thank you," he said. "My parents and sister are this way."

"I just wanted to say thank you to the home that protected you as a child," said Olivia.

I married such a good person, he thought. He often had that thought. His wife was born a noble but lived a commoner's life and could find it in her to offer a prayer of thanks to even a house as run-down as this. To him, she seemed so very kind.

The two walked into the forest to a clearing filled with wild plants and a few small trees.

"They're here. These three trees are their grave markers, instead of headstones," said Arthur. "I dug the graves deep so they wouldn't be disturbed by animals, then I planted these trees here. They've grown a lot since the last time I was here."

They were three silverberry trees. Arthur moved over to them and placed a hand on each one in turn.

"This one is my dad's tree," he said. "This is Mom, and this is my little sister. I didn't have the money to buy real headstones, and I wasn't strong enough to drag some stones over from somewhere. Instead, I pulled three silverberry seedlings from the forest and planted them here to mark their graves. You get all sorts of little birds here when the trees get berries. I figured the birds would make for decent company, even if I wasn't here..."

"You did all that and you were only fourteen... I'm sure they can feel how much you care about them," said Olivia.

Hi, everyone, thought Arthur in prayer. I brought my wife to see you. She's such a compassionate person, and a hard worker. I'm doing good. I'm sorry I haven't been back for so long. But, now, I finally got the courage to come back to visit, thanks to Olivia.

Olivia stood beside him, also praying. Hello. My name is Olivia. I'm Arthur's wife. He's such a kind, strong, wonderful man, and I promise to cherish him. Please be at peace. You won't have to worry about him.

After their prayers, they raised their heads to look at each other and smiled.

"Let's take the horses over here. I want to give them a drink. There's a creek," said Arthur.

"We're lucky that horse we borrowed is so hard working and obedient. He's been getting along well with Annie, too."

"Yeah. It sure helps there hasn't been any bickering between those two."

Their hands naturally clasped together as they walked towards the creek. The horses' steps grew lighter when they smelled the fresh water. The creek was narrow and gentle, and the horses gulped down water with relish.

Water! Yum!

Nice cool water!

They must have been quite thirsty.

"My dad said he built our house there 'cause of this creek," said Arthur. "A

well might dry up during a sunny summer, but a creek won't ever run out of water."

"It's a beautiful creek. It seems perfect for children to play in, too."

"I had a lot of fun catching little fish. My sister and I'd use a net to catch them, then Mom'd cook them up and serve them."

"I get emotional every time you tell a story about your family. You sound like you were all very close."

"Thinking back now, yeah, I suppose we were. I didn't think much of it at the time, though."

They drew the horses away once they'd had their fill to drink, then Arthur led them to the lake where he learned to swim. It was a vast lake with small fishing boats dotting the center.

That's when Olivia realized Rob wasn't with them.

"Rob!" she called. "Rob? Oh, no. He just disappeared at some point. He must have found a rabbit or something." She put her fingers to her lips and whistled, then waited.

After some time, Rob came running back, making a racket rustling through the foliage. And behind him...

"Oh my! You came all the way out here?" cried Olivia.

"Whoa, that's a huge buck. And it really is gold," said Arthur.

"I was certain you would've gone to one of the areas next to Marlais. Why in the world are you here?"

The golden deer appeared slowly from the forest, though he didn't step beyond the forest boundary. Perhaps he was worried about people seeing him, or perhaps it was because Arthur was there.

You well? he thought.

"Yes, I'm doing very well," said Olivia. "I can't believe you came this far."

Many humans.

His memories flowed into her. It seemed he'd been hunted in Marlais's

neighboring regions as well.

Oliva then saw four does hanging back silently behind the golden deer. "Oh, are those your wives behind you?"

Yes. That human is male?

"Oh, yes. This is my husband. We're married."

The golden deer looked at Arthur with his red-tinged eyes. Mate?

"Yes. We can see into each other's hearts."

True mate?

"I think it's likely, yes."

Arthur was guessing what the deer and Olivia were talking about based on what he could hear from her. She spoke to the deer like she was speaking to a human, but Arthur couldn't hear what the deer said.

Live well. Bear children, said the deer.

"We will, eventually. Thank you," said Olivia.

The golden deer turned to the does waiting for him and disappeared into the forest without looking back.

"Well, that was short," said Arthur.

"Yeah. It was sort of a one-sided attachment from me, after all."

"Are you sure you're done? I can wait here," he offered.

"No, I'm done. I'm happy just knowing he's alive and well. I'm glad I saw him."

"You said we'll do something eventually. What did you mean by that?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm sure we'll talk about it. Eventually."

Arthur didn't push any more on that since Olivia's cheeks turned pink, and so the two went off to the inn where they would be staying the night.

Olivia had said she was perfectly happy to sleep in the carriage they'd rented for this trip, but Arthur insisted, both here and on the road, that they stay in actual inns.

"We can splurge just a little, now if no other time," he'd said. "I want to. It's nice to stretch out and relax on clean sheets when traveling. I want that for my wife."

They arrived at the inn and were eating in the restaurant on the first floor when Olivia called Arthur by his name while they were talking. The man at the table next to them froze for a second and stared at them with a look of shock on his face. Olivia wondered what that was about, but she soon found out because the man could apparently no longer hold back his curiosity and finally said, "Arthur? Arthur, is that really you?"

"Yes, sir, my name is Arthur. And you are?" said Arthur.

"It's me, Carl, an old friend of your dad's. You don't remember me, do you? Guess that'd be the case 'cause it's been so long since I last saw you. But I knew it was you right away. You look just like your dad."

"I do? Makes me happy to hear it. Actually, I'm here with my wife. We came to see my old home while taking some time off after getting married."

"You got married? Congratulations!"

Arthur and Carl continued chatting after that, while Olivia listened with a small smile.

But her expression stiffened as the conversation continued.

"There's going to be a big hunt here real soon, hosted by the royal family," said Carl.

"A hunt hosted by the royal family?" said Arthur.

"Yep. It's 'cause there's been sightings of this golden deer in the forest nearby lately. Apparently, the local lord told one of his relatives who works in the castle all about it. The story's obviously just going to keep on spreading after that. So now the whole area's buzzing with talk about it."

"Huh."

Arthur, thinking of Olivia, found an appropriate point to break off the conversation, and the two went up to their room.

"Arthur, what do we do?" she said. "A hunt hosted by the royal family? All

sorts of nobles and hunters with the best hunting hounds will take part. It'll be filled with only the most skilled hunters."

"Should we go warn him?" he asked.

"Yes! We have to warn him as soon as possible!"

"All right. At dawn tomorrow. We'll leave the inn before the sun even comes up."

Chapter 2: A Silent Scream

THE next morning, Olivia and Arthur woke before the sun rose.

They got dressed and quietly went downstairs. A worker was already up because the inn provided breakfast.

"Good morning. You're up early," she said.

"Yeah, we've got some stuff to do this morning," said Arthur.

"Um..." started Olivia like she couldn't help herself. "I heard there's going to be a royal hunt nearby?"

"That's right. People've seen a golden deer! I don't know who said it, but rumors have been going around saying it brings good luck. I guess His Majesty heard the rumors, too."

"Will the king be coming?" Olivia inquired.

"Oh, no, of course not. It'll be hunters sent by the king."

"Do you know when it will happen?"

"I imagine it'll start today or tomorrow."

"Oh. Thank you."

"Will you two be having breakfast?"

"Sorry, but we're in a bit of a hurry."

Arthur, who had been waiting for Olivia to finish her conversation with the worker, stepped close to her and whispered, "Doesn't look like we've got much time."

"No. But it's all right. I have an idea."

They stepped outside and found Rob sleeping underneath the carriage—he hadn't been allowed in the inn. Rob yawned and stretched all his limbs out with

a groan, then came out from under the carriage and looked up at Olivia and asked, sounding concerned, *Food? Where food?*

"We'll have breakfast after we go to the forest," said Olivia.

All right! Food, food, food!

Rob was always cheerful. He jumped into the carriage, in such a good mood he'd probably be humming if he were a human, then lay on the floor.

Arthur and Olivia boarded the carriage they'd rented in Marlais, then they hurried towards the forest. Arthur called to Olivia from the driver's seat, so she moved to the seat directly behind and opened the window.

"What was that? Did you say something?" she asked.

"Yeah. If the point of this whole thing is to get the pelt of the golden deer to give to the king, then I bet they'll use some method that won't damage the fur. They'll avoid hunting rifles and bows and arrows."

"Oh, you're right. What would they use, then?"

"Once, when I was working as a guard for a noble, he went on a hunt. He wanted a bearskin, so he was using loads of poison and traps. He put poison in some food a bear might eat, but I guess you can't do that for a deer. They'll probably use traps."

"It does seem likely."

"What are you thinking of doing?" he asked.

"Deer don't have dens. They can run free. They might find themselves in some other buck's territory, but I'm not worried about that since the golden deer is used to it. I'm going to tell him he should move somewhere else."

Arthur tried to figure out exactly what that meant she would do as he drove the carriage, but what she said still wasn't enough for him to make a concrete guess. "Ah, well, guess I'll just get to see what she can do. Something fun about that, too," he murmured to himself, looking forward again.

After some time, the carriage brought them near the lake.

"Is this a good spot?" asked Arthur.

"Yes, thank you, Arthur. All right. I'm going to scream. Silently. Try not to be surprised," said Olivia.

"Uh, sure," he said, while thinking, Silently scream? What in the world does that mean?

He had many questions but decided not to say anything. Instead, he watched as Olivia stood with the lake at her back, facing the forest, her eyes closed, her hands clasped in front of her as if she were praying.

She stood like that for some time, and then the shock struck Arthur's mind.

Hunters are coming! They are after the golden deer's pelt! Run! Run! Run far away!

Every bird in the forest took flight at once, their cries echoing between the trees, and Arthur couldn't help jumping. The sudden voice in his mind was loud and powerful and, he realized, indeed a silent scream. He looked at Olivia, his breathing slightly unsteady, but she still stood there, her eyes closed.

She was repeating what she said, still, letting out powerful yet silent cries of Run! Hunters are coming!

And a mass move began in the forest.

Wolves urged their pups on, though their pups were nearly as large as they were, trying to move as far from Olivia's mental yells as possible. Bears, both male and female, ran, their large bodies lumbering with surprising speed, spurring other animals into moving. Both those animals with dens and those without hurried north, away from Olivia's screams. Rabbits ran alongside foxes, while brown deer bounded gracefully past them.

The golden deer also heard Olivia's cry. He stretched out his long, graceful neck, his head tilted in thought for a moment, then he turned to his herd of uneasy does and gave them one high-pitched bleat.

Then, unlike the other animals, he began to move west.

The golden deer had survived for a long time, and he had been hunted often by humans. He knew humans came from cities, that they followed tracks, and that their hounds traced back the scent of animals. That's why he didn't head north, the same direction as all those other animals. He went west, with the city behind him to the east.

He eventually came to a large river. The river flowed quickly, but he didn't hesitate. He knew he could escape the hounds following his scent if he managed to cross the river.

The four does followed as the golden deer led them across, the morning sun illuminating them as they forded the river. The golden deer crossed carefully, gauging the depth of the river because the does were significantly smaller than him and more likely to be swept away.

Once the last of the does clambered up the other side of the river, they continued on, heading upstream along the rocky riverbed. They wouldn't leave tracks in rocks.

Back at the lake, Olivia said, "Arthur, can we go home after we say goodbye to your childhood home? I miss home."

"You think everything will be fine here?" he asked.

"I do. That deer is smart. I'm sure he's heading somewhere safe by now. Rob, you can play in the water a little if you want."

Food? No food yet? thought Rob.

"Oh, Rob, I'm sorry. I forgot. I had someone at the inn give me a little bit of boiled meat and bread for you. Here, let me put it on a plate for you."

Rob scarfed the food from the wooden plate, finishing his breakfast in a mere twenty seconds, gulped up water from the lake, then went to the carriage of his own accord.

"Rob's such a clever boy," said Olivia. "All right, Arthur, let's go visit your family again. Then we'll go home. The goats are probably waiting for us."

"All right. You get in the carriage, then, too," said Arthur, and they drove back to Arthur's childhood home.

Around the time Arthur, Olivia, and Rob went to the silverberry trees to say their goodbyes, a large group of hunters was heading into the forest from the city. They were all hunters skilled with traps, convinced they would be the one to present the golden deerskin to the king. But they were all wrong.

"That's weird. I don't hear any birds," said one.

"It's not just the birds. I'm seeing neither hide nor hair of any rabbits or squirrels," said another.

"Hey, come look at this. There are loads of tracks trampling the underbrush, and not just on the game trails."

These veteran hunters felt uneasy about these things.

"What in the world happened?"

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Is there going to be some huge natural disaster?"

But it was a rare opportunity to distinguish themselves by presenting a trophy from a hunt to the king, so they spent all day long setting up a huge number of traps to catch the golden deer.

They didn't see any living creatures in the forest the entire time they worked.

In the two days that followed, not a single animal was found in any of their traps.

"Maybe we angered the goddess of the forest," muttered the oldest of the hunters. The rest of them nodded in silence, as if they'd just been waiting for someone else to voice their thoughts. "I been a hunter for forty years, but I never seen anything like this. Apologies to His Majesty, but I value my life. Maybe the golden deer was the goddess of the forest in physical form, so she could come and play in the forest. I have no idea what'd happen if I caught something like that."

"I have to agree, when you put it like that. The kingdom isn't paying for my meals. It won't care for our wives and children if something happens to us."

"I'm out. I don't want to commit some sin."

Hunters spent their everyday hunting animals, and that made them superstitious. All several dozen of them pulled out of the forest.

"And if some high-up official gives us a tongue-lashing, we just need to

meekly bow our heads. At least that won't kill us," one said as they left.

It was far more terrifying to lose their only means of providing for themselves by angering the goddess of the forest, or from whatever injury they might sustain if they did anger her.

Chapter 3: The Second World

OLIVIA began tending to the potted plants in the restaurant when they returned to Soup Forest from Arthur's childhood home. She'd given them plenty of water and placed them in shade before they left and that, along with the fact that it was fall, meant the several dozen plants survived without withering to nothing.

"I'm sorry. You must want a drink. Here you go, drink up," said Olivia as she gave them water from the well and carefully removed any brown leaves. Rob followed her around, watching her as she did, his tail wagging slowly.

Arthur came back with Pete and Pepe around the time she was done watering the plants and had put them all back on the saucers in their respective locations.

Home!

Our own home!

"Welcome home, Pete, Pepe. Did you behave yourselves at Billy's?" she said to them.

We got bullied!

Bullied and belittled!

"Oh, by one of Billy's goats? I'm sorry. Please forgive him."

No forgive bully!

Hate bully.

"Haha!" Olivia laughed.

It seemed the two goats didn't like the dominant male goat at Billy's house. And that goat probably didn't like this new goat couple suddenly entering his herd. Billy might have given Pete and Pepe special treatment while he was caring for them.

"I'm going to go return the carriage," said Arthur.

"Oh, I appreciate you taking care of that, Arthur, even though you must be tired. See you in a little bit," said Olivia.

Hate that house!

Hate that goat!

"Oh, don't say that, you two," chided Olivia. "We couldn't exactly leave you here alone. Do you want to eat some grass? It's grown quite long."

Grass!

Yummy grass!

Olivia let the two goats out into the backyard, and they went to munch on the tall grass. They ate it all down to the base, resulting in a neat and tidy lawn.

More grass!

Want eat grass!

"All right. I'll let you outside the fence," said Olivia, then she kept an eye on them as they ate the grass outside the fencing. In reality, she wanted to get right to cleaning the house, but the two goats had been bullied by that billy goat for ten days. She wanted to make up for that first.

As she did, she heard an animal's inner voice.

Food come!

"Hm?"

She looked in the direction of the voice and saw a blue-and-white flycatcher watching her from its perch on a branch.

"Oh, hello. I'll get you something to eat," she said.

Food! Bugs!

"I don't have any bugs, but I do have berries. Wait just a moment."

She hurried into the kitchen, gathered up her jars filled with dried blueberries, wild strawberries, and raspberries, then went into the front garden. There, she shook out plenty of the dried berries with a rattling sound onto the bird feeder.

The flycatcher couldn't seem to wait until Olivia moved away. It flew to the feeder immediately.

"Eat up," she said. "I'll change out the water in the bird bath, too."

She used well water to rinse the large dish she always left out on top of a large, flat rock in the garden, then filled it to the brim again and put it back on the rock.

Wild birds loved clean water. They could always bathe themselves in the puddles and bogs here and there, but they were at risk of being attacked by foxes and wild cats. But they could feel at ease in the garden, and they seemed happy to drink and bathe there.

Grass! So yum!

Yummy!

Olivia sensed the goats' thoughts from outside the fence. She went over to them, thinking it was about time she put them back in the barn.

"All right, time to go back in the barn," she said.

More grass!

No want barn.

"Oh, don't say that. I want to make Arthur's dinner."

Arthur! Mate.

Arthur. Mate.

"I know, I know."

She smiled awkwardly and put the goats in the barn, opened the windows wide, then went back into the house.

Arthur had driven the carriage the whole time they were traveling. He surely must have been more tired than her since she could just sit there and relax, so she wanted to make him something nice for dinner.

She took some dried, butterflied trout from upstairs along with some onion into the kitchen, then soaked the crackly dried fish in a mixture of half water, half distilled spirits as she cut up the onions. While doing that, she thought of

the carrots in the garden. She found they'd grown large when she went to harvest some, their leaves healthy and upright.

The kitchen was beginning to fill with a wonderful aroma by the time Arthur returned from the more than a mile walk home.

"I'm back," he called. "Something smells good."

"I'm making dinner with what we have around the house," said Olivia.

"Can't wait. I'm pretty sure I'll live longer by eating your home cooking."

That was exactly what her grandfather, Jenkins, used to say. Olivia smiled but didn't say anything.

She stirred the pot while boiling some water to make tea. It was a mint tea mixed with dried catnip leaves and stalks.

As she watched Arthur enjoying his cup of tea, she thought, *Grandma and Grandpa may have moved on to God's garden, but I feel like they'll stay with me as long as I remember them like this. Are you two watching over me from the other side? I am so happy right now. I hope that helps you be at peace.*

Olivia added the trout to the simmering onion and carrot in the pot, setting it on top in large chunks as she waited for it to come to a boil again. Once heated, she put the lid on to wait for the trout to soften as she made biscuits. She planned to use baking soda in them since there wasn't time to wait for them to rise with yeast.

"Arthur?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"That was my first time being away from this house for ten days like that, but, I realized another fun part of traveling is coming home."

"Yeah."

"It seemed there was a blue-and-white flycatcher just waiting for me to come home. It called me 'food."

"Haha! I guess your name is Food, now."

"Yep. And it looks like Billy took good care of Pete and Pepe."

"That's good."

"But they kept complaining about a billy goat at Billy's house bullying them."

"I didn't see any injuries on them..."

"No. I'm fairly sure when they say they were bullied, all that really happened was the other goat insisted they listen to him. They were new to the herd. It makes sense they'd end up at the bottom of the ladder."

Arthur chuckled softly as he drank his mint tea. "You see such a serene world," he said.

Olivia took the softened trout from the pot and carefully deboned it, muttering, "Hot, ooh, hot," as she did, then stopped at what Arthur said. "You're right," she agreed. "I've always thought I had to struggle because I'd been born with this ability, but you're right. I've lived my whole life seeing a peaceful world."

"I only know one world, but you live in two," he noted.

"I...never thought of it like that. But I do, don't I? I live my life moving back and forth between two worlds."

Olivia kept thinking over what Arthur said while they ate dinner, then smiled at Arthur as she bit into a biscuit. "I always thought I was the only one living in a different world, but that's not true. I stand between two worlds, and I go into both of them. Thank you, Arthur."

"Why are you thanking me?"

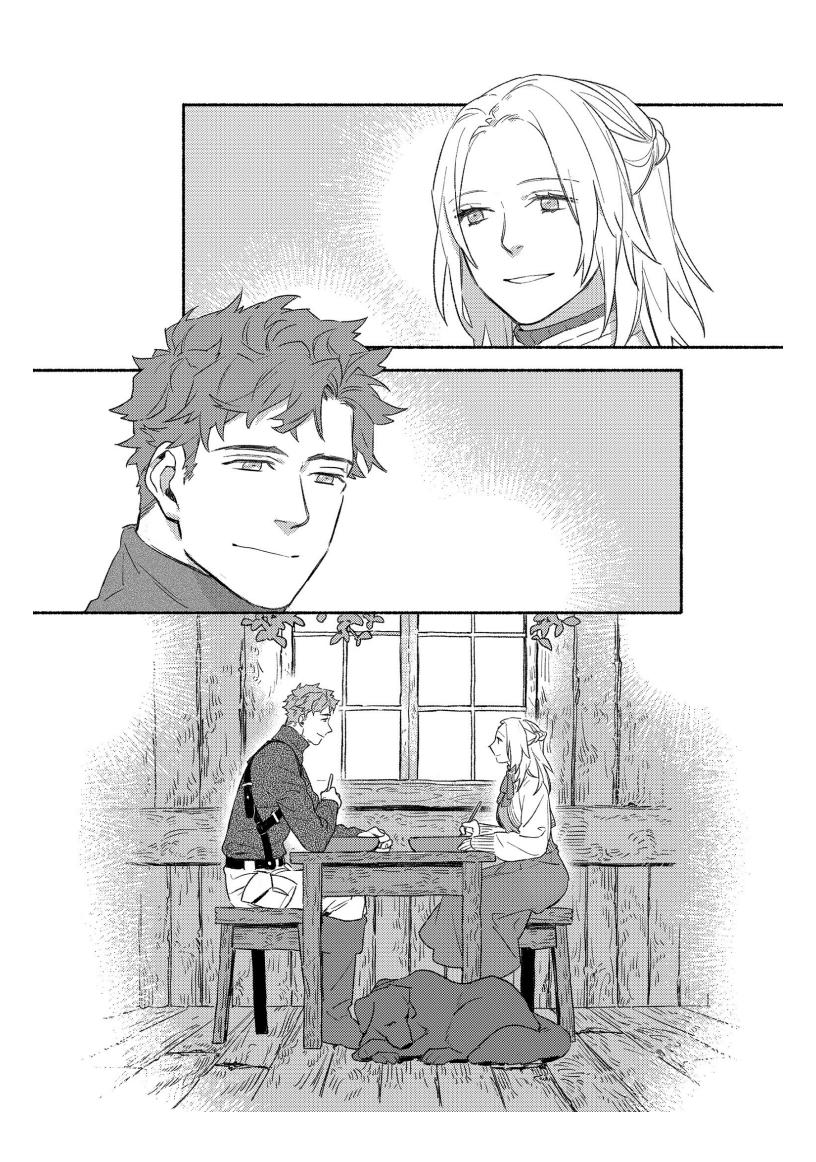
"No reason, really. My grandmother used to always tell me humans do bad things, but they also do good things, too. I've really come to understand what she meant after seeing what it's like living with you."

"Yeah? This veggie and trout stew is amazing, by the way."

"The trout bones make a good stock for the stew."

"Yep. It's really good."

Rob had finished his dinner long ago and now slept at their feet, time passing gently and peacefully in Soup Forest.



Chapter 4: The Long-Lived Bird

THERE was a customer, a woman, in her late forties. Her black hair speckled with white was cut neatly to about shoulder length, and her eyes were a deep brown.

She ordered the soup of the day, a slice of bread, and the set sides, as well as a cup of tea, and finished all the food but seemed uneasy. Her eyes roved around the restaurant, but she didn't speak to Olivia.

Olivia was certain she wasn't a farmer from the area, and she also didn't look like one of the people from the villas. The impression Olivia got from the woman was that of an experienced servant from a well-off house on her day off.

Olivia was consciously careful not to read the woman's thoughts, but something drifted into her anyway: She's not here, is she? Perhaps she's passed away. What will I do now?

Having heard that, Olivia wondered if this woman might have come to see her grandmother, but it would be very odd on Olivia's part to go up to approach this woman and tell her that her grandmother was dead without the topic coming up first.

As she worried over what to do, the woman began pulling her things together to leave, looking at Olivia all the while. The woman's eyes looked so at a loss that Olivia finally pulled together the courage to go over to her. Luckily, all the other customers had already left.

"How was the soup today?" asked Olivia.

"Oh, it was very nice," said the woman. "It might look like simple, homemade food, but the taste would stand its own against anything a seasoned chef cooked."

"Thank you. I learned everything I know about cooking from my grandmother.

She was such a good cook."

"Pardon me, but, your grandmother is...?"

"She passed away five years ago."

"Oh, is that so..."

"Did you know her?"

"I did. I'm sorry to bother you while you're working, but could I maybe ask you something?"

"Of course. What is it?"

The woman introduced herself as Lina. She worked for a fairly high-ranking individual. "I visited this restaurant several times a long time ago, it must have been ten years now, with my former master," said Lina.

"Really?"

"He's passed on, and I now serve his son. And, well, there's something worrying my current master."

"Oh...?"

"He's incredibly worried about his parrot."

"His...parrot?" Olivia repeated.

"It's a type of bird from a southern country. My previous master purchased it from a merchant and cared for it very carefully until just before he died. I'm concerned because the parrot doesn't seem to be doing well."

"May I ask you a few questions, Lina?"

"What sort of questions?"

"Well, I don't believe birds ever live that long in the wild."

"The merchant said parrots live forty, even fifty years. Essentially as long as a person. This parrot is only twelve, still a child, in human terms. But it's ill," Lina explained.

Olivia found it difficult to believe a bird could live fifty years, but decided to assume it was true for now. "What made you think of coming to my

grandmother for advice about the parrot? Do you need medicine?"

"No, it's actually just that, when we were chatting in the restaurant, my former master proudly told your grandmother about the parrot. Once he was done singing the parrot's praises, he said the parrot would outlive him, since they live for decades. He was going to leave the parrot to his son once he passed. But he was actually worried about his son because parrots are so long-lived, since his son was such a kind and honest boy, he was worried his son would be upset if the parrot fell ill."

"I see."

"And now that just happened, I remembered your grandmother had said she might be able to help should anything happen to the parrot."

Now I understand, thought Olivia. Grandma would have seen me talking to sparrows and grackles and flycatchers. When she said she could help, she likely meant me, actually.

"I think when my grandmother said she could help, she really meant me," said Olivia. "But I've never seen a parrot, so I'm not sure how helpful I'll be. But if my grandmother said that, then I can't very well stand by and do nothing."

"Oh! Does that mean you'll have a look at the parrot?"

"Yes. Where is it now?"

"In the capital."

"The capital..."

Lina's excitement immediately dwindled when she saw Olivia's thoughtful look. "I understand you run this restaurant. I suppose you couldn't close it while you came all the way to the capital."

"I actually got married recently and only just reopened the restaurant after closing it for our honeymoon. What a pickle. And I suppose you'd be uneasy bringing the parrot here, since it's unwell."

Neither of them could come up with a good solution. Lina eventually told Olivia to contact her if she decided she would see the parrot, then wrote down the address of her inn and left. She would be staying somewhere in Marlowe

for the night.



"SOMETHING like that happened? So, what do you want to do, Olivia?" Arthur asked.

"I feel bad shutting the restaurant for several days again. But I'm also concerned for this parrot. I also want to live up to my grandmother's expectations. She did tell this woman I might be able to help, after all."

"Parrot, huh? I kind of feel like a bird that lives that long isn't going to die just 'cause you take them for a little trip. But I guess birds can get real bad real fast when they're sick."

"They can. I wonder how big a parrot is. The larger the animal, the sturdier they are, normally."

"I have no idea how big one is."

"Me neither."

"Olivia. What if you meet in the middle? The capital's a three-day carriage ride from Marlais. Right in the middle would be...Doncaster, wouldn't it? What if you meet there and you can do the checkup there? If the lady leaves Marlowe tomorrow, she'll get to the capital in three days. Then if they come back to Doncaster...yeah, they'll be there right on the day when Soup Forest is normally closed anyway."

Olivia's face brightened as she looked at the calendar on the wall. "You're right. I could have a look at the parrot the night before the restaurant is closed, and I'll learn a lot by observing it all day long the next day. Arthur, would you mind if I borrowed Annie?"

"Don't tell me...you're thinking about going to where that lady's staying all on your own?"

"Is there something wrong with that?" Olivia asked.

"Of course there is. I'm going with you. We'll both ride Annie."

"Oh. All right."

Arthur was grinning for some reason as he saddled Annie and helped Olivia up onto her.

"What's put you in such a good mood?" asked Olivia. "I thought you'd be tired having just got home from work."

"Hm? Well, I've just been wanting to take Annie out for a ride with you for a while now."

Sitting in front of Arthur, Olivia felt relieved, thinking, I'm glad I'm in front, otherwise he'd see this stupid grin on my face. I'm sure I look like a lovestruck girl.

But then a realization struck her.

Did he hear that thought just now?

She jerked around to look up at him to see him desperately trying to hide his smile.

"You heard," she said.

"What? I don't know anything about you being a lovestruck girl."

"Oh, don't tease!"

They sat in the saddle, giggling together, and then Olivia heard Annie's inner voice. *Mates so close, that good, that good.*

Olivia sighed. "Sometimes this ability is convenient, and sometimes it's not so convenient."

"What makes you say that?"

"Annie's thinking about how good it is that our relationship is so good. It's embarrassing."

And so, the two lovestruck humans headed towards Marlowe astride the horse that looked on with satisfaction.

When they arrived at the inn in Marlowe, Lina looked surprised, but joyfully said, "I cannot thank you enough for agreeing to meet us in Doncaster. I'll inform my master. Thank you."

They arranged to meet at the largest hotel in Doncaster, then Olivia and

Arthur left Lina's inn.

"Olivia, before we head back home, do you want to stop somewhere and have a drink with me?" asked Arthur.

"I'd love to. Maybe I should get some nibbles, too. I don't often get to eat other people's cooking."

"Eat as much as you like. I've got money to spare!" said Arthur in an intentionally exaggerated tone, which made Olivia smile.

She was all smiles before they even entered the restaurant in anticipation of the good times waiting for them there.

Chapter 5: Laurie the Parrot

SOON, it was time to see the parrot.

Four humans and one bird sat in a room in the largest hotel in Doncaster. This large, white bird was apparently a parrot. It was inside a gilt birdcage, barely moving, its shoulders hunched, its glazed eyes staring listlessly at Olivia.

"Do you know much about birds?" asked the man present.

"Yes, I know some," Olivia responded. "But this is my first time seeing a parrot. Lord Woods, I am sorry to ask this, but may my husband and I be alone with the parrot while I work on it?"

The thirty-eight-year-old count, Lord Alfred Woods, looked taken aback. He'd hidden his rank, that of a count, until they met in person, and already agreed to meet in Doncaster for Olivia's convenience, even though she was a commoner. The fact that he was willing to make so many concessions was an indication of how important this parrot his father left him was.

But he frowned slightly and thought, I can't possibly agree to leaving Laurie alone in a room with a commoner I've only just met. If I did and Laurie's condition worsened, I'd have no way of knowing if it was Laurie herself or if these people did something.

Feeling those emotions, Olivia thought, *That's not surprising. Most people would feel that way*.

Then she said, "If that's not acceptable, then may I ask you and Lina to make a promise if you two stay in the room?"

"What sort of promise?" he asked.

"I don't want what I do here to become fodder for the rumor mill. That's all."

"That shouldn't be an issue."

Olivia looked at the count, who seemed a little perturbed, then readied

herself for the task at hand. "All right then, I'll begin. Laurie, you don't seem well. What's wrong?" she asked.

Hungry.

"You're being fed, aren't you?"

Want eat bugs.

"I see. What sort of bugs do you like?"

Like grasshoppers. Like caterpillars.

"All right. Is there anything else wrong?"

Bad smell. Hate bad smell. Unpleasant.

"Can you tell me what smells bad?"

That person. He smell bad.

At this point, Lord Woods stepped in, no longer able to watch in silence. "Wait just a minute. Are you trying to make it look like you're having a conversation with Laurie?"

"I understand why it might seem like that, but I—"

"We're done here. Leave. If you were hoping to take advantage of someone clutching at straws, you should have done a better job."

Olivia sensed Arthur growing angry, but she shook her head in silence. They were dealing with a count, and they were just commoners. If she argued, it would cause trouble not just for her, but for Arthur as well.

"There's nothing we can do, Arthur," she said. "Laurie, I'm sorry I couldn't help you. My lord, if you'll excuse us. I am really sorry, Laurie."

"Wait!" cried Lina as she rushed over to stop Olivia leaving.

"Lina, I don't blame you for bringing these people here. Don't worry," said Lord Woods.

"That's not it, my lord. I... I'm shocked. Olivia knew Laurie's name."

"What of it?"

"I never told her Laurie's name. But she knew it. Is there any possibility that

she has some sort of special ability? That she could maybe actually speak with Laurie?"

"Don't be absurd, Lina," said Lord Woods with a strained smile.

Olivia ignored them and searched through Laurie's memories and emotions. Since she'd come all the way here, she figured she might as well do everything she could. She wouldn't get another chance to see Laurie if things went south and they were removed from the room.

The parrot did seem very unwell. The fact that it wanted to eat bugs meant it was picky about its food. It wouldn't survive long if it wasn't getting proper nutrition.

If neither Laurie's current owner nor her previous one fed her insects, she would have lived a long time without her preferred food. She may have survived this long because she's a large bird, but her condition would have suddenly worsened. If that was the case, they didn't have much time.

Animals are good at hiding it when they're unwell. Out in nature, they'd be attacked if other animals learned of their weakness. Laurie was already showing signs of being unwell, though, which meant things were quite severe.

However, the count couldn't bring himself to trust two commoners. He'd decided they were just after some sort of reward money.

That's absolutely ridiculous, he thought. Lina must have simply let Laurie's name slip without realizing it.

"No, my lord," said Olivia. "Lina never told me Laurie's name."

"What in the ...?"

"What do you normally feed Laurie? She seems to prefer the seeds of wild plants and vegetables, fruit, and insects. This bird needs a variety of foods, just like humans do. And, this isn't very easy to say, but Laurie says there is a bad smell coming from you. Do you use any strong-smelling products near her? Cologne, for example?"

The count fell silent, he and Lina looking at Olivia in shock.

He kept Laurie in his room, with her birdcage set next to a set of shelves. One

of the things on the shelves was a bottle of cologne, and the count's morning routine included standing near Laurie's cage while he spritzed himself with the cologne two or three times.

Is it possible she really is speaking with Laurie? he thought.

"Yes, I can hear animals' inner voices," said Olivia.

And is she also hearing mine?

"A little."

The count's emotions filled with shock and a little fear, leading to the birth of a strong feeling of disgust. He looked at her as she responded in time to the questions that flitted through his mind, a mix of emotions on his face.

That expression brought back old memories for Olivia.

Oh, it's been such a long time since I've seen that expression, she thought. I always saw it when I was a child. I thought I'd put it out of my mind, but I haven't, have I?

Arthur felt Olivia's emotions flowing into him. It was unbearable. "Olivia, let's go. This has gone far enough. You knew it'd end up this way. You came anyway 'cause you were worried about the parrot, but I don't want to see you hurt any more than this. My lord, if you'll excuse us." He bowed, put his arm around Olivia's shoulder, and started walking. Olivia looked at Laurie. Laurie looked back at Olivia.

Help.

Olivia stopped in place. The pain in Laurie's voice lanced through her heart. I was found in the forest. I wanted nothing more than someone to help me, and my grandparents did just that. But now I'm going to just abandon Laurie?

Laurie looked dejected.

Laurie is trapped in a cage, not living the life she was meant to. Isn't that the same as me when I was five, hated by my family, constantly walking on eggshells? And Laurie can't even run away like I did that day.

Olivia hated herself for giving up so quickly and leaving.

That's when the count spoke. "Wait. Please. Please wait. Can you really read my mind? And Laurie's?"

"I can clearly hear Laurie's heart. Right now, she's asking me to help her. Oftentimes, I can't read humans even if I try. You're currently open, because you're somewhat worked up. That means I can read you if I try."

"Then tell me what I'm thinking right now."

"All right. You're thinking, 'I can only assume there's something wrong with this woman's head based on what she said, but she was right that I use cologne near Laurie. But Lina likely just said something."

"Good heavens!"

Unsurprisingly, the count flinched when she completely hit the mark on something he couldn't ever say aloud.

"Was I correct?" asked Olivia.

"I-I did indeed think that. You really can read minds, can't you?"

"Yes. I can also sense how you're currently disgusted by it."

"Right. Well, that means Laurie is really asking for help, doesn't it? I find it hard to grasp this ability of yours, of reading human and animal thoughts, but I can't brush you off after what you've said. No, that exchange we just had proves that much. Please, then, take a look at Laurie. And forgive me for my rude behavior."

Olivia smiled and accepted the apology. The sting from her past wounds was nothing, at this point. It hurt her far more to consider abandoning Laurie when she was asking for help.

Chapter 6: What Laurie Wants

THE first thing Olivia did in order to give Laurie what she wanted was go out onto the balcony and call to the city's sparrows.

If you bring me bugs, I'll give you as many pumpkin and sunflower seeds as you can eat! I have apples, too!

After calling out in her heart, she went back into the room. She'd already seen there were glass jars packed full of seeds next to Laurie's cage, and there were apples on the table for the humans to eat.

Then, Olivia spoke to Laurie while Lord Woods, Lina, and Arthur watched. "Laurie, wait just a little longer and you can have some bugs. Is there anything you want other than food?"

Splashy splashy.

"Um. Do you mean a bath?"

In her mind's eye, Olivia conjured an image of the deep dish set in the garden. She imagined the dish filled with clean water, and Peep having a good bath.

Laurie suddenly flapped her wings inside her cage. It wasn't a very large cage. Laurie gripped firmly to the stand and flapped her wings carefully so as not to smash against the sides.

"Looks like you do want a bath." Olivia turned to the count. "I want to let her out of the cage so she can bathe. Could I perhaps get a wash basin filled with water?"

"Right away. Lina, would you please?" said the count. "What else is Laurie saying?"

"Laurie, is there anything else? Anything you want to do?" asked Olivia.

Laurie's thoughts rushed into her. Olivia saw an elderly man with a white beard. He was likely the previous Lord Woods. He stood there, smiling,

watching as Laurie flew freely around the room. Laurie seemed to love the old man. Olivia felt enjoyment accompanying the images of him.

"It seems she wants to come out of the cage and fly around the room," said Olivia.

"Actually, yes, my father did let her free in the room."

Lina came back with a wash basin filled with water. Laurie furiously flapped her wings inside the cage. She really wanted a bath, it seemed.

Olivia double-checked that all the windows were closed then opened the cage. But Laurie didn't come out.

"She's been like this for a long time," said the count. "Lina told me my father let her free to play in the room. Every day since my father died, I opened the cage door and waited, but she'd never come out. I eventually gave up, assuming she didn't want to come out."

"Laurie, why won't you come out of the cage?" asked Olivia, as she searched through Laurie's memories. What she found shocked her.

There was a woman, a maid by the looks of it with a fearsome expression, who was shrieking as she chased after Laurie with a butterfly net. Laurie flew around in a panic, but no matter where she went, the woman came after her, swinging the net.

Eventually the woman caught Laurie, who thrashed inside the net. The woman grabbed her tight and shoved her in the cage, throwing insults of some sort with that wicked look on her face. Those fearful memories stung Olivia's heart.

"Oh, how horrible," she said. "Laurie was terrified many times when she was outside the cage. That's why she doesn't want to come out. A woman wanted to put Laurie back in the cage if she came out even for a short time."

"That can't be possible..." said the count. "What exactly happened?"

"There was a woman with brown hair, who's tall and thin. She chased Laurie around the room with a butterfly net, and she looked so scary. Once she caught Laurie, she violently grabbed her and stuffed her back in the cage. Even

afterwards, she acted very mean towards Laurie."

"But..." said the count with an expression of disbelief, but Lina looked like she had an idea of what Olivia was talking about.

"Lina," said Olivia, "you seem to know who that woman is."

"It must be Agatha. She's already left His Lordship's service. She was very experienced and had worked in the mansion for a very long time, but she started stealing. She must have had some financial difficulties. She just happened to be caught in the act and was sent away."

"Lina, why was someone like that caring for Laurie?" asked the count.

"I'm sorry, my lord. She was a very good worker before the stealing incident. I trusted her. I asked her to look after Laurie while you and I were traveling between the capital and the county, since we took on those duties when your father passed. I can't believe she was doing *that...*"

"Well, she's gone now, right? That's good," said Olivia. "Laurie, the scary person is gone. You don't have to be afraid of coming out of the cage."

Laurie still didn't come out.

Just like she did when dealing with wild animals, Olivia waited for Laurie to make the decision to move on her own. She didn't forget to put her hand in the wash basin and make splashing sounds while she did, though.

Laurie seemed uncertain. She stood on her perch, swaying uneasily to each side and back again.

"It's all right. No one's going to chase you anymore," soothed Olivia.

It seemed Laurie could no longer resist. She bounced through the cage's door and flapped her wings, flying towards the wash basin set on a nearby table.

And then she became obsessed with her bath. She spread her wings, shaking her body, half of it sunk into the water as she flapped her wings into the water, splashing it on her upper half.

"That splashy splashy must feel nice, Laurie," said Olivia.

Splashy splashy! Fun! Splashy splashy! Happy!

Water went splattering across the table and floor, but the count smiled as he watched Laurie bathe.

Oh, he really does seem to care for her, to treasure her, thought Olivia.

"Olivia..."

"Hm? What is it, Arthur? Ah! Oh, hurry!"

Olivia glanced over and saw sparrows lined up, completely filling the railing of the balcony, each one with something in its mouth. Not just anything, though. It was the insects Olivia asked for.

Hurry! Seeds! Hurry! Seeds!

Want eat seeds!

Apple, apple, apple!

The sparrow who knew what an apple tasted like must have gotten one from a human before.

"Laurie, the sparrows brought you bugs. I have to go out on the balcony to get them, could you go back in your cage for just a moment?" requested Olivia.

Laurie took a look out the window then flew into her cage. Olivia quickly closed it, the elegant clasp shutting with a click.

"Um, Arthur, could you come with me?" she asked. "It's not like I dislike insects, but there are so many. We have to make sure we get all of them."

"Sure, no problem."

"Lina, could I have one of those apples? I promised the sparrows they could eat some."

"Promised? Oh... Right, please, go ahead."

"And, if you don't mind, I'll just use this fruit knife here."

Arthur and Olivia stepped out onto the balcony and scattered Laurie's food onto the ground. The sparrows plopped down the insects from their beaks and swarmed the seeds with joy.

Arthur gathered the dragonflies, butterflies, caterpillars, and worms into a

handkerchief. Olivia sliced up the apple then stacked the pieces in a mound on the ground once they were cut small enough.

The pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, and juicy apple made a feast the likes of which the sparrows rarely got. They were focused on eating, their brown backs turned to Olivia and Arthur, but Olivia still said, "Thank you. You were a huge help."

The two of them went back into the room and closed the balcony door to find Lina watching the whole scene with a stiffened expression. The count, too, looked like he wanted to draw back from the handkerchief bulging with insects.

"Eat whatever ones you like," Olivia said to Laurie. "Once you've eaten, you can fly around the room."

Laurie came out of the cage with a joyful cry and gobbled down lots of the insects. Having finally had her fill, she began preening her feathers. Once she carefully arranged each one, she flapped her wings and took off.

There was something imposing about the large parrot flying around the room. Both Arthur and Olivia looked on with gasps of surprise.

Laurie landed on the curtain box above the curtains, then flew to the chandelier. From the chandelier, she moved to the backrest of the sofa.

"How wonderful," said the count. "She seems much better. Was what she ate just now what gave her all this energy?"

"Food alone wouldn't make her this energetic this quickly," said Olivia. "I think she was emotionally weakened, as well."

"I see. But I'll make sure to let her play in the room like this from now on. I'm so glad," he said, looking at her with satisfaction.

And then Laurie spoke. "Laurie, good morning. Are you well? Want an apple? You're such a good girl, Laurie."

"My lord, that's..." said Lina.

"What a surprise," said the count. "That's what my father would say to Laurie every morning."

Laurie kept talking, seemingly in a good mood, her head moving side to side

while she rested on the back of the sofa. "You're such a good girl, Laurie. Good morning. Want an apple? Laurie. Laurie. You live a good, long life, you hear?"



"ARE you sure, Olivia? Didn't you want to spend time with Laurie tomorrow, too?" said Arthur.

"I think she'll be all right. The count said he'd feed her insects from now on, and she's able to come out of her cage without feeling frightened."

"The count said he'd arrange a place for us to stay. You sure you don't want to stay the night?"

"Rob's waiting for us back home. I set out two days' worth of food when we left, but I'm sure he just went and ate it all in one go."

"Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if he did."

"And Pete and Pepe are waiting too. They'll want to eat grass. But, actually, Arthur, are you sure you don't want to stay? It must be hard on you to drive the carriage at night."

"How many years do you think I was a mercenary?"

"I'm sorry. And I made you take time off work, too."

"Don't worry about it. Freddy said it was all right. Besides, I plan to forage enough herbs for him to make up for my time off."

"I'll help."

"Grateful for the help."

The carriage trundled down the dark road. Annie, pulling the carriage, was still murmuring to herself, *Mates so close*, *that good*, *that good*.

Chapter 7: The Guide

ARTHUR and Olivia came back home from Doncaster to a huge welcome from Rob and the goats, then returned to the peaceful life they'd led before.

Olivia made soup with seasonal ingredients, cooked sides to go with the soup, took care of the potted plants, and chatted with the animals. She spoke with Arthur, her love, occasionally filling with warm and fuzzy feelings when his gentle emotions swept into her.

That continued, day after day.

Today's soup was a chunky soup made with dried mushrooms and boar meat. She served it with an omelet loaded with caramelized onions. The omelet was rich and luscious from the milk and cream she added to the egg. She even grated cheese on top for anyone who wanted some.

One customer, after tasting the soup, said to Olivia, "Ah, you really get the flavor of the mushrooms in the broth. Really goes nice with the boar. It's good."

"I wonder why mushrooms taste so wonderful when you dry them," pondered Olivia.

"Huh, you're the cook. Thought you would know."

"You'd think I would, but I don't."

She smiled and told the customer to take his time, then turned back towards the kitchen, but another customer called to her.

"This is one filling omelet," he said. "Which is a big help since I've got to work until nightfall. And it's delicious. There's this crumbly, crispy stuff under the omelet. It's like a cookie, but not sweet."

"You bake it basically the same as a cookie, but it's not sweet and has walnuts in it. I think it's nice to eat with an omelet since it gives you something to munch on," she said.

"It is. You got this crispy base and soft omelet. It's good. I can't get enough of it."

"I'm glad you like it."

Arthur was sitting at the table in the kitchen listening to Olivia chat with the customers. He had the day off from the pharmacy. Olivia told him not to worry about her and to go out wherever he wanted to on his day off, but he told her he was happiest in the restaurant, smiling as he begged her not to send him away.

The lunchtime customers left, and Olivia hurried into the forest with Arthur and Rob in tow now that she had some time before evening.

"The bugs get to the mushrooms if you don't harvest them quickly," she said. "And they don't taste as nice if their caps open too much."

"But you gather so many every day. Aren't you going to end up with too many?" asked Arthur.

"Nope. I'll dry them all before winter comes, then cook with them throughout winter. I have never ever had too many mushrooms."

Olivia was so energetic at times like these. Arthur thought she seemed like a squirrel in the forest hoarding for winter.

It was late into autumn, and the bears were busily gathering food in preparation for hibernation. Knowing this made Arthur worry every time Olivia went into the forest.

"I know your grandpa protected you when he was alive, but your grandparents died at almost the same time," he said. "What'd you do for the five years after that? You didn't go all the way into the forest on your own during that time, did you?"

"I did. I'd sing really loud while I gathered mushrooms and walnuts to let the animals know there's a human so they shouldn't come near."

"That's dangerous. I'm just glad there weren't any bears who heard you singing and decided they'd actually rather go towards the sound." He'd heard that after a bear's first taste of a human, it'll keep on attacking humans. Arthur

whispered a thank you to God that nothing ever happened to Olivia.

Olivia was pleased she managed to gather as many mushrooms and walnuts that day as she did. Arthur smiled as he glanced at her.

Once back at the restaurant, Olivia picked the leaves and large debris from the mushrooms, then wiped them clean with a damp cloth before sliding them onto long, thin wooden skewers. She had a lot of those skewers, a whole box full.

"What are those?" asked Arthur.

"Grandpa made these skewers. I guess Grandma was happy to use sticks, but Grandpa always wanted to do things right. Apparently, he made all these skewers himself, the exact same length and thickness."

"Skilled with both a sword and his hands, it seems. Can't get a better husband than that. I'll help with this. You just stick them on upside down, right?"

"Yep. Grandma said they taste better if you dry them upside down. I don't know how true that is, though."

The stove had a gentle fire going with a kettle set on top; the only sound in the kitchen was the gentle piping sounds informing them of boiled water. The only other thing was the occasional caw or hoot from the forest.

"You know, living here makes me feel like one of the little animals living in the forest," said Arthur.

"Little? You mean like helpless and weak?"

"No, not that. I feel like I have plenty of food and clean water, and there are more living creatures around me than I could possibly count. I've become a part of that. And I've got a wife who can hear animals talking, so things never get boring."

"Only you would see things like that, Arthur."

They finished threading all the mushrooms on the skewers.

"What do we do with these now?" asked Arthur.

"We slip them in two lengths of twine and hang them. When I don't have

many, I'd just lay them out on a sieve."

They strung two pieces of twine from the back of a chair then stuck the ends of the skewers into the braid of the twine. Each addition of a mushroom skewer made it look like they were making a rope ladder. Olivia kept shifting the ropes until she'd made a mushroom ladder as tall as herself.

"Once we have a bunch of these, we'll hang them from the eaves. They'll get nicely dried out in the sun, which will preserve them."

"Huh. It's not just cherry tea, all sorts of things take a lot of effort," Arthur mused.

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"I enjoy it."

"I do, too."
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Rob, who had been sleeping in his bed in the corner, jerked his head up, then jumped to his feet before pushing the doggy door open with his head and slipping outside.

"What's that about? I didn't sense anything," said Olivia.

"I'll take a look. You stay here."

Arthur picked up his large knife and an oil lamp before following Rob out the kitchen door.

Olivia waited, worried about what was happening, when Arthur returned with something cradled in his arms. Rob stood up on his hind legs several times to get a look into Arthur's arms.

It was a wild rabbit, unconscious.

"It's got a pretty bad wound on its hind leg. I don't know if it's going to make it," said Arthur.

"Oh. I must not have felt anything because it's unconscious."

"What should we do?"

"Well, we found it. We might as well tend its wound. I'll get a box we can put it in."

The brown rabbit was knocked out cold. It didn't move even when they put it

in the box. Rob shoved his snout near the rabbit, sniffing and snorting.

"He's curious about the smell of blood," said Olivia. "Mm, it looks like something bit hard on its leg. I'll have to stitch it."

Arthur watched in silence. If this were his mercenary days, he'd be thrilled to have a meal drop in his lap, but Olivia always treated any animals that came to her then released them back into the forest. That was the end of the relationship with most animals, but some, like the female wolf, never forgot Olivia.

"Arthur, can you hold the rabbit so it doesn't move? I don't want it to thrash about if it wakes up while I'm doing the stitches."

"Sure, I'll handle it."

Olivia applied rubbing alcohol to the rabbit's wound, shaved the fur from the area, then began stitching. The rabbit was completely unconscious. It didn't move or wake up during the entire process.

"All right," said Olivia. "Now we have to make a hutch for this little one so it doesn't decide to run away."

"There was a stack of boxes in the barn, right?"

"Yeah. The goats like to be up high, so I used those to make stairs. I guess it should be fine if we take one box away, right?"

"I don't mind. I won't be able to hear them if they complain," Arthur said.

"And I'll make sure to apologize. It'll be fine."

Arthur got one of the wooden boxes from the barn, spread straw out inside, then put together a lid with gaps in it for air to pass through.

The rabbit lay still in the box, and Olivia said, "I pray you'll be able to return to the forest," like she was casting a spell, then went back to making mushroom ladders.

They hung the mushroom ladders from the second-story eaves where the autumn sun would hit them and dry them out nice and crunchy.

The rabbit thrashed in the hutch on the first day, but Olivia talked to it, and it

calmed right down.

"I'll let you go back to the forest once you've healed," she said. "We won't eat you, I promise."

It ate the vegetables and wild plants they gave it and slowly healed.

Two weeks later, Olivia checked on it and said, "Hm, the wound has completely healed. Wild animals do heal quickly."

She picked up the hutch and went out into the back garden. She took off the lid and tilted the box, and the rabbit bounded out. Olivia assumed it would head towards the forest, but it only got about fifteen feet before stopping and turning back to look at her.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to go back to your den?"

It hopped back towards her, then moved towards the forest again before stopping and looking back at Olivia. It was like it wanted her to follow it. She had some time before she had to serve dinner at the restaurant, so she took Rob with her as the rabbit guided them into the forest.

Chapter 8: Dame's Cure

THE wild rabbit hopped along, regularly checking that Olivia was still following. It'd turn back every once in a while, then wait if Olivia was too far behind.

Olivia had never managed to have a conversation with a rabbit before. They ate, they ran, and they made babies. That's about all their minds were filled with. They resembled hedgehogs in that regard.

But, while Olivia couldn't pick up this rabbit's thoughts, it was definitely thinking something.

They'd traveled over a mile from the restaurant when Olivia started thinking she should probably turn back soon, but that's when the rabbit stopped and looked up at Olivia.

"Here?" she asked. "Oh! Those are dame's cures! You wanted to show them to me?"

Olivia tore her eyes from the mushrooms to look back at the rabbit, but it was already gone.

The rabbit had watched Olivia from inside its hutch and saw her go out every day to forage mushrooms and make mushroom ladders. It must have decided she was some sort of animal that loves mushrooms.

"Well, I do love mushrooms," she said. "But this..."

The caps of the mushrooms were around four inches across, and their cheery yellow filled an area about as big as one of the tables in Olivia's restaurant. There were three patches, actually, about the same size. Olivia had heard these mushrooms used to be foraged quite a lot, loved for their flavor and incredible medicinal effects, but they were over-foraged in the end. She hadn't seen any in about ten years.

If you soaked dame's cures in water for a good time, they cooked into a

delicious mushroom with a fragrance like butter. These mushrooms had a scary side though: if you ate too many without soaking them, you might stop breathing in your sleep.

Eating large quantities without soaking them first induced deep sleep followed by feeling refreshed when you awake, which was why they were called "dame's cures," or so Olivia's grandmother had said.

"But why did it end up 'dame's'?" Olivia had asked her.

"Good sleep improves your skin, and apparently it's common practice for ladies to wake up before their husbands to put on makeup, so they need the sleep," said her grandmother.

"But wouldn't it just be better for their skin to not wear makeup in the first place?"

"You'll understand it once you're older."

Olivia smiled when she thought back to that conversation.

"I bet Freddy would be delighted to have some for the pharmacy," she said. She had been thinking lately that she wanted to give some sort of thank-you gift to Freddy since he was always so generous with giving Arthur time off. He could probably make quite a bit of money with these mushrooms, since no one had even seen them in recent years.

Olivia carefully began picking the mushrooms.

"They should grow back next year, too," she said, leaving pairs of mushrooms untouched in each little section in hopes they'd come back.

She hadn't brought anything to carry the mushrooms in, so she took off her cardigan and piled the mushrooms in that. The thinly knit cloth dirtied and stretched as she carried the weighty load of mushrooms back.

"I can wash out dirt, and, if the whole cardigan's a lost cause, I can just reknit it. We'll just consider it a worthy sacrifice since these mushrooms will go for quite a lot."



THAT evening when Arthur came home with Annie, Olivia beamed with

excitement as she said, "Arthur, I want you to give Freddy these mushrooms."

"Did he request them?"

"No, they're a gift. A thank you for taking such good care of my husband."

"Oh, I appreciate it. Thanks."

Arthur was eating a soup laden with dame's cure mushrooms.

"This soup smells like butter," he noted.

"I only used a little butter in it. It's the smell of those mushrooms."

"Huh. Well, I'm sure Freddy'll be happy about these."

The next day, Arthur arrived at work and, when Freddy arrived later, he gave him the basket of mushrooms.

"Huh? What's this?" asked Freddy.

"A gift from Olivia. She wanted to thank you for taking care of me."

"See you're bragging about your wife early in the morning to your employer. Well, what have we here then? Let's see... Oh my!"

"What is it?"

"These are dame's cures! And a lot of them!"

Freddy took the basket and hurried into the waiting room where he grabbed the four corners of the cloth lining the basket and gently lifted out the mushrooms to lay out on a table.

For a moment he just stood there staring at the mound of yellow mushrooms, then said, "Arthur, I'm going out. Please take care of any customers that come in. If there are any complicated requests, just write them down and tell them the pharmacist is out so we'll deliver the order when I return and take payment on delivery."

"Is there a problem with the mushrooms?" asked Arthur. "Olivia said you'd be happy."

"I am. I'm absolutely thrilled. I'll explain later. I have to deliver these before they lose their freshness."

And with that, Freddy rushed out of the pharmacy.

He didn't return that day, or the next, or even the day after that. He finally came back the morning of the fourth day, when Arthur and Olivia were really starting to worry.

Just after Arthur opened the pharmacy that day, Freddy came in looking exhausted. He plopped into a chair with a thud.

"I'm finally back, Arthur."

"Welcome back. I told Olivia what happened, and she was worried about where you'd gone off to."

"Oh, yes. I didn't explain anything. I'm sorry, I was in such a rush."

"You took the mushrooms all the way to the capital, didn't you? And got a reward for them?" Arthur ventured.

"Yes, I did. Hah, Guess I should expect a former mercenary to pick up on that. That reward, we'll split it in half. Half for me, half for you and Olivia."

"That's all right. Who would ever accept money earned by someone else with a gift they gave?"

"I'm going to insist. Especially since this might end up causing trouble for Olivia."

"What?!"

According to Freddy, there was a surgery trial involving removing diseased parts while the patient was unconscious using those mushrooms. This cuttingedge endeavor was being run by a group of doctors working in the castle, and they had a great need for these mushrooms since they had no side effects so long as you got the dosage correct. Unfortunately, however, they'd been foraged to extinction in this country and weren't readily available on the market.

The doctors were able to import dried mushrooms from other countries that were producing large quantities of them, but the effects of the serum made from the dried versions weren't as predictable.

"They can't perform these surgeries unless the patient's unconscious?" asked

Arthur.

"Not everyone's as resistant to pain as a mercenary. Some people die from pain or fear before the injury or disease takes them."

"Yeah. I know."

"You do?"

"Sometimes when you're in the middle of a fight, you don't even feel pain if you get hurt. I've seen some people pass out the moment things calm down and they realize they just can't take it. Some people went on to die from it."

"Maybe a pharmacist shouldn't say this, but the human body is a mystery."

"Yes, it is."

"Anyway. Here's your share. Exactly half." Freddy set ninety-four large silver coins on the table with a jangle. One large silver was enough to give four mercenaries as much food and drink as they could want at a pub. Ninety-four of them was a huge sum.

"It was one large silver per mushroom," explained Freddy.

"Really, Freddy—"

"They asked me if there's more where those came from."

"I doubt it. Olivia's relentless when she's foraging for mushrooms."

"And the location?"

"That forest's like her backyard. I'm sure she remembers where it is."

"Uh, right. So, Arthur, promise me you'll keep an eye out for anyone following you when you go home, all right?" Freddy warned.

"They want them that bad?"

"That's the impression I got."

"I'll be careful, but I don't want to bother taking a roundabout way to lose them. I want to go straight home. And there's no way I can shake the pursuit while on Annie."

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me for letting myself get caught up in the idea of

making a lot of money."

"I doubt that's the real reason. I bet you just wanted to help someone, didn't you?" said Arthur, his expression serious.

Freddy grinned awkwardly. "Oh, don't go embarrassing your elderly employer by calling him out on the truth. Of course I wanted to help someone. I have a friend who's kind of like an older brother to me. He studied medicine, and he was willing to give an arm and a leg for these mushrooms. He asked me to drop everything and bring him any if they're ever found in this region."

"What a good little brother you are."

"Oh, cut it out."

"And that older brother would put a mark on his little brother?"

"Not him, but the look in everyone else's eye was something else."

"Ah. I get it."

That day before heading home, Arthur stopped at the town's main shopping street and bought a hunk of pork and of lamb, eggs, and molasses. As he did, he noticed one man on a horse following him. Arthur casually took a look at them to see his pursuit was riding a large stallion and gave up on the possibility of Annie outrunning them.

"Don't worry about it, Annie. We'll just take our time going home like always," he said, and they headed straight back to Soup Forest, though Annie's steps were a little quicker than usual.

"I'm sorry, Annie. I shouldn't've said that. Don't be in such a bad mood," said Arthur, giving her a carrot the moment they got home, which seemed to make her happier. He'd gotten the impression she was just a little annoyed.

Chapter 9: I'm not Jealous, I'm just Venting

"WELCOME home, Arthur."

"Hi, Olivia. I bought some extra meat. Figured you could serve it in the restaurant."

"Thank you. Oh? There's someone outside. Do you know him?"

"Nope. But he does look hungry," said Arthur with a stiff smile.

Olivia walked briskly across the restaurant and opened the door to call to the man astride a horse looking at the restaurant. "Hello. Would you like a bowl of soup loaded with mushrooms? The omelets and roast pork are really nice too."

"Uh, um. Yes. Yes, I'd like to eat!" he said. He was probably around thirty years old, heavily built, with bouncy curls of a warm brown.

He came into the restaurant, looked for a while at the menu on the wall, then ordered the soup of the day, an extra-large helping of the sides, an omelet on a separate plate, and three pieces of bread. He must've had quite the appetite.

The man fidgeted while he waited for his food and glanced repeatedly at Arthur, who was eating alone. Just in case, Arthur was pretending to be a customer and sitting at a table near the kitchen.

"Sorry for the wait," said Olivia. "Here's your soup of the day, a large helping of the side, an omelet, and bread."

The man let out a gasp of delight when he saw the food brought to his table, and then he used his spoon to shovel up hearty mouthfuls. His gusto was obvious.

Arthur smirked to himself and thought, *That's my tail? Guess Freddy's friend's place lacks people with those skills.*

It was already late enough for the restaurant to be closed on a normal day, so the man was the only customer.

Arthur waited for him to finish eating, then said, "You followed me to find the dame's cures, didn't you?"

"Uh, no, I just..." He faltered, his eyes darting back and forth.

"Must've been tiring following me when you're not used to that kind of work. Sorry to say, though, I'm not the one who picked them. I just delivered them."

"Oh. Uh, guess you realized I was tailing you. Oh, my name's Bill, by the way."

"I wouldn't even call what you did tailing. You basically just walked behind me. I'm Arthur."

"Oh. Right."

At that, Arthur turned back to Olivia. Olivia was trying to sense Bill's inner voice, but all she was getting were feelings of fear and bewilderment. There was no sense of hostility or aggression. Once she was certain of that, she nodded to Arthur with a smile.

"Since I'm not the one who picked them," said Arthur, "I can't tell you where they were. Sorry. And I can't tell you who did pick them. So, what are you going to do? Are you going to leave? Or do you want to try going with me and my wife into the forest tomorrow to look for more? She knows a lot about the forest."

"Your wife...? Are you sure? I had no idea what to do. I can't go back empty-handed. I'm actually an apothecary. I didn't want to take this job, I've never tried tailing someone, but I'm the lowest in seniority. They wouldn't let me refuse."

"I had a feeling that might be the case."

Olivia joined the conversation then with a kind expression as she served some cherry tea. "There aren't any inns in the area. Would you like to stay in our outbuilding? The goats use the first floor, but the second floor is nice enough, and the sheets are clean."

"I hate to impose, but, if you don't mind, that'd be a huge help," said Bill. "Thank you. Honestly, I didn't feel comfortable traveling the roads at night in a place I don't know. Oh, how much is the rate to stay here? I don't have too much on hand..."

"You don't have to pay, since you'll be sleeping above the goats. It's all right," Olivia said.

"Thank you so much! You're a lifesaver! And, you know, this tea is really good!" Bill's chair scraped across the floor as he pushed it back to stand and bow several times to Olivia.



THE next morning, Bill was apologetically grateful the whole time he devoured breakfast and even when they were going into the forest.

Both Olivia and Arthur had the same expression as they watched him, an expression that said, "How could you hate this big lug?"

Rob huffed with excitement as the four of them walked through the forest, alternating between rushing ahead and falling behind.

Olivia would normally be wary in this situation, having just met this man who followed her husband home the night before, but she noticed she wasn't on edge. She was relaxed. When she realized it was because Arthur was with her, her heart filled with warm feelings of gratitude for the umpteenth time.

Bill constantly talked to Olivia like he would never get bored of it. "Olivia, you know a lot about mushrooms, don't you?"

"A bit."

"Who taught you?"

"My grandmother. She was an apothecary."

"Really? In Marlais?"

"No, actually. She worked at the castle. Her name was Marguerite, though I doubt you'd have heard of her. You're so much younger. You wouldn't have worked together."

"Marguerite? You don't mean *the* Marguerite? The legendary Marguerite who accompanied Princess Louise abroad?"

"I don't know about 'legendary,' but yes, that's her."

"Oh my God!"

Bill was even more apologetic after that. Olivia was a little happy to find out her grandmother was a little more well-known than she'd realized. As they walked, Olivia steadily picked herbs and mushrooms and placed them in the basket Arthur had slung across his back. Bill watched and then copied her, picking some as well.

"I've only ever used medicinal herbs others foraged and sent to us. I'm learning a lot seeing how they grow out here."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Olivia.

"Are you an apothecary, Olivia?"

"No. I run the restaurant, Soup Forest, that's all. I give some of these herbs to the people in the area when they're not feeling well."

"Seems a waste of talent."

Olivia chuckled.

She led them to where she'd picked the dame's cures.

"I think you probably guessed by now, but I'm the one who picked those mushrooms," she said. "If we pick the rest, they won't come back next year. I want to leave these ones for then. I had hoped to find more nearby but couldn't. I plan to deliver them to Freddy again once they grow back next year. I'm sorry for hiding this from you, Bill."

"No, don't be sorry! You've already done more than most people would have by going to such lengths for some strange man who followed your husband home." He was as apologetic and grateful as always. "This forest is filled with treasures. Just look at all the medicinal herbs growing here. Maybe I couldn't find more of the dame's cures, but I found all sorts of other things that make good medicine. I'm happy with that."

"I'm glad you don't have to go back empty-handed," said Olivia.

"Uh, by the way..."

"What is it?"

"Do you mind if I come back?" he asked.

"To the forest? Or to Soup Forest?"

"Either. Both."

"Of course I don't mind. I look forward to seeing you again."

Bill left in high spirits, his sack filled with medicinal herbs and mushrooms. He seemed relieved to be promised more dame's cures next year.

Arthur, on the other hand, was not in a good mood. He went to work without saying much, then stayed quiet when he came home.

"Arthur, are you angry about something?" asked Olivia.

"No. I'm not angry."

"You are, though. I can feel it."

"It's just, you..."

"I what?"

"You're not careful enough. Why were you so nice to that guy? He'll take that the wrong way. Men always jump right to assuming a woman has a thing for him if she's even a little bit nice to him!"

"Despite the fact that you, my husband, were walking just a couple of steps behind us?"

"That's just how men are when they get swept away by someone. They don't see anything else around them."

"Swept away...? He didn't seem swept away to me."

"Sure."

Rob barked and hurried over to stand between them. His tail wagged as he looked between their faces.

"Rob's worried," said Olivia. "He's concerned we're having a fight. Rob, I'm sorry. We're not fighting. Arthur's just oddly jealous."

"Whatever."

Olivia sighed, watching Arthur go upstairs in a huff, then smiled sadly. Arthur was normally so calm and collected, which meant she rarely sensed his thoughts. Right now though, he was angry and kept thinking, *She's* my *wife*.

"'My wife.' Oh, he's so cute, Rob," she said.

"Woof!"

"You think so, too, don't you?"

Arthur good human! Close with Olivia!

"I agree. He's a good human. Tomorrow, why don't I make Arthur's favorite? Green pea egg drop soup. That should put him in a better mood."

"Woof!"

Olivia cleaned up the kitchen, boiled a large pot of water to wash her hair, then blew out the lamps before going upstairs. The lamp was already out up there, and Arthur seemed to be asleep.

She slipped quietly into bed so as not to wake him, then laid down to sleep with her back to him.

"Olivia, I'm sorry," he said.

"You're awake?"

"I'm sorry for venting at you. But I'm not jealous."

"Mm-hmm."

"I was just worried. You're too nice to everyone."

"Sure." Olivia chuckled.

"What? Why are you laughing? I'm trying to apologize."

"It's just... I always thought I'd spend my whole life alone. I'm glad. Having someone jealous over me, it's an odd feeling. I actually found myself feeling grateful."

"I told you, I'm not jealous. I was just venting."

"All right. Even though I don't really know what you were angry about that needed venting."

Arthur was silent for a moment. "Neither do I."

Olivia suddenly burst into laughter, then Arthur.

"He's definitely coming back next year," he said. "Probably sooner, actually. And he plans to take advantage of all your doting niceness. And that annoys

me."

"Oh, don't say that. He was such a sweetheart."

Arthur didn't reply. He was making an odd face in the dark, lit only by the moonlight, his lower lip stuck out as he lay on his back staring at the ceiling. Olivia laughed.

Rob heard it from downstairs and lifted his head, his ears perked up, but then he closed his eyes again.

Arthur good human.

Rob licked his chops then settled down to sleep feeling satisfied.

Ever since Arthur came to live with them, he stopped feeling the cold icy feelings flowing from Olivia's heart, and that made him very happy.

Chapter 10: Randall and the Robin

"OLIVIA, I brought some pumpkins. We got a bumper crop this year. They're nice and sweet, too."

"Thank you. I can't wait to try them. Your pumpkins are always the nicest, Joshua."

It was around this time that the local farmers brought pumpkin after pumpkin to Olivia. Her grandmother had told her pumpkins grow sweeter if you store them somewhere cold for a while, but Olivia was getting pumpkins so often and she didn't want to let these kind gifts go to waste, so she was cooking up some of the freshly picked pumpkins every single day.

"Huh, is there honey in this? This sweet flavoring you've added is nice," Joshua said.

"Thank you. I thought of this recipe myself, but my grandmother told me it was delicious."

"Marguerite and Jenkins did love their pumpkins."

"That they did. Every year around this time they'd start saying, 'The pumpkins Joshua grows are especially sweet and tasty."

"And their words always encouraged my family. Hope you'll keep on delivering the compliments, Olivia."

"Of course! Every year I'll compliment you like no one's ever complimented you before, haha!"

Today's soup of the day was chicken soup, made with a whole chicken. Olivia first opened the chicken up and stuffed in spring onions and bay leaves, along with her secret ingredients of chunks of garlic and ginger. She then boiled it until the chicken meat was so tender it fell off the bone with the touch of a spoon, and it was that broth made from both the meat and the bone that was so flavorful.

She filled bowls to the brim with the broth with the chicken meat crumbling, and a wonderful aroma filled the restaurant.

The soup was served with pumpkin she panfried with the lid on, steaming it along with loads of butter until it was nice and soft. She then glazed it with a generous dollop of honey and finished it off with a sprinkle of granular salt, resulting in a sweet-and-salty combo you couldn't get enough of.

"My mum always said when I was growing up that pumpkins keep colds at bay, and honestly, eating this soup and pumpkin, I could really believe no cold could get the best of me," said Joshua.

"Now that you mention it, I heard there's a nasty illness going around the capital," said Olivia. "One of the traveling merchants told me."

"I heard about that. Apparently, it gives you a wicked fever and cough. Oh, that's right, Olivia, could I get some fever and cough medicine from you? One of the women in the neighborhood seems to have caught it."

"What sort of cough is it?"

"Her husband said it was a wet cough."

"All right. I'll give you three doses."

"Thanks, you're always helping us out."

"It's no problem at all."

Olivia gave Joshua a packet with the ingredients for the medicine when he was about to head out, then walked him and his wife to the door, which is when she heard the clear chime-like *cheeep* of a robin.

It was rare to see a robin, even if you heard their calls. It seemed one had settled down near Soup Forest recently which was why she heard it so often.

While it wasn't common to see one, she had seen it sometimes after she'd been tilling the soil in the vegetable patch. Once, she left her shovel stuck in the ground, and the robin came to rest on its handle and sang after eating the insects from the turned-up earth.

Seeing its orange throat quavering as it sang was such a lovely sight. Olivia was grateful for the little bird that gobbled up so many insects. Her

grandmother had told her that if a robin stays in the area for a long time, it means a nasty bug will spread through the area that year.

The region of Marlais saw heavy snowfall during the winter, and normally the robins would fly somewhere warmer before the snow piled up and spend winter there.

"Is it because robins staying here means winter's going to be late?" she'd asked her grandmother. "Maybe illnesses get worse when winter is mild?"

"I don't really know how it's connected," said her grandmother. "But apothecaries have always said that, about the robins. Perhaps that's a general rule they learned from experience."

"Huh."

Olivia thought back to that conversation as she washed the dishes. The robin called out again, and Olivia found herself praying there would be no nasty bug going around.

A few days later, a customer who came to the restaurant in a carriage started talking to Olivia. He was a first-time customer, likely around seventy years old. He had white hair and an air of elegance about him.

"I've heard you're related to Marguerite," he said.

"I am. Did you know my grandmother?"

"Grandmother? I was certain she never had children."

"She adopted me. So, more accurately, she'd be my mother, but she told me to call her grandmother."

"Is that so? I'm an old acquaintance of hers. Well, in truth, she was something of a mentor of mine. My name is Randall, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, does that mean you're an apothecary at the castle?"

"That it does. I had retired, but some circumstances urged this old body back to work. But that's all settled now, which gave me the opportunity to come out here."

She started to wonder why an apothecary from the castle would be here, but

then Bill's face flashed in her mind. "Did you happen to hear about this restaurant from Bill?" she asked.

"I did. He told me a member of Marguerite's family ran this restaurant, and I was overcome with nostalgia. I was hoping we could share memories of her."

"Thank you. I'm sure my grandmother would be happy to hear you've remembered her."

Once the lunchtime customers left, Olivia told Randall about Marguerite's life following her duties.

"Oh, so then, she adopted you after she returned from Arche?" he asked.

"Yes. She raised me with such love and care. I can never thank my grandparents enough."

"Olivia, do you know anything about medicinal plants? Did Marguerite teach you anything?"

"She did, a little. But I don't have apothecary credentials, and I've never registered. All I really do is give some medicine ingredients to the people in the neighborhood when they need help."

"May I ask why not?"

Olivia gave a wan smile as she searched for an answer that wouldn't cause any trouble. She obviously didn't want to say it was because she could hear people's thoughts and didn't think she could bear being an apothecary who regularly interacts with the ill and injured.

"I suppose that's difficult to answer," said Randall.

"No, it's just that I'm already busy with running the restaurant, and, if I had to choose just one, I think I'd prefer to keep running my soup restaurant rather than be an apothecary."

What a waste. She carries on Marguerite's vast knowledge, yet will end as nothing but the owner of a restaurant in this backwater area, came Randall's thoughts. No other thoughts of his had slipped out before that, which meant he really must have thought it was a shame.

"Well," said Randall, "at the moment, I'm untethered and carefree. Marlais is

peaceful and isn't all that far from the capital, and it has this wonderful restaurant as well. I like it here. I think, as a reward to myself for an important job done, I'll stay in Marlowe for a time. And I'll probably stop by Soup Forest again."

"Please do. I often go into the forest during my break in the afternoon, but otherwise, I'm almost always in the restaurant. I'd love to talk more about my grandmother with you any time."

Randall's eyes seemed to sparkle. "What do you forage in the forest?" he asked.

"All sorts of things. Medicinal herbs, nuts, tinder. I gratefully accept whatever the forest has to offer."

"Hm. Are you going today?"

"I hadn't decided. If you like, I could show you the forest."

"Ah, well, if you don't mind. I was just thinking I'd like to stretch my legs after three days in that carriage."

"All right. I'll get ready right now."

Olivia cleared away Randall's dishes, put several medicines for use in emergency situations in her satchel along with several large handkerchiefs and two water bottles, and then put a "Back Soon" sign on the door.

Chapter 11: Bitter Potato Trees

OLIVIA walked through the forest with Randall and Rob. At first, she walked slowly out of consideration for Randall, but she quickly realized that consideration was unnecessary. Randall's legs were strong, making it so Olivia was actually the one at risk of being left behind.

"This is a pleasant forest to be in," he said. "And abundant."

"It is. I think part of the reason my grandmother loved this region was for its abundant forests and rivers. Oh, poison cherries."

"What? Where? Oh, plenty have fallen off."

When Olivia started gathering the dried poison cherries, Randall joined in with zeal.

It had definitely been the right decision to bring two sacks. She'd suspected it might end up like this. Randall's hands moved quickly as he filled the sack with poison cherries.

"There are some bitter potato trees a little farther in. Do you like bitter potatoes?" Olivia asked.

"That brings back memories. My mother used to make bitter potato dumplings all the time when I was a child. I never liked the harsh flavor when I was younger, but it would be nice to try them again."

"How about I make something with them tonight then?" Olivia offered. "Unless you have other plans."

"No plans more important than eating the food of my childhood." In a cheery mood, Randall urged Olivia. "So, where are these bitter potato trees?"

Olivia changed direction so they were heading towards the river.

Contrary to their name, bitter potatoes were not potatoes at all. They were the fleshy roots of a tree rich in nutrients. The trees favored sunny spots, so they flourished where the forest was cut into by the river. The ones growing inside the forest didn't develop the thick roots.

"I take it there were bitter potato trees near where you grew up as a child, Randall?" Olivia asked.

"Yes. I come from a small farming region farther south and often saw them. My parents sobbed when I told them I wanted to become an apothecary."

"Oh? But it's such a respected profession."

"It takes ten years of training to become a full-fledged apothecary. That period is an unpaid apprenticeship. Today, apprentice apothecaries have their housing costs paid for, but my generation didn't receive that kindness. My parents couldn't accept that the son who'd finally grown to an age where he could work wouldn't be earning the family money."

Randall steadily picked mushrooms, medicinal herbs, and edible plants as he talked.

"My mother cried, and I felt I had no choice. I helped out with the farmwork, but I never truly gave up on becoming an apothecary. I honestly don't even know why I was so set on it. But it got to the point where I was convinced my soul would wither away if I stayed at home working like that forever."

"Oh..."

"The night before I turned twenty, I left home with just a change of clothes and some change. Thirteen years later I was finally in a position to send my parents money. I rushed home, but they'd passed away. My younger brother had become the head of the household and he struck me. How dare I come back after all that time and without shame, he'd said. I didn't fight back. I let him hit me until he got it out of his system. I could do that much to atone, at least."

I also ran away from home, thought Olivia, because I knew my soul would die if I stayed there.

"But you had no other choice," Olivia pointed out. "There was nothing else you could do. Humans are the only animals where the children take it upon themselves to make sacrifices for their parents. I don't get it. There are so many

people who value the children's sacrifice, but if I were a parent..."

Olivia's words faltered, and Randall glanced over at her but didn't say anything.

"There are a lot of bitter potato trees growing on that slope over there," she said finally. "See! They cover the entire slope."

"Oh my. I didn't expect them to be growing in such a thicket."

The trees coated a slope that saw lots of sunlight. They were free to grow unchecked since there weren't many people in the area who ate them. Their foliage was dense with leaves shaped like the palm of a human hand.

"Oh, drat," said Randall. "If we were going to dig up bitter potatoes, we should have brought tools with us."

"Don't worry. I have some tools hidden around here. I just leave them here since they're heavy."

"Huh. This forest really is like your own backyard."

Rob was staring up at Olivia with a look of desperation. *I swim? I can swim?* Swim all right?

"It's fine, Rob. You can go swim," she said, but he didn't even wait for her to finish speaking before he flung himself into the river. He doggy paddled through the river, huffing wildly with just his head poking up above the surface.

Olivia took out the shovel she had hidden in a pile of stones. It was wrapped in oiled paper after she'd carefully rinsed it and wiped it dry, so it wasn't rusted.

She used that shovel to start digging out the roots of the bitter potato trees. Randall started prying them out of the dirt without Olivia having to say anything. She took a knife from her bag and started cutting off the elongated egg-shaped tubers.

They were so in sync with each other it felt like they'd worked together for years, allowing them to collect fifteen of the bitter potato roots in no time at all.

"Let's leave it at that," said Randall. "The goddess of the forest will scold us if we're greedy."

"All right. And it's been a while since I've heard someone say that. My grandmother loved that warning."

"She always said that to me when we were foraging."

Olivia called, "Rob! It's time to go home!" then lifted the sack with the bitter potatoes and began walking. As she did, three squirrels appeared in the tree branches. They must have remembered that Olivia would give them some of her chestnuts or walnuts when she was gathering them.

This is a bad time for the squirrels to come, with Randall here, she thought as she kept repeating in her mind, I have no food. It was hard to express the message to them if she didn't say it out loud. She could get across powerful messages without speaking aloud, such as Run! or Enemies come! but essentially everything else she had to speak for them to understand.

Before she realized it, there were squirrels scattered here and there, looking at Olivia expectantly.

"Olivia, were you perhaps a squirrel in a past life?" asked Randall. "There's been a gaggle of squirrels watching you for a while."

"You noticed... I tend to give them some chestnuts and walnuts when I gather them. They must think of me as a source of food."

"Ah..." Randall looked at Olivia with curiosity as they walked through the forest. It made her uncomfortable.

They returned to the restaurant, chatting about nothing in particular on the way back, then Olivia set right to working on the bitter potatoes. Randall sat watching her every move as she took off thick slices of the skin to peel them, sliced them into discs, soaked them in water, and then boiled them.

"Did you know you can make quite the potent poison if you boil a large quantity of just the skin?" he said.

"Poison? Grandma taught me to peel them well since the scum you get from the skin is strong. I didn't know it was poisonous, though."

"The poison was commonly used some two hundred years ago. But I suppose it isn't something Marguerite would have taught you."

Once the bitter potatoes had been boiled, Olivia mashed them and sieved the result through a cloth before adding a small amount of flour. Randall watched excitedly in between reading snippets from Marguerite's books on medicinal herbs as Olivia formed the mash into dumplings.

The customers for dinner went home, and Olivia boiled a huge batch of bitter potato dumplings for the next day, which was when Randall started saying he felt a chill. She put a hand to his forehead, and he was quite hot.

"You have a fever," she said. "Stay upstairs tonight. I'll keep an eye on you."

"I'm sorry. We've only just met, and now I'm making you take care of me," he said.

"Whether or not we just met doesn't matter when you're feeling unwell. Please, let me handle this."

Randall's complexion wasn't good, and he was shivering. His fever was likely to go up even more.

Olivia ran into the forest towards her ice store. I'm sure I have a little ice left!

Randall's fever was worse by the time Arthur came home and was joined by head and stomach pain. Olivia was up all night caring for him. She remembered her grandmother saying fevers were particularly dangerous for the elderly.

"Drink this water," she urged. "I've sterilized it with boiling, then cooled it."

This must be that bad illness going around the capital, she thought.

She told Arthur not to go near the room Randall was sleeping in and gradually opened the window. That was Olivia's old room, and her grandmother had told her fresh air was necessary for fighting an infectious illness like that.

She soaked a cloth in icy water, rung it out, and placed it on Randall's forehead. When he said he was cold, she put hot water in a jar, wrapped it in several layers of cloth, and then laid it next to Randall's side in the bed to warm him.

"Everything's going to be all right," she soothed. "You'll get over this soon."

He had no appetite, but Olivia had him drink chicken broth, mushroom broth, or the broth of the bitter potato dumpling soup, changing his sweat-drenched

clothes when necessary. When he started coughing, she placed a damp towel with a cough suppressant on his chest. She also mixed up some cough medicine and had him take that.

During this time, Soup Forest was temporarily closed.

Randall's fever subsided, and he regained his appetite two days after the fever started. It seemed he'd made it over the worst of things without it getting too bad.

Once his fever went down, he started flinging a flurry of questions at Olivia about medicinal herbs, dealing with illness, methods for preventing illness, and treatment of wounds.

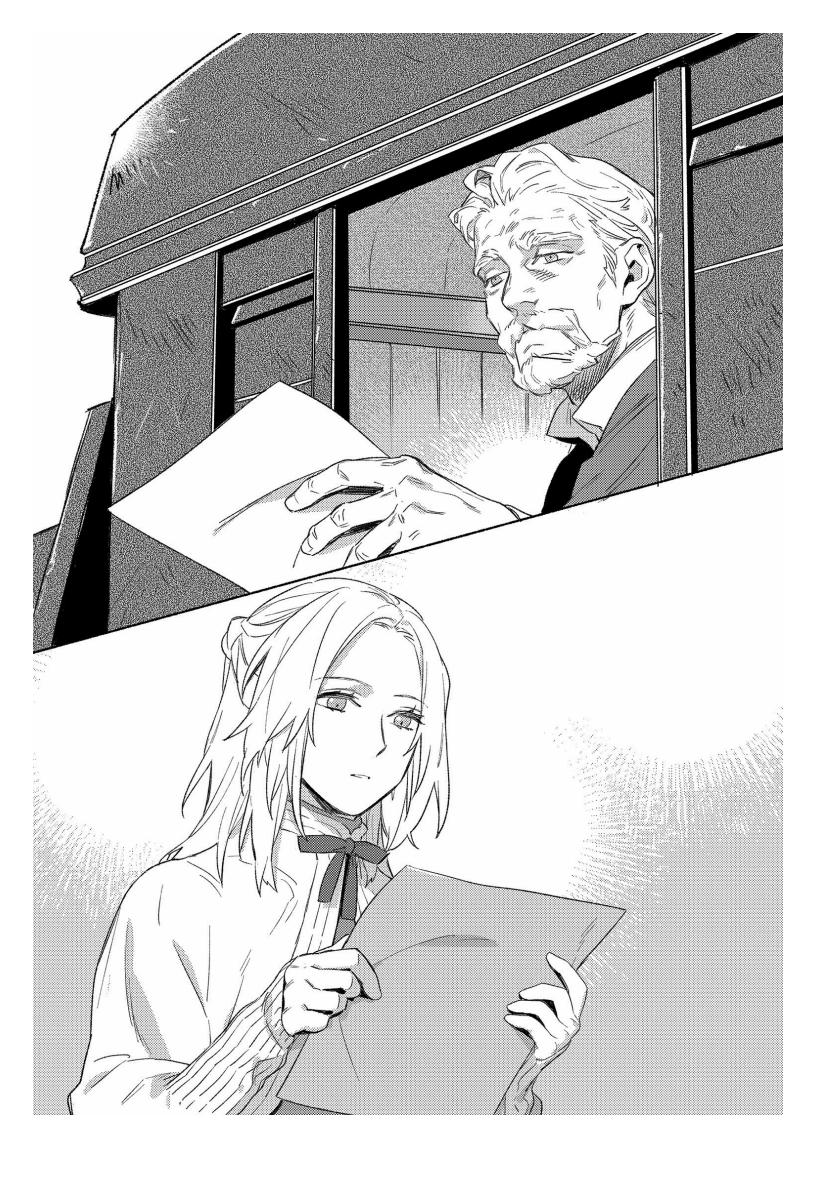
This is hardly much to ask of me if it distracts him from his illness, thought Olivia as she kept on answering each question in full.

Three days after the onset of his fever, Randall's condition was much better, and he was starting to eat again. He had his fill of pumpkin soup with bitter potato dumplings, though he seemed lost in thought as he ate. Then, the next day, he returned to Marlowe.

He kept thanking Olivia even once he was in his carriage, then handed her a piece of paper.

On it was written: "I, Randall Auber, former royal apothecary, do swear on fear of penalty that Olivia Eagleton Dariu has knowledge equivalent to that of a royal apothecary."

However, Olivia had no concept of the true weight of those words.



Chapter 12: To the Castle Barracks

THERE are a few customs in Marlowe, the capital of the Marlais region, that were started by Marguerite, Olivia's grandmother:

One: When a member of the family has come down with something contagious, only one person in the family should care for them.

Two: Always get fresh air. This is obvious in summer, but make sure to have fresh air in the house in winter, too.

Three: Disinfect anything the ill person touches using boiling water, or at the very least, wipe it down with rubbing alcohol.

Boiling water was hard for people with very little money since they couldn't afford to use what little they had on the extra fuel for their fires, but Marguerite continuously insisted this was still better than a family member dying. If they lived, they could work again and help earn back the money, and they must not let their family die just for the immediate money savings.

Plenty of shops also stocked alcohol that prioritized alcohol content to flavor for those families who didn't have much money to spare. Freddy's Pharmacy was one of them.

Perhaps it was because of these particular customs in Marlowe that the illness that ravaged the capital passed through Marlowe without taking too many lives.

Soup Forest saw largely unchanged business once Randall had recovered. Olivia's customers were still coming, only slightly less than usual. According to the traveling merchants, though, the illness was seeing no end in the capital.

"It's bad. Even the doctors and apothecaries are laid up with this bug."

"Even the doctors?" inquired Olivia.

"Apparently, even the castle's servants are bedbound. I didn't recognize any

of the people working there when I went to make my delivery."

"Oh, dear."

"And on a different topic, this soup is really good. What did you season it with?"

"Spring onion and ginger. The usual. Oh, and the flavor of the bitter potato dumplings has probably melded into the broth."

"Bitter potatoes? Haven't had that in forever. People don't really eat it that much these days, not with how easy it is to get wheat."

"My grandmother told me people fought over bitter potatoes when there was a famine."

"Yeah, sounds about right. Bitter potato is the kind of food that falls out of favor for those with a more affluent lifestyle."

"Perhaps."

The soup of the day was a salty spinach with pork meatballs soup. There were also a few bitter potato dumplings thrown in. The mound of spring onion and ginger that went into it meant a bit of salt was all you needed for seasoning, and eating it warmed you so much from the inside it could make you sweat.

Randall didn't visit the restaurant again. While she wiped down the tables after the customers left, Olivia thought, Randall said he'd retired from being an apothecary, but, with things as they are, maybe he was called back to duty.

Arthur came home and started talking about the illness going around. "Freddy's Pharmacy is selling distilled alcohol for cheap, but he's soaked bitter plants in it to make it taste nasty so people who just want a cheap drink don't buy it. That means we still have some to sell to the people who really need it, when other shops are running out."

"What a good idea."

"This soup is great. There's something chewy in here, besides the meatballs, isn't there?"

"Those are bitter potato dumplings. I love them, they add a nice flavor."

Arthur seemed to like the meatball and dumpling soup. He had three whole bowls then kept rubbing his belly and complaining about how he ate too much. There was a small fire in the stove, a kettle of water warmed on top so they could make a cup of tea whenever they wanted.

"I realized how fun digging up bitter potatoes is because of the time I did it with Randall," said Olivia. "I've gone and made two giant potfuls of dumplings. Tomorrow, I think I'll try something new with them when I use them in the soup."

"I think this soup with the bitter potato dumplings is one of my favorite ones you've ever made," said Arthur.

"There are plenty more dumplings where that came from. Eat as many as you want."

"Can't wait."

They then heard the sound of a carriage outside, and Rob was the first to rush towards the sound.

"Who could that be at this time of night?" wondered Olivia, but Arthur waved her back and went to the door himself.

He talked for a moment with whoever it was, then came back to the kitchen with a severe expression. "It's from the castle. Seems there's some emergency for you."

Olivia hurried to the door, wondering what this could possibly be, and found a tired-looking man standing there.

"Are you Ms. Olivia?" he asked.

"I am."

"You've been summoned to the castle. Please come with me immediately."

"First, come inside for a moment and please explain what this is all about."

Arthur came to join the conversation and hear what was going on.

"The castle's doctors and apothecaries are falling bedridden one after another," said the man. "They're in a constant state of exhaustion as they deal

with the sick, and now they're catching the illness too. You're requested to come to the castle and assist in treating the ill."

"How did anyone at the castle even hear of me?"

"Mister Randall Auber suggested we call you in, as he has been as well."

"Oh... But I'm not a registered apothecary. I don't have the qualifications."

"Mister Auber said he left you a document. If you have that, there will be no issues. Mister Auber oversees the apothecary qualification exam."

That little note?! That's why he gave it to me, he was thinking of a situation like this! thought Olivia. She and Arthur shared a look of understanding.

"This is an emergency," the man continued. "Please, come to the capital immediately."

"Right this moment? Though, I understand I can't really refuse in this situation. I'll go," said Olivia.

Olivia left Soup Forest that evening, along with a giant load of bitter potato dumplings.

"I don't know when I'll be back, so I'm going to take all the dumplings," she said. "I worked really hard to make all these. I can't bear the thought of them going bad and becoming inedible."

She was so insistent Arthur had no way of talking her out of it.

The man who came to summon her introduced himself as Edgar and explained the situation as the carriage drove down the road.

"The illness first spread through the commonfolk of the capital, but status makes no difference at this point. What is the state of the illness in Marlais?"

"I don't think it's that bad in Marlowe, at least," Olivia said.

"I wonder what made the difference."

"Perhaps it has something to do with how densely populated the area is, or isn't? Infectious diseases spread from person to person, after all."

They stayed in an inn for the night then set off again at sunrise, Edgar and Olivia taking turns driving the carriage as they headed towards the capital.

Once they arrived, they went straight to the castle. Olivia was surprised to see that all the guards and clerks were wearing scarves wrapped around their mouths and noses.

"Edgar, what is that for?" asked Olivia.

"It's on order from Mister Auber. He believes the illness may enter the body through the nose or mouth."

"I see. Well, I may as well follow suit and use a scarf."

"Thank you. It's become a requirement within the castle."

After that, Olivia was led to where the soldiers lived. On the beds of each room were physically fit patients, coughing weakly. Olivia went up to a man walking around in white and said, "I was summoned by Randall Auber to help. My name is Olivia. What should I do?"

"Ah, it's you. I heard about you from Randall. Do rounds of the particularly worse-off patients. They're in the rooms with a red cloth hung across the doorway. The infirmary prepares any necessary medicines. Use whatever you need."

"All right."

Olivia immediately began rushing from patient to patient, checking up on them, placing damp cloths on their foreheads, preparing medicines, and administering them. She was working so much she forgot to eat, but Randall came over and told her to take a break.

"But there are so many severely ill patients..." she said.

"Fatigue invites illness," he said. "Take a break. I don't want to have to deal with you as a patient on top of everything else."

"You're right. Of course."

That's when she suddenly remembered all the bitter potato dumplings she'd piled into the carriage. She rushed to her things and gave the giant batch of dumplings a good sniff.

"Oh, good! They seem all right still. Maybe I can get them to put these in a soup."

She took them to the kitchen and asked the cook in charge of the kitchen to taste one. Once they approved, the dumplings were tossed in a soup. The chicken soup with piping hot dumplings was delicious in a way that spread through her fatigued body.

The other apothecaries and doctors, helpers, and anyone else who wasn't busy at the moment had some of the soup as well, and the severely ill patients were given the broth without any of the dumplings. The less severely ill patients got the broth and its contents. With that, the huge batch of dumplings was used up in one big go.

That night, the fevers of the patients in the barracks began to fall. The doctors and apothecaries scurrying around realized this fact the next morning.

"I finally got to lie down last night for the first time in a long time," said one. "It looks like everyone's made it through the worst."

"It does look that way. That's good news," said another.

"There's something I'd like to ask you!" said another man, barging into the conversation. He was likely a little younger than thirty and dressed in the white of a medical professional.

"Hm? Doctor Ulysse? What would you like to ask?"

"I'm currently in charge of caring for the maidservants, but they have definitely not made it through the worst of it. This is the only area in which we've seen a sudden reduction in the number of severely ill. The situation in the servants' quarters is as horrible as ever. Is there some particularly good medicine you used only on the soldiers? I have several maidservants on the verge of death. If you have any more of that medicine, please, I beg you, share it with us, too!"

The doctor's plea was so desperate his face turned beet red, but all the doctors working in the barracks looked dumbstruck.

One of the younger doctors working in the barracks quickly argued back. "We haven't used any such medicine. All we've used is the same medicine and medicinal broths we've been using. Perhaps the difference is in the soldiers' greater constitution?"

"Yet the rate of severely ill among the soldiers has been essentially the same as with my patients despite their greater constitution! But your patients have suddenly begun to recover ever since yesterday. That doesn't seem odd to you?"

"Still..."

While everyone else was uncertain about what was happening, a voice came from a nearby bed. "It was the soup yesterday."

"What was that?" said Olivia, spinning quickly to face the soldier since she was the one who nearly forced the cooks to use her bitter potato dumplings.

The soldier thought carefully then said, "Yesterday we were served a soup with these slightly bitter dumplings. I'd never eaten dumplings like that, but not too long after I did, my fever suddenly started to drop, and I started to feel better. I assumed the bitter taste was from some medicine, that my fever suddenly dropped after eating dumplings with medicine in them. But, that wasn't it?"

"See! You did use something!" cried Ulysse.

"No," said Olivia. "I just made bitter potato dumplings. They didn't have any medicine in them. That bitter flavor is just how bitter potatoes naturally taste."

Ulysse stepped closer to Olivia. "What is that? Bitter potatoes? What sort of medicinal effects do they have?"

"They don't have any effects, as far as I'm aware. It's just the root of a tree people have been eating for ages."

"Are there any more of these bitter potato dumplings?"

"I'll go ask. I am the one who brought them, after all."

"I'll go with you."

They went to the kitchen that prepared the food for the barracks, surprising the cooks as both Olivia and Ulysse came rushing in.

"The soup from yesterday?" one said. "There's a little left, but the dumplings have all crumbled..."

"That's fine. I want some of that soup," demanded Ulysse.

"Sure, all right. Go ahead and take some."

Ulysse scooped some of the remaining soup from the giant pot into a smaller one and said, "Soup can't be worse than trying nothing. I'm going to go give this to the worst of the maidservants!"

And then he rushed away.

Chapter 13: The Bitter Potato Squad

THE soup with its crumbled bitter potato dumplings was fed to five of the maidservants with the highest fevers. Even the vegetables and the meat had turned to mush at this point, so it was more of a thick porridge than a soup, but the maids ate it as they coughed. Some of them struggled to get it down, while others nearly gulped down their entire serving.

"Just rest, now. I'll be back to take your temperature every hour," said Doctor Ulysse. The patients nodded weakly and lay back down.

Olivia joined him for the hourly checkups. When she looked at the sheet recording the change in their temperature, she saw everyone's fevers had started to fall after three hours. After five, they only had a slight fever. After eight, they were back to a normal temperature.

"How?" she wondered. "I've never heard of bitter potatoes having that sort of effect. They're a food that's been eaten for a long time. I wish we at least had some old wives' tales about them."

"We'll pick apart the reason later," said Ulysse. "First things first, I want more bitter potatoes for the other patients. Could you draw a map showing their location?"

"I'll take you there. It's a hard place to find, and you won't recognize the tree if you don't know it already."

"Hm. Well, the patients in the barracks are on the mend. They should be able to manage without you... All right. Please, if you don't mind, show me where they are."

"I'd be happy to."

Soon, they'd formed a "bitter potato squad" consisting of soldiers not bedridden with the illness, a horticulturalist, and gardeners. Olivia was put astride a horse along with a young soldier.

"We'll be going fairly quickly, ma'am. Please hold on tight," he said.

The squad hurried to the forest Olivia was so familiar with as fast as they could.

Arthur came rushing out of Soup Forest when the bitter potato squad arrived, catching a fatigued Olivia in his arms as she climbed down from the horse.

"Olivia!" he said. "Are you all right? Who are these people?"

"All these people are going to dig up bitter potatoes, Arthur," she said. "It helps with the illness going around. I'm going to show them the way."

"You look terrible. Tell me where it is, I'll show them."

"No. I have to explain to them how to dig up the roots in a way that won't damage the trees so much that they die. I'm sure we'll need more bitter potatoes in the future. I don't want things to get out of hand and let the trees die. I have to teach them how to harvest them and how to cut them up."

"All right, but I'm going with you. We'll ride together on Annie. Come on."

They pulled out every spade and basket in the restaurant, then Arthur and Olivia led the bitter potato squad through the forest on Annie. They came to the river, then traveled upstream for a time.

"Everyone, listen," said Olivia. "Every tree growing on that slope is a bitter potato tree. They'll die if you dig up all their roots, so please only take up to two roots per tree."

"Don't worry, Ms. Olivia. We gardeners will take care of it. Plants are our expertise. We'll be careful not to let them die."

"And I'm a horticulturist. I came because I wanted to see what environment these plants naturally grow in. Once I have a solid grasp of that, I can try cultivating them in the capital."

Until then, Olivia had been chatting with the others with a smile on her face, but now she gently lowered herself onto a nearby rock. Arthur immediately started to worry and asked, "Are you all right? You look beat."

"Part of it is being tired from working and traveling, but the other part is I had to listen to all the voices while I was working..."

"The inner voices of the patients?"

"Yeah. I tried as hard as I could not to listen, but they were so weak that their hearts were completely unguarded. They kept saying, 'I want to die,' or, 'It hurts so much, help,' or even, 'Mum, please, help me.' I listened to their screaming nonstop, they sounded so desperate..."

Hearing that and being unable to do anything wore down Olivia while she was left unable to let on to anyone else that she could hear it at all. She'd worked that whole time hearing the internal screams of the severely ill patients. There were so many times she wanted to burst into tears and demand why God would give her this ability, but she had to keep working with a smile.

Despite her tiredness, Olivia got back to her feet and moved over to a bitter potato root now exposed from the dirt. She showed everyone how to cut it off, and they remained serious as they watched.

"All right. I got it. Thank you, Ms. Olivia. We'll take care of the rest. You can go home and rest," said one of the gardeners.

"I'll write down instructions on how to prepare them. Mistakes would be bad since the skin's poisonous."

"Thank you!"

Olivia took pen and paper from the satchel she always had with her and wrote clear, thorough instructions that no one could get wrong.

There was no need to go to the effort of making dumplings, this time, so she wrote down how to peel them, soak them, rough chop them, and boil until soft. Arthur stood beside her and watched with a serious expression as she wrote the notes. It was very clearly written that the skin was poisonous.

"All right, that should be good enough," Olivia said. "This should let them prepare them safely."

After gathering nearly a hundred tubers, the bitter potato squad returned to the capital. Olivia started to stagger over to join them in going back, but they stopped her.

"Olivia, you're released from duty. You're not looking very good. Let us take

care of the rest. And here is your portion of the bitter potatoes," said Ulysse.

"Thank you, Doctor Ulysse. If you insist, then, I'll go home. Please take care."

"No, thank you for caring for the patients and for the bitter potatoes. You've been a massive help. I'll see you later!"

The squad left, trailing a cloud of dust in their wake. Arthur and Olivia watched them go, then turned towards home.

They returned to Soup Forest, where Olivia washed the grime from herself with warm water, then she realized she actually had a fever herself.

"Arthur, I think I've caught the illness," she said. "Stay away, I don't want you to catch it too. I'll stay in my old room; you go on to work."

Arthur froze for a moment, but then decided what his priorities were. "No, I'll take the day off work. The pharmacy will manage without me. I'll contact Freddy later."

"Fine. But it'd be bad if we both end up bedridden, so stay away from me."

"I got it, I got it. Just go lay down."

"All right, I'm going."

With that, Olivia tottered up the stairs and went into the room she'd used when she was single. She was already starting to feel lightheaded and chilly.

"I need to prepare things while I can still move for when my fever gets worse," she said. She got out a change of clothes and put it by her pillow, then placed a bucket on the floor for if she started feeling nauseous. There was a knock on the door so she called back, "Arthur, could you draw some water for me to drink and use to cool myself?"

Her head was starting to throb.

"Come at me, you silly cold!" she said. "I've got plenty of bitter potatoes. Oh, wait, they need to be prepared..."

She gave up on the idea of making bitter potato soup and slipped slowly into bed. Her fatigue crashed into her, from both not getting much rest at the castle because she was so busy treating the ill and from all the travel back and forth.

The moment she closed her eyes, she felt like she was sinking into a swamp as she slipped into sleep.

She had the vague feeling that she was shivering in her sleep, and that Arthur had come into the room, but he wasn't there when her eyes snapped open.

Ugh, my throat hurts. My head hurts. My joints hurt. Everything hurts. I'm so miserable, so in pain.

It was then, when she was complaining in her head, that she realized something.

The soldiers were overflowing with thoughts like that. And in that case, shouldn't I have spoken to them in a gentle voice, encouraged them, tried to help ease their worry? But I just shut off my heart and kept on grinning! I'm such a complete idiot!

She pulled her cover up to her face and realized her pajamas were clean and dry. Someone had changed her out of her other ones at some point. Not long after that, Arthur came to check on her.

"Thank you, Arthur," she said. "I would've felt so hopeless if I'd been alone for this."

"Yeah? Well, I'm here. Just relax and get some sleep."

"Oh, you'll catch this illness if you're in the same room as me."

"It's all right. I'm doing what you taught me, opening the window bit by bit. And the bitter potato soup'll be ready soon. Just sleep until then."

Even talking was a pain, so she just nodded slightly then went back to sleep. In a haze, she found herself being sat up and a warm liquid spooned into her mouth. It seemed like the cool towel on her forehead had been changed out several times, too. She continued to sleep; all her memories vague.

During that period, she had a feeling Arthur was there gripping her hand and saying something to her, but she wasn't entirely sure if it was real or a dream. It seemed like he was saying the same thing over and over: "Don't take any more family from me. Please, please. God, please help her."

He was overflowing with pained emotions, and she wanted to tell him she

was fine, but she didn't have the energy to get the words out. She just kept on sleeping, weighed down heavily. She slept, then woke, then slept again.

Throughout all of it, she gradually started to feel better.

The next time she opened her eyes, her headache was gone and her breathing was steadier.

"Arthur, I think I've gotten over the worst of this," she said, but there was no answer. She looked over to see Arthur sitting in a chair he'd brought over to the bedside, his arms crossed as he slept.

There was a soup bowl on the bedside table with roughly chopped chunks of bitter potato remaining at the bottom.

"I noticed you were reading my note, but I didn't think you'd go all the way through that tedious preparation for me. Thank you, Arthur. I'm not going to leave you all alone."

She reached out and gently laid her hand on his knee. For the first time in a while, she thought back to what the golden deer had said about true mates.

"I've found my soulmate, after all. I'm not going to go and die first and leave you behind."

Olivia sat up in bed with a huff of effort, then lowered her weak legs to the floor and gently draped a blanket over Arthur.

"My precious mate," she said quietly as she softly wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders.

Chapter 14: What Arthur Fears

"OLIVIA, what are you doing?"

"Saying thank you to the mum while I fertilize it now that it's done flowering."

"That's called a mum?"

"Yep. Cute, isn't it? I used to love mum fritters, but I didn't eat any this year."

"What? You can eat that?"

"You sure can. I'm pretty sure you can eat most plants, so long as they're not poisonous."

Arthur stopped sharpening the knife he'd been working on and looked at Olivia. She then repeated herself as if she were reasoning with a child.

"You can eat them as long as they're not poisonous."

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't look like you believed me. Mum leaves and flowers are both wonderful if you batter them, fry them, and sprinkle them with a bit of salt."

Wouldn't it just be the batter and oil that tastes good? thought Arthur, but he didn't say anything. He went back to sharpening the knife. Unless there was some huge conflict in their difference in opinion, he'd keep his mouth shut and just listen. He was a man of few words in general anyway.

Olivia watched him and thought, You know what, maybe I'll make some fried food. It's been a while.

Once Arthur left for work that day, Olivia took Rob and went to the river. River fish was one of the prime examples of food that tasted great when you battered and fried it. She had plenty of fish bait in the form of worms she collected from the garden. They got to the river, Rob's steps filled with enjoyment, and Olivia cast her line into the water.

As she watched it float, a kingfisher dived from a branch on the other side of the river into the water, then came back up to sit on a branch and eat the small fish it had clamped in its beak. The kingfisher was easy to spot with the metallic gleam of its blue back.

I don't know why, but I feel so lucky on days I see a kingfisher, thought Olivia, the corners of her mouth turning up.

Around the time she'd fished up three trout, she sensed what could only be described as "slight concern." It was the emotion of some animals worrying about something.

Oh no.

Run.

Danger!

Olivia slowly scanned the area, wondering where it was coming from and if there was some danger. She kept her vision wide, not focusing on any particular thing, her eyes vaguely taking in the area around her. She slowly moved them, making sure she'd pick up immediately on any movement.

Ah, there it is.

There were brown animals on the other side of the river. She focused her eyes on them to see river otters. The otters were running up the sloping bank of the river, looking behind them several times as they did. Something seemed to be coming on the water.

Could have been dangerous if it had been a bear. They're eating like crazy right now getting ready for hibernation. I should go home.

She quickly disassembled her fishing rod and put it in her grandfather's handmade carrying case.

After thinking for a moment, she called quietly, "Rob! Time to go," then began walking with him. As they walked, she took a quick look back and saw it, the large brown mass far bigger than a human. A bear.

It was upwind of them and hadn't yet noticed them.

We need to get out of here before the wind shifts, Olivia thought, then

commanded Rob to stay quiet.

Rob had already noticed the bear, and his fur stood on end.

Olivia stepped gently on the stones along the river, trying not to make a sound as she ever so quietly put distance between her and the bear. Her grandparents had warned her over and over that if you run and the bear chases you, you have no way of winning a contest of speed. She held her breath as she moved, letting it out in a woosh when she felt they'd made it a good enough distance away.

"Rob, you're such a good boy."

"Woof!"

"I'll give you a treat for being so clever when we get home."

"Woof!"

They hurried on, then she gave Rob a treat of boiled dark meat pork.

Olivia was planning not to tell Arthur about her encounter with the bear. It would just worry him. All she had to do was stay away from the river until winter.

And so, when she was frying up the trout that evening, it was really rather careless of her to think, *That bear was huge, though*.

She set the piping-hot fried fish fillets on the table, and Arthur, who normally would have been ecstatic about such a feast, ate in silence.

Hm? Does he not like it? thought Olivia. Maybe he's not in the mood for fried food.

She tried telling him about something she heard from a customer. "It's a good thing that illness didn't cause too much trouble around here," she said. "But I was thinking next year, I might harvest bitter potatoes little by little then make them into flour so they can be stored, ready to use whenever we need it."

"Good idea."

"Arthur... Is something wrong? Are you feeling all right?"

"Let's talk after we finish eating."

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"Sure..."
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They finished their dinner in silence, washed the dishes together, and put them away on the shelf.

"Olivia, sit down," said Arthur.

"All right." Olivia wondered what this was about as she sat down across from him.

He took a deep breath then said, "Olivia, why didn't you tell me about running into the bear?"

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"Oh..."
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"I thought I asked you not to go to the river since the bears are hungry because it's right before they go into hibernation."

"Well, I wouldn't say I ran into a bear. I realized there was one a little way off and I got out of there before it noticed me."

Arthur let out a long sigh, his expression intense. "You just happened to be the one who noticed the other first. The bear might be the one to notice you first, too."

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"Well... Yes, I suppose."
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"What would you've done if it attacked? Do you know how fast bears run? A bear could catch me in the blink of an eye even if I was running as fast as I could."

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"I know."
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"And there's no point climbing trees, bears can climb, too."

"I'm sorry, Arthur. I won't go to the river alone again."

"You said that before!"

"Yeah..."

"I just... I don't want to dig any more graves for my family!"

BANG!

Arthur slammed the table with no other outlet for his anger. Rob jumped and

whined, his tail swinging back and forth slightly as he looked up at Arthur with puppy-dog eyes.

Olivia felt a sting of pain in her heart when she felt Rob going, *I sorry. I make you angry?* so she told him, "It's all right, Rob. He's not angry at you," as she patted his head.

Then she stood and moved over to Arthur, gently slipped her arm around his shoulders, and plunked her head against his.

She felt all sorts of mixed emotions flowing from him, like a murky stream. Sorrow, unease, loneliness, real fear that he was going to lose Olivia.

"I'm sorry," she said. "When I was a child, I'd go fishing at the river regardless of the season. I was careless. I promise I won't do it again. I'm sorry, I really am."

"The fried trout was really good."

"Yeah?"

"I wasted it, though. Couldn't really taste it 'cause I was angry while I was eating."

"Yeah..."

"The next day off, I'll come with you. If you really want to go fishing, let's do it on my day off."

"All right. But I can just wait until the bears go into hibernation."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. I'm sorry I slammed the table."

"It's all right. I'm the one who broke a promise then hid it from you."

They stayed like that for a while. Then, when Arthur regained his composure, he put his arm around Olivia's waist, pulled her onto his lap, and rested his head on her shoulder.

"When I was a mercenary," he said, "I once ran into a bear. It was around this same time of year, too. We looked into each other's eyes, and I just wanted to run."

"Yeah?"

"But my squadmates attacked out of fear, swinging their swords at it."

"Oh..."

"They slashed at it. It got worked up and attacked back. After that...it was like war. Three mercenaries died because of it."

Olivia fell quiet.

"And these were mercenaries. Fighting was their job."

"Yeah."

"Bears... They just tear you apart with those thick limbs and razor-sharp claws. If they get your neck, you die from all the blood loss. If they get your stomach, you die in utter agony. I've been scared of bears ever since. I know you can feel what animals are feeling, but that doesn't mean you can control them, right?"

"No, it doesn't."

"So, please, try not to do anything that'll make me worry. I feel like it'll cut years off my life."

"I wouldn't want that. I'm sorry."

"I want to live a long life with you."

"I know."

"All right. Let's call this conversation done. I could do with a cup of cherry tea. I'll make it."

"Could you make some for me, too?"

"Sure thing."

Seeing the tension ease between the two of them, Rob slowly went back to his bed.

While she was drinking the tea Arthur prepared, Olivia thought, *When was the last time I got scolded like that?*

As far as she could remember, she'd never been scolded once since she'd been adopted. She was an obedient child, and her grandparents rarely got worked up. She was very grateful for the easy-going love of her grandparents,

but she was also grateful for Arthur's love, the sort that caused him to worry so much he was beside himself with anger.

She felt both sorry for worrying him and grateful. This was her first time ever feeling grateful after being scolded.

The next day, Louise came to eat. They chatted about what happened after they finished, and Louise looked at Olivia with affection.

"How sweet," she said. "You don't meet many people in life that will get worked up out of concern for you."

"I know."

"On a different note, I heard about your work in the capital. You did such a good job, dear."

"I didn't do anything. It was one of the soldiers that caught on to the effects of the bitter potatoes."

"Even so, you have to be impressed at how fortunate you were to bring them along. I wish I could tell Marguerite about it."

"I'm sure she's watching."

"You're right. I do feel like she's there."

With that, Louise left, reminding Olivia she could come to her if she was ever in trouble.

Chapter 15: Lara Lefort Comes to Visit

OLIVIA had just finished cleaning up after lunch and was thinking about starting her prep for the evening when a girl in a small, fancy carriage came to Soup Forest.

The girl was driving the carriage herself and stopped it at the edge of the garden with skill. Olivia watched through the window as the girl approached, clearly concerned about the wrinkles in her skirt. She then hurried to the door to meet the girl.

"Hello," said the girl. "Is there a Ms. Olivia here?"

"I'm Olivia. How can I help you?"

"It's nice to meet you. I am Lara Lefort. I'm fifteen years old, nearly an adult." The girl, with her chestnut-colored hair pulled back in a high ponytail, gave an energetic greeting.



"I heard you have all the knowledge of the legendary apothecary, Marguerite. I want to be an apothecary, too. Please, let me be your apprentice."

"Apprentice? Lara, where are you from?" Olivia asked.

"The capital. I came by myself by carriage."

"By yourself, from the capital? That must have been a difficult journey. First things first, come over here and have a seat."

Olivia took a casual look at the girl while she urged her to a chair. She looked rather classy, but something about her didn't feel like nobility. *Perhaps she's the daughter of a wealthy merchant?* she wondered as she made some apple tea.

"This is amazing! It smells just like sweet apples," said Lara.

"I've added the flesh and skin of dried apples to the tea. Right, so, about what you said earlier," Olivia said, getting them back on topic. "I'm not taking on apprentices. I'm not even working as an apothecary. I'm sorry I can't help even though you've come out all this way."

"I guessed that might be the case. Mister Auber said you'd definitely refuse."

"You know Randall?" The intense dejection on Lara's face made Olivia feel uncomfortable. "What I know I just memorized by reading the notes my grandmother left behind. What if you copied them?"

"Could I? But they're such valuable resources."

"I don't mind. I'm sure my grandmother would be happy if her knowledge did some good in your hands. But copying them will be a huge undertaking in and of itself. There's a lot."

"It'd probably take several days, wouldn't it?"

"I think so. I doubt you'd finish in three or four days even if you spent all day copying from morning until night."

"Sounds about right. It is the entire life's work of the great Lady Marguerite, after all."

At that point, Olivia realized she'd forgotten to ask one very important question. "Lara, do your parents know you're here?"

"No. I was...run out of my home. Because, out of all my siblings, I'm the only one with a different mom. I depended on my dad, but he died. My stepmom said she had no obligation to take care of me anymore, and that she'd give me a carriage if I'd just leave. But, thanks to that, I finally get to go after my dream. The only thing I own right now is my horse and my carriage. So, as embarrassing as it is, I don't have a whole lot in my pockets. Could I stay here? Just even in the corner of the barn, and just while I copy everything."

Olivia's mind had been leaning towards firmly refusing until that point, but that flipped to "I want to help this girl," so forcefully there was practically a loud *clang* when it did.

"You've been through all that? Well, there's an outbuilding behind his house. The goats live on the first floor, so you'll hear some noises from them, but the second floor is clean. You could stay there, if you like."

"Are you sure? You're a lifesaver! Thank you, Ms. Olivia!"

"Please, just Olivia."

"Sure thing, Olivia. Thank you for everything."

"Of course. Take your time copying, Lara."

Olivia gave Lara the books Marguerite left behind and a set of writing utensils, then went to prepare dinner.

Today, she was making a stew from chestnuts dried until they were crispy crunchy, as well as dried mushrooms. It was loaded with onion, carrot, and dried celery, just covered with water and simmered on a gentle flame. Once warm, she added chicken stock and salt, then boiled it all together.

While the stew was simmering, she worked on a side dish of pan-fried homemade bacon and beans. Just as she was frying the beans in the bacon fat, she turned around and saw Lara sniffing the aroma wafting from the kitchen with rapt attention.

Oh, what if...? thought Olivia. She quickly sliced a big round loaf of bread into thin slices and smothered those in butter and wild strawberry jam. The jam was made by boiling down the wild strawberries Olivia picked in the forest during summer.

"Have some of this to tide you over until dinner," she said as she gave Lara the bread.

"Are you sure? Thank you!"

Lara was hesitant at first, but halfway through a slice she became entranced with the food. Her now unguarded thoughts slipped out: *Oh my God, this is so good! It's amazing! Yum!*

Olivia felt sorry, wanting to apologize for not having noticed the girl's hunger sooner. She'd probably been sent packing without much money, either. She'd likely been rationing whatever money she did have for food.

It doesn't matter what the situation is, does Lara's stepmother not feel intense guilt over sending a girl of this age out on her own? And isn't it a bit odd for her to give a carriage to someone she has no blood relation to? She sounded like the kind of parent that would kick a girl out with just the clothes on her back.

"So, your stepmother gave you the carriage even though she forced you out of the house?" asked Olivia.

"The carriage and the horse were left to me in my dad's will. He left me more than that, but they changed his will. But it doesn't matter. Staying in that house was like living in hell. I'm actually grateful she made me leave."

"You're a strong person, Lara."

"I'm not sure it's because I'm strong. I'm just used to it. My real mom was a servant. I started working when I was six, and it has been like that ever since. Servants get paid for their work, but me and my mom weren't paid. We got everything we needed when my dad was still alive, but it's gotten really bad now that they're both dead. Even these clothes were my mom's. There was only this one set of clothes. Well, more like I hid this one set so they couldn't take it. Hee hee!"

Olivia looked at Lara, giggling with jam stuck to the corner of her mouth, and her protective instincts went off at full blast. "Lara, you can stay here for as long as you like, not just while you're copying my grandmother's books. I was also chased out of the house I was born in, but I came here and was saved."

"Yes. And I was raised with so much love. This time, it's my turn to protect you and raise you."

"Well, I'm pretty much all grown up already..."

"You need to put some meat on your bones, though. You're so thin. I ate so much when I was your age..."

"Haha! Thank you, Olivia. I don't hate working, so I'll help around the restaurant however I can. Cleaning, or something. I'll keep copying the books when I have free time."

"You can just take it easy," Olivia said.

"Nope. I'm good at working. Don't you worry about it."

What Lara said was no lie. She threw herself with passion into her work.

"Huh, Olivia, did you hire someone?" asked a regular customer later.

"I did," replied Olivia with a smile. Then she and Lara looked at each other and smiled. Olivia never had much opportunity to chat with young ladies, but she wasn't nervous when interacting with Lara. She could smile with her, and that made her happy.

She doesn't lie at all, either, thought Olivia. She didn't feel on edge when dealing with animals and people who didn't lie. In contrast, she couldn't handle people who lied at all.

Olivia had always been terrified of humans whose actions didn't match their minds, but Lara didn't seem afraid of people despite the horrible treatment she'd been subjected to.

I'd like to be a strong person like Lara, even if I get there just little by little, thought Olivia.

She was captivated by the perseverance of this girl who was ten whole years younger than her. They'd only been together for a few hours, but Olivia was already starting to like Lara a lot.

When Arthur came home that evening, he was shocked to find Olivia getting along with this girl he'd never seen before like they were sisters.

"Arthur, this is Lara," Olivia said, introducing her. "She's going to be living in the outbuilding starting today."

"All right... Olivia, can I talk to you for a second?" he said. They went into the kitchen, and he whispered, "Are you sure about this girl?"

"She has no bad intentions. It's all right. Her father passed away and her stepmother chased her out of the house. She wants to become an apothecary, and I want to look after her while she's copying my grandmother's books. Is that all right?"

"I have no objections if you really like her that much. And you said she doesn't have any lies in her heart? That's good."

"I know! I'm so happy, she's like a cute younger sister."

If Olivia was happy, then that's all that mattered to Arthur.

That night, they ate the dried chestnut and mushroom with veggie stew, with a side of bacon and beans, along with buttered bread. They paired it with cups of apple tea.

Rob quickly grew fond of Lara, too.

And so, Lara came to stay at Soup Forest for some time.

Chapter 16: Lara Lefort's Worries

EVERY day was filled with happiness for Lara once she began living on the second floor of the goat barn behind Soup Forest.

The first reason for this being she could have her fill of delicious food. The owner of the restaurant, Olivia, was also very kind. And so was her husband, Arthur. Their big black dog, Rob, was so clever and friendly.

"I never knew life could be like this," Lara said to herself.

While she may be a member of the family under Count Lefort, she'd lived her life as a servant for as long as she could remember. This restaurant, this home, was like heaven compared to that.

"On top of all that, Olivia works so hard. Where does she get all that energy?" she wondered aloud.

Lara was confident in her own hardiness, but she didn't come close to beating Olivia in how hard she worked. Lara knew Olivia got up at sunrise because smoke from the stove and a delicious smell would waft all the way to the outbuilding shortly after dawn. Lara was starting to wake with hunger at that tantalizing aroma. The lights also never went out in the main building before Lara put her lamp out in the evening, either.

Whenever Lara got up and went to the main building, Olivia would, without fail, say with a smile, "Oh, you could've had a bit of a lie in."

But Lara thought she couldn't possibly do that. Olivia was already taking care of her. Lara had to work, but Olivia wouldn't really put her to work.

This particular morning, Olivia quickly boiled the kettle and poured Lara a cup of tea, saying, "Here you go, a cup of tea to wake you up. It'll still be a little bit until breakfast. Want some dried chestnuts to tide you over?" and she set a small dish on the table. Atop the dish were two round...things.

The chestnuts resembled walnuts, hard and wrinkly. Lara, who had never

eaten a dried chestnut before despite her age, looked at them and thought, How do I eat these?

"Oh, you've never had dried chestnuts before?" asked Olivia.

"No, this is my first time."

"Pop one in your mouth and suck on it like a hard candy. The flavor will slowly, slowly creep across your tongue. I rehydrate them and use them in soup, too. There are a lot of customers who say they prefer dried ones since the flavor is stronger."

Lara picked up a crinkly dried chestnut between two fingers and stuck it in her mouth, then took a sip of tea.

At first, it didn't taste like anything. But then, after a short time, an intense sweetness and the flavor of chestnut spread slowly in her mouth. Her teeth couldn't dig into it no matter how hard she tried, but the wonderful flavor only got stronger and stronger.

"It's sweet," she said.

"It is, isn't it? They're so simple to make for storing; you just boil then dry them, but they're so nice."

"Huh..."

When she lived at home, she ate whatever was left over after the family finished eating, along with the other servants. She'd never be able to relax and sip a cup of tea. It was a given that the only thing she drank when thirsty was water. If she'd boiled water in order to make herself a cup of tea, she was certain her stepmother would have yelled at her and told her not to waste firewood.

But that was completely different here.

There was tea made just for her. Soup put out just for her. A warm, clean bed prepared just for her. A kind smile and words just for her.

Lara sucked on the sweet, dried chestnut, then said exactly what she was feeling before she could think. "Olivia, I never knew you could live this way. If this is how normal humans live, then I haven't been a human for fifteen years."

Olivia froze in the middle of stirring the huge pot of soup, then she turned to look at Lara with a troubled expression. Her lips were pressed together in a frown and the tip of her nose was red.

"Huh?" said Lara. "What? What is it? What's wrong?"

"Lara, you are human. And right now, you're my valued guest. No, actually, if I'm being completely honest, you're more like a much younger sister to me. Don't ever think you weren't human."

"You're totally right. Oh no, oh no, Olivia, why are you crying?"

Olivia bit her lip, and tears welled in her eyes. "I just...was reminded of me, from a long time ago. I don't cry anymore when I think about my past, but when I think about you feeling the same way...I just can't stand it. It hurts so much. I wish I'd met you sooner, then I could've kept you from ever feeling that way. I would've taken you in, protected you, raised you here."

Heavy drops fell from Olivia's eyes as she talked.

Lara jumped to her feet and moved over to Olivia, uncertain of whether or not she should rub her back. If she ever even accidentally touched people in her own family, they yelled at her and told her never to touch them.

"Olivia, can I rub your back?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Olivia.

Still hesitant, Lara gently rubbed Olivia's back.

"Thank you," said Olivia. "You're ten years younger, but so much more like the older sister out of us."

"My mom would always make me feel better when I was crying because my half siblings bullied me. All she did was rub my back, but somehow, that was enough to make me forget how much it hurt."

"Yeah... You seem to have a lot of good memories with your mother."

"I do. She might've seemed timid, but she was a strong person. But she died when she got really unwell after catching some nasty cold..."

Olivia pulled Lara into a tight hug, then turned back to the stove. With her

back still to Lara, she started to talk. "My parents weren't mean to me. I remember them raising me with care. But there was a rule that I wasn't allowed out of my room if there were any guests. I'd spend my time alone, listening to their conversations and laughter... It has been that way ever since I was little, so I thought it was normal, at the time. I was so lonely. When I came to this house and started living with my grandparents, I realized how lonely I'd been the whole time."

"Why would your parents do that?"

"I said a lot of strange things when I was a child. People thought I was odd in the head. I think my parents were embarrassed of me. They wanted to hide me. Not that there was actually something wrong with me."

"Really? There's obviously nothing wrong with you."

"No. I hope someday I can tell you all about it."

Then Olivia went quiet and started stirring the soup.

Lara had a feeling she shouldn't ask more questions, so she sat back down, her mouth filled with the powerful sweetness of the chestnut.

Lara couldn't believe someone as kind and gentle as Olivia had a past like that. It made her angry. It was clearly her parents who had something wrong with them.

In her anger, she bit down hard on the chestnut. So hard that the nut cracked with a pop and was as sweet and tasty as a boiled sugar candy.

I only got to eat candy on New Year's Eve, but this dried chestnut is way better than that. There's good food in this house every day. I want to learn how to cook while I'm here. And I want to learn about medicinal herbs. But I can't stay here forever. They'll start to think of me as a nuisance if I do.

Though, her next thought was, Olivia's so nice, though, she'd never tell me to get out.

And that was why she decided she needed to leave before Olivia started to think of her as a nuisance.

I can't just sit here getting pampered forever.

Lara wanted to stay here, but she also didn't want Olivia to think she was taking advantage of her. The two desires tugged her back and forth.

It was only when Lara was uncertain what to do but unable to ask anyone for advice that Olivia would look at her with an expression that said she wanted to say something. Lara was curious what it was, but she could never bring herself to ask. She was too afraid that if she did that the response would be, "So, how long are you going to stay here?"



ONE day, Randall came to visit Soup Forest.

"Ah, I knew you'd be here," he said. "I guessed as much when I heard you had left the Lefort house. You kept going on about how much you'd like to come here ever since I told you about it."

"I just really want to be an apothecary. Right now, I'm spending each day copying down Lady Marguerite's books, little by little."

"Are you, now? Olivia, may I have today's soup? And one slice of bread."

"Of course," said Olivia. "Lara, you sit with Randall and keep him company."

"But I can work," said Lara.

"It's fine. Your job right now is to have a chat with Randall."

"Oh, well, all right. May I sit with you, Mister Auber?"

"Of course, take a seat."

Olivia brought out soup and bread for two. Lara was hesitantly eating when Randall said something unexpected. "Would you be interested in an apprenticeship with a royal apothecary? A spot has recently opened up. The pay is meager, but you'll learn a lot."

"What?"

If this had been when Lara had just come to this house, she would have been overjoyed at the thought of being an apothecary's apprentice, but now, she didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay with Olivia for longer. It was too soon to give up on this heavenly life. She started to panic.

"What's wrong?" asked Randall. "You don't seem excited."

"I am, but...it just seems sad to leave here."

"I see. This place does seem pleasant. But your father worried about you. He told me he wanted you to have the knowledge and skills necessary to support yourself even when he was no longer there."

Lara sensed someone behind her. She turned to see Olivia standing there with an indescribable expression.

"Olivia, what's wrong?" asked Lara.

"Lara, you're leaving?" Olivia inquired.

"I don't want to, but I also can't stay here forever."

Randall gave several small nods as he listened to Lara and Olivia, urging an answer from Lara. "There are others who want this apprenticeship. Someone else will take it if you hesitate."

"I know. You're completely right."

"I apologize for barging into the conversation, Randall, but, will this apprenticeship provide some sort of advantage when Lara takes the apothecary exam?" asked Olivia.

"It has nothing to do with the exam. Everyone who takes the exam is treated equally. No one can become an apothecary if they lack the requisite knowledge of medicinal herbs and illnesses."

"And would the books my grandmother left behind be enough to provide that knowledge?" Olivia brought several of them over to show Randall.

He flipped through the pages to confirm. "Someone who memorized all of this would be able to pass. I have no doubt about that."

"Did you hear that, Lara? If you want to stay here, you can stay for as long as you like. All you have to do is take your time memorizing what my grandmother left behind while you do live here. And I'd never think you're taking advantage of me. You're important to me. You're like my sister."

"Olivia..." said Lara as she thought, It really is heaven here.

Chapter 17: Dale the Cat

LARA decided to stay living in the outbuilding for the time being.

"If that's what you want to do, then just do it," said Arthur. "I'm happy as long as you're doing what makes you happy."

"Thank you, Arthur," said Olivia. "And it sounds like Lara wants to learn how to cook on top of learning about medicinal herbs and illnesses."

"Seems like she's really taken a liking to you."

"And I like her. She's like a little sister."

The two of them were sitting on a bench in the garden. A hedgehog was in front of them, using its snout and forelegs to dig through the dirt in search of bugs to eat. This was the mother hedgehog who'd had the baby hedgehogs before.

Yum, yum, yum.

Hedgehogs in this country went into hibernation when the snow piled up. Right now, they were focused on nothing but eating in order to store fat, eating as much as they could while they could. Olivia gently picked up the hedgehog in her hand and looked at it.

The hedgehog looked around on her hand then muttered, *No bugs*. Its previously happy mood dropped sharply into sorrow.

"I'm sorry. Here, take your time eating," she said, returning the hedgehog to the vegetable patch before joining Arthur in watching the birds at the bird feeder.

Six sparrows bustled about eating vegetable scraps, breadcrumbs, and toasted pork fat. The pork fat was a huge hit among the birds.

A tit waited on a branch nearby, staying a long time as it waited for the sparrows to finish eating.

There was a strict order in which the wild birds could feed at the bird feeder. Those with higher standing because of their numbers or size got priority. The lower-standing ones had to just wait until it was their turn, and it was perfectly expected for a stronger bird to interrupt weaker ones.

What should I add to the feeder if it runs out before it's the tit's turn? thought Olivia, as she started to say, "I couldn't stop myself from crying when Lara said she thought she wasn't human before she came here. I think I'm starting to understand how my grandparents felt when they took me in. They probably felt like I did now, which was why they poured so much love into a complete stranger."

As he listened, Arthur visited the vivid memory of the first time he ever had cherry tea. "I know my situation isn't the same as Lara's, since I'm the one who decided to be a mercenary, but I feel like I understand how she feels. I remember how shocked I was when you told me how you made cherry tea. It was crazy to think there was a way of life so good for the soul."

"Really? You never mentioned that to me."

"You gather the cherries that drop to the ground, dry them, then mix them with tea and drink them. To me, that's such a fulfilling life, it seems like a dream. I didn't tell you? Guess I never do say enough."

"Oh, it's fine. I don't need to know every single little thing about you."

Looking a little surprised, Arthur turned his gaze from the bird feeder to Olivia.

"It doesn't matter what sort of past you had, or what sort of person you were before," she said. "I love you for who you are now."

"Urgh... I don't think I can find anything that sounds that nice to say back."

"Hee hee. That's fine, too. I even love you for not being the most eloquent person in the world."

Arthur's gray hair had been quite short when he'd first come to the restaurant, but it'd grown fairly long now. He raked both hands through his hair, his expression a little troubled and a little happy.

Olivia smiled as she smoothed his tousled hair back into place, feeling truly happy.

Mate, came a thought.

"Hm? Who was that?" asked Olivia.

"What's wrong? Did you hear someone?" Arthur responded.

"Yeah. They just thought, 'Mate.' There's someone nearby watching us."

They both looked around them, but there were no animals that stood out as being the one whose thought Olivia had heard.

"Where are they?" wondered Olivia.

Here.

"Where? I want to see your face," she said to the voice.

Here.

"What? Where?"

"Olivia, could it be this guy?" ventured Arthur. He was crouched by the side of the horses' barn.

Found me.

"Who is it?" asked Olivia.

Mates come. Mates lovey-dovey.

On top of a sunny rock beside the barn was a black-and-white cat, its left eye shut the whole time.

"Hello. Is your eye hurt?" inquired Olivia.

Forever like this.

"Oh. Where's your home?"

Have no home.

Olivia was certain there were no stray cats living in the area. She looked through his memories to figure out what was going on. The cat grew attached to a man who sometimes fed him, then hopped in the man's wagon and

traveled with him. But apparently the man wasn't that attached to the cat. The cat went out to play and the man left without waiting or going to look for the cat.

The cat spent days walking along the road, sleeping in the grass until he arrived here. He was very hungry.

"If you have no home, would you like to live here? We do have a dog and two goats, though," said Olivia.

Here warm? Have food?

"It is warm, and we do have food. But if you're going to live here, we'll have to give you a bath."

Hate bath.

"But you've got ticks all over you. I can't let you in the house like that. I'll give you some chicken to eat if you let me wash you."

Chicken! Chicken!

The black-and-white cat broke out into loud yowls.

"All right. I'll get some warm water ready. Then it's bath time."

Hate bath!

While he did insist he hated baths, he didn't run when Olivia picked him up. To Arthur, she said, "Bring the hot water from the stove over to the well for me, would you? And a bar of soap. Oh, and the lotion for ticks!"

Arthur replied with a quick, "Sure thing," and went right into the restaurant to get the hot water.

They washed the cat outside. Olivia wanted to get the ticks off him right away, but you might end up leaving their head on if you just pulled them off. There was a trick to getting them off: You had to slather them in a lotion with a medicine they hated, then steadily pull them off as they started to move. Her grandmother taught her that.

Arthur watched her work, then went to get a burning log from the stove, which he used to burn the ticks one after another. That homemade anti-tick

lotion was a necessity for Olivia, considering they lived on the edge of the forest.

Olivia washed the cat with the bar of soap, rinsed him several times in warm water, then wiped him down with a dry towel, transforming the once dirty cat into a fuzzy, nice-smelling kitty.

Chicken, yum! Chicken, yummy!

The cat loudly devoured the boiled chicken. Rob saw and thought, *Chicken good. Want eat chicken...* which made Olivia chuckle and give him a little.

The cat's hackles rose when Rob came close, but he turned back to focus on his chicken once he realized Rob didn't mean any harm.

Once the chicken was gone, Olivia stroked the cat while he cleaned his face, then she said to Rob, "Rob, be nice to this cat, all right?"

Cat friend?

"Yes. This cat is now your friend."

Cat friend. Protect cat.

"Thank you, Rob. You're such a good boy."

Rob grinned wide at the praise.

Lara had gone out to Marlowe today. The moment she heard today was Arthur's day off, she said she'd take over the responsibility of buying things and took her carriage out to Marlowe. Olivia wasn't sure if she was trying to be considerate or if she just wanted to see the town. It was probably a little of both.

Olivia picked up the now soft cat and took him to meet the goats in the barn. "This kitty is going to be part of the family from now on. Be nice to him."

Hate cats.

Hate cats.

"Don't say that, Pete. And Pepe, don't copy everything Pete says. There won't be mice coming in here if there's a cat."

Pete hated mice so his attitude immediately flipped to, I let cat stay. Pepe

always copied Pete no matter what, which made Olivia feel better.

Olivia sat on the bench in the garden with the cat in her lap. She stroked his back and he began to purr.

"What's your name?" she asked.

Patches. Flopsy. Squirt. Dale. Deety.

Inside the cat's mind flowed images of human faces paired with names. He'd been called various names at various homes where he'd gotten food.

"What about Dale?" she said.

Dale, Old man, Dale, Fish,

The old man who'd called the cat Dale had given him fish. Where could that have been? Near a lake? Or perhaps very far away in a town near the sea? Olivia couldn't tell from the memories in the cat's head.

"Dale, you can't go into the restaurant or kitchen. Understand?"

Why no go?

"Some people don't like cats, and my customers will stop coming if there's cat hair in the food."

No good if no customers come?

"If no customers come, I won't be able to give you meat to eat."

No eat meat is bad.

"I thought so. So, you're allowed to play on the second floor, the stairs, and out in the garden."

I like garden.

"Man, that seems handy," said Arthur. "Wish I could talk to cats and dogs." He seemed jealous while he guessed what the conversation was about based on the parts Olivia said.

They spread a blanket on a windowsill on the second floor, and Dale settled down, his eyes starting to close.

It was finally the tit's turn to eat at the bird feeder in the garden. Olivia

sneaked chopped dried blueberries onto the feeder for it.

Chapter 18: Deep in Arthur's Heart

WHEN Lara got back from shopping and saw Dale, she immediately shrieked, "Kitty!" and tried to pull him into a hug.

Scary, scary! thought Dale as he scurried away.

"Lara, Dale seems scared. Try to be quieter around him," said Olivia.

"Sorry. I've just always dreamed of having a cat. His name is Dale? Ooh, I'm so happy! A kitty!"

Scary. Loud. Loud and scary.

Dale seemed frightened by loud people.

Lara tried to stroke Dale's back as he walked, but his back arched away from her hand, and he moved away. It seemed unlikely he'd let her pet him easily. He moved over to Olivia and rubbed up against her legs.

"Oh, Dale, don't leave me the only one you're cold towards," said Lara, her shoulders slumping as she took notes on everything Olivia was doing as she cooked.

Olivia's grandmother always insisted diving in and tasting things yourself was better than taking notes, since the weather, the season, and the ingredients' condition could all change flavor, but Olivia was letting Lara do things how she wanted to.

As the two were cooking, Peep, the sparrow, came to the window.

"Peep, I haven't seen you in a while," said Olivia. "I'm glad you're doing all right."

Rain! Lots of rain! Rain lots!

"Oh, if it's going to rain a lot, you best stay inside. You can go into the horse or goat barn, if you like. And feel free to bring your friends."

Peep flew away without responding.

"Olivia? What do you mean it's going to rain a lot?" asked Lara.

"I raised that little bird, and I can kind of get a feel for whether it's going to rain or not depending on how it's acting. I have a feeling we're going to get a lot of rain."

The air was heavy and damp. Olivia worried about whether or not Arthur would make it home before it started coming down. She went around to all the customers who came in for lunch, letting them know it was likely to rain quite a bit.

"Thanks, Olivia."

"Guess I'll harvest both today and tomorrow's vegetables today, just in case."

"I'll wait until the rain stops to go out."

With that variety of responses, they finished eating and went home earlier than usual.

The rain came in the evening. It wasn't coming down too heavy just yet, but the pitch-black clouds were thick and menacing.

Once you really got into autumn, the rain was cold. Olivia gazed out through the window, wondering if the wild animals and birds had a place they could wait the rain off without getting soaked.

As time passed, the rain pounded more strongly on the roof and overhangs. Arthur wasn't back yet. Olivia looked out the window again, and Dale rubbed himself against her legs.

Mate no come.

"No, he hasn't come home. Thank you for worrying, Dale."

Hate rain.

"It is horrible getting soaked like that. Wait, didn't you promise you wouldn't come into the restaurant?"

No humans here.

"Hmm. I suppose you're right. Fine. You can come in here at night after all the customers have left. But don't you dare do any 'scritch scritching' in here."

That "scritch scritching" was when he used his claws to scratch at his fur. Olivia made the motion with her hand, and Lara, who was in the corner of the restaurant studying, was impressed by how good she was at imitating a cat.

The rain grew stronger, and everything outside looked shrouded in a white mist. Just as Olivia was really starting to worry, Arthur finally came home riding on Annie.

"Oh no, you're soaked," she said. "You must be freezing."

"Yeah, I ran into someone on the road who didn't seem to be feeling too well, so I took them home," Arthur explained.

"Well, good work, it must've been tough. Change out of those clothes right now, though, I'll dry Annie off."

"Olivia, I'll take care of Annie," said Lara. "You look after Arthur!"

"If you insist, Lara. Thank you."

"I feel kind of cold," said Arthur. "And my head hurts."

Olivia listened without saying anything. She remembered how Arthur had been even more reticent that morning than usual. Perhaps he was already feeling unwell back then.

Arthur said he wasn't feeling hungry so he was going to pass on dinner, then went upstairs. She watched him go, thinking he looked nowhere near as lively as normal.

This seems like a cold, she thought, then she flipped the card on the door to Closed.

"Lara, I'm sorry, can you do your apothecary study in the restaurant tonight? It's unlikely, but if anyone passes by seeking shelter from the rain, let them in. I'm going to look after Arthur. Just give me a shout if anyone does come."

"All right. How does he seem?"

"I think it's a cold. I just hope it goes away on its own without getting worse."

Dale was sleeping in Rob's bed in the corner of the kitchen. Rob was used to this and carefully climbed into bed, trying not to step on Dale. Lara started studying, filled with warm fuzzies from seeing the cat and dog curled up together sleeping.

Upstairs in their room, Arthur's temperature was starting to rise, getting hotter the deeper into the night it went. His face was red, and his breathing labored.

Olivia's grandmother had taught her that a fever was the body's way of fighting off illness, so you should always keep an eye on the patient's condition as you try to lower their fever.

She put a damp towel on his chest to help alleviate inflammation and made a ginger broth to warm his body. Once warm, she took that upstairs along with a cup of medicinal tea.

When she went into the room, Arthur looked at her with eyes misty from the fever and said, "Olivia..."

"Yeah? Do you want something? Want me to do anything?"

"Something for the headache, maybe? It feels like my head's 'bout to split."

"Of course. It must hurt."

"Olivia?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something I want to say, and I'm only going to have the courage now..."

"What is it?"

"If anything ever happens to me, and I die..."

"Arthur? What are you talking about? It's just a cold."

"Just listen. If I go before you, I don't want you to just keep on grieving me forever. I want you to find a nice man and remarry, live a happy life."

When a fever sweeps someone away, it often shakes up their spirit. Their true feelings were normally shrouded in several layers of logic and reasoning, but when that reasoning loosened, their true feelings slipped out. Arthur would never say these sorts of things when he was well, and hearing them made Olivia

think of Arthur's days as a mercenary, where he lived side by side with death.

Was Arthur always thinking this, deep inside? she wondered.

He'd had to become a mercenary in order to survive, and every fiber of Olivia's being wanted to help him heal from that.

"All right, Arthur," she said. "If that's what you want. But unless I find a man with gray hair, who's good with a sword, crafty around the house, loves my homemade bacon and cherry tea, and is loved by Rob, the goats, Dale, and Annie, I'm not sure I can ever remarry."

Arthur let out a huff of laughter despite his painful-sounding breathing. "Might be hard to find someone like that," he said.

"I agree. So, don't go dying on me, all right?"

"All right, I'll do my best."

"Good. Now sleep. Illness leaves while you're asleep."

The rain was still falling at dawn. Olivia crept downstairs so as not to wake Arthur where she found Lara, up before Olivia for once. She rushed over to Olivia, her eyes wide.

"Olivia, Olivia!"

"What is it, Lara?"

"I went to feed the horses and found something terrible in the barn!"

"What? Something terrible?"

"There are all sorts of wild birds in there sheltering from the rain. They're packed in there all over the beams!"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I'm sure they'll leave when the rain lets up. Are the horses all right?"

"They don't seem to care about the birds."

"Even better. Thank you for letting me know, though."

"Oh. Right."

Olivia started making breakfast without even going to look at the barn.

The rain finally stopped around noon, and customers started coming into the restaurant.

Olivia bowed her head to Lara and asked, "I'm really sorry to ask this, but could you go to Freddy's Pharmacy in Marlowe? I'd like you to let Freddy know Arthur will be taking a few days off because he has a cold."

"Sure! You don't have to bow for that. I'll go right now."

"Thank you, you're a lifesaver."

"It's nothing!"

Lara smiled, hopped in her carriage, and went to Marlowe.

Chapter 19: The Messenger Pigeon

ARTHUR recovered after three days and returned to work on the fourth.

Olivia watched him leave and decided he probably regretted the conversation they had about her remarrying when he was loopy from the fever, since he never did bring it up again. That's why she decided to also avoid the subject and just gave Arthur a smile as he left for work.

While Arthur was bedbound, Dale seemed to get bored with the fact that Olivia barely even left the room. He'd hurry off to the forest to play, always bringing a snake or insect back with him. Then he'd show his catch off with pride to Olivia while saying, *I amazing*, *yeah*?

"Yes, you're amazing. Thank you for the gift."

You happy? You eat?

"I am happy. Thank you. I'll eat it later."

You should eat.

"Yes. Thank you."

Lara secretly watched their exchanges and thought, It almost seems like Olivia can talk to animals, but obviously not. Maybe that's what made her parents think there was something wrong with her, but she just loves animals!

She couldn't forget what Olivia had told her about her family. It still made her angry. She was in a huff as she mopped the restaurant before opening time, which was when Dale tried to come in through Rob's doggy door in the kitchen. It sounded like he was struggling, too, like he had some large prey with him.

"Oh, you must have some big present for us today, Dale," she said as she opened the door to let him in, then she froze. He was holding a pure-white pigeon. And it was still alive.

The pigeon started thrashing the moment Lara opened the door. Dale must

have opened his mouth slightly to try and readjust for a better grip, because the pigeon suddenly escaped and raced into the kitchen, flapping around the room. Dale chased it. Lara panicked.

"Stop! Stop going crazy. I'll put you outside!" she screamed as she raced after the pigeon, but it only thrashed more out of fear. It slammed into the window in an attempt to get out, fell to the ground, then took flight again. Dale raced around in excitement, leaping at the pigeon.

Olivia came in through the back door after she finished putting out the laundry to dry and was surprised at what she saw.

"Oh my!" she said. The moment the pigeon landed on the ground, blood seeping from a wound on its back, Olivia quickly popped the laundry basket she was holding over it.

Dale ran over, puffed up with pride as he bragged, I caught!

"Yes, Dale, you caught such a big one this time," said Olivia. She'd realized the first time he brought her a present and looked into his mind that it was going to be impossible to tell a cat not to hunt. Hunting was instinctual.

Olivia tilted the basket just a little to slip her hand in and grab the pigeon. It froze in fear. She could feel its heart racing impossibly fast.

"It's all right," she soothed. "We won't eat you. We won't kill you. I'm just going to treat your wound. Please don't thrash about. Lara, wrap a towel around its head. That should calm it down."

"All right!" She gently wrapped a dry towel around the pigeon's head, and it went still.

"There's a ring on its leg," said Olivia. "This pigeon belongs to someone. I hope it says the owner's name. First, we'll treat its wound, though. Oh, this isn't from where Dale bit it. These raking wounds look more like sharp claws. It must have been attacked by a hawk or eagle."

Olivia rinsed the wounds with clean water, then took a salve made from medicinal herbs from a jar. She took only a tiny amount out then thinned it slightly with sterilized water before spreading it on the wound. She was very careful because she didn't know how well birds would tolerate the medicine.

Once finished treating the wound, she snapped the silvery ring off the pigeon's leg to find it also had a tube of the same silvery metal attached to it.

"Huh, there's paper in the tube," she said. "Hmm... Oh."

"What's it say, Olivia? Does it mention who owns the pigeon?"

"No. Lara, I need to go out for a little bit. Could you serve the customers if any come?"

"Sure. The soup and sides are already done anyway. I can handle it."

"And do you mind if I borrow your carriage?"

"Not at all."

Olivia rushed upstairs and flipped quickly through one of her grandfather's books before hopping in Lara's carriage and leaving. She was headed to Louise's mansion.

Louise's mansion was just outside the residential area of Marlowe. It was a great big building surrounded by expansive gardens, and housed Louise along with the bare minimum number of servants necessary.

The guard at the gate recognized Olivia and invited her inside. She'd been to the mansion several times before with her grandmother.

"What is it?" asked Louise when Olivia arrived. "You don't often come to visit me."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace. There's an emergency," Olivia said, then took out a slip of paper, which she slid across the round mahogany table to Louise.

Louise put on her spectacles and read what was on the paper which still had crease marks from where it was folded. "Oh my," she murmured as she read it again, then a third time.

The tiny, folded piece of paper was crammed with writing: "The master's father has gone mad. He's imprisoned the lady of the house, her mother, and her daughter in the underground cell. All male servants have been released from duty, and we maids can't resist in any way. Please help!"

"This...is quite bad, if it is true," said Louise.

"I thought so, too," agreed Olivia. "This is the ring that was on the pigeon's leg. I'm not too familiar with the noble families, but I looked this crest up in one of my grandfather's books. I'm certain it's House Mistral. Can you double-check?"

Louise lifted the silvery ring between two fingers, brought it close to her spectacles, and stared intently. "It is. Crossed swords and three eagles. That is the crest of House Mistral. Olivia, thank you for bringing this to me first. This could turn into a fiasco if Lord Marlais or the royal family catch wind of it. One of the imprisoned women is an old friend of mine from school."

"I remembered you talking about her."

"I had a feeling it might turn out this way someday. The former Lord Mistral fell to drinking when his son and heir died. Now he's imprisoned my old friend, her daughter, and granddaughter."

Louise bit her polished nails for a moment as she thought. Then she looked at Olivia. "People will only talk more if I publicly go to visit the Mistral house," she said. "Olivia, could you go instead? I'll send three of my guards with you. I'd like you to treat the man as you bring him here. I'll give you a letter so you can prove you're acting under my orders. I'll also send a messenger to Freddy's Pharmacy to let Arthur know I'll be borrowing you."

"Of course, Your Grace."

"Thank you. I will owe you for this one. I'll send my guards to meet you at Soup Forest. Please be ready for them."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Olivia gave Louise the piece of paper then left the mansion.

I'll have to prepare if he's become dependent on alcohol and lost his faculties, she thought. In terms of medicines, I'll need that, that, and that... Oh, and I should take that.

The former master of the house had lost his ability to make logical decisions and had confined his wife, his son's wife, and his granddaughter. This situation called for urgency. She continued to think about what medicinal herbs she would need as she drove the carriage.

Once back at the restaurant, she explained the situation to Lara, who seemed shaken up as she asked what they would do about the restaurant.

"We can shut it, or if you want to take over, I'll write down some recipes that you can't possibly get wrong. What do you want to do? The bread delivery will come anyway, so I wouldn't worry about that."

"I'll... I'll do it. I want to help. Let me run the restaurant."

"Thank you, that's a huge help. I'll write those recipes."

Olivia jotted down a recipe for bean and bacon soup, as well as one for a side of pan-fried dried meat with dried mushrooms.

She finished that then gathered together everything she would need for the trip to the Mistral house, and Louise's three guards arrived just about as she was finishing with that.

It was time to go.

She climbed into the carriage sent by Louise and called out the window to Lara, "Thank you! And please look after Rob, the goats, and Dale!"

"I've got it, don't worry! I'll give it my all!"

Rob watched Olivia go, looking sad. Dale looked unconcerned on the surface, but kept thinking over and over, *Sad. She go away. Sad.*

House Mistral's territory wasn't far. Olivia began planning in her head how she would handle the ill man and the three women who had been confined. She was going to be dealing with a man who had lost his ability to make sane decisions.

I need to take this seriously to make sure he doesn't turn violent the moment I see him.

Olivia would need to use all her knowledge and experience, for both Louise's sake and the sake of those three ladies. Olivia closed her eyes and leaned back against her seat, her mind racing at top speed.

Chapter 20: The White Cat of Mistral

SOMETIME after they set off, the carriage came to a halt and one of the guards said to Olivia, "Ms. Olivia, there's a large man with gray hair chasing after the carriage. Would that happen to be your husband?"

"Arthur's here?" Olivia opened the door and stepped out to see what was without a doubt Arthur astride a horse coming their way.

"Good, I finally caught up with you," he said.

"Arthur, what's going on? What about work?" asked Olivia.

"Duchess Louise was kind enough to purchase a cartload of stuff from the pharmacy. Freddy told me to go with you since he's already made the whole week's worth of profit."

"Oh, I'm always causing Freddy so much trouble." Olivia stroked Annie's neck, who was huffing from the exertion. In a low voice so the guards couldn't hear, she said, "Annie must be tired, too. You should ride in the carriage with me."

Not tired! No! I run! Annie stamped a hoof, sounding angry.

"Oh, really? Well then, if you don't mind helping Arthur a bit more..." said Olivia. She felt bad about accidentally wounding Annie's pride as she got back in the carriage, and then they set off again.

Arthur was where she could see him from the window. He was such a familiar sight, but astride his horse, he looked even more gallant and brave than usual.

No matter how many times I see him, he's still so incredible, she thought quietly. Oh, drat. She saw his expression and realized he must have heard that. He was still looking forward, but he had an embarrassed smile on his lips. Sometimes this ability is convenient, but other times... she thought, her face going red.

She regained her composure and began thinking about what they'd do when they arrived at the Mistral house. *If the man is drunk when we arrive, the only*

option is to have the guards and Arthur deal with him. While they do that, I can work on freeing the confined family members.

She had her medicine to give the lord, and it was her grandmother's recipe. She was certain it would work as expected. After taking the medicine, it made alcohol taste horrible for half a day.

I'll keep having him take that medicine, then we'll just have to keep a close eye on him until we can bring him to Louise's mansion.

The lord of Mistral house was an old man in his seventies, though Olivia heard he was a soldier active in the war thirty years ago. They must not let their guard down.



THE next afternoon, the group arrived at the home of Count Mistral without any issues along the road. The vast gardens had grown wild as no one had tended to them, and there was no one there to open the gate despite the fact that someone had arrived in a carriage.

"I'll open the gate, Olivia," said Arthur.

"Thank you."

Arthur put a foot on the tall iron gate and quickly scaled it. Once inside, he removed the heavy-looking cross bar and opened the gate. They approached the entrance to the manor with Olivia still in the carriage, and only then did someone come out.

"Hello. I received a white messenger pigeon," said Olivia. "This was where it came from, right?"

"Ah, yes! Yes, it is! You came to help? Thank you!" The young maid looked exhausted and spoke in a quiet voice as she constantly glanced over her shoulder. "Please help us."

Olivia lowered her voice, too. "We will. You go hide somewhere safe outside the house. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Yes, I can."

"I'll call for you when everything's over and it's safe. Wait and stay hidden

until then."

"Yes, ma'am."

Arthur led, the three guards following and staying in a formation that kept Olivia protected. There were no signs of other people in the huge mansion.

"Hello!" called Olivia. "Is anyone home?"

There was no reply.

They strained their ears for any sound, moving slowly onward, first looking for the lord. They moved along the hallway in the direction they thought might be the lord's study, keeping an eye out, and that's when they heard the meow.

Olivia looked around, wondering where it came from, and saw a pure-white cat face pop out from around a corner farther down the hallway. She tried to move towards the cat, but Arthur stopped her.

"I'll go first," he said. "You follow behind me until we're certain it's safe."

"All right."

They proceeded, on edge at the thought that the mansion's master may attack at any moment. The cat joined their group and began walking beside Olivia.

They eventually came to a particularly resplendent door. Everyone exchanged glances, assuming this was the study.

Arthur knocked on the door, but there was no response. He gently pushed, and the tall, heavy door swung quietly inwards. The room was a disaster and filled with the stench of rotting food.

"There's no one here," said Olivia.

"How'd it get left like this? Where're the maids?" Arthur wondered.

The three guards searched for the owner of this room while they listened to Olivia and Arthur, but they found no one.

"Shall we prioritize saving the captives over finding the lord?" asked one guard.

"I think so. I don't want to waste time," said Olivia.

The white cat, who had stopped at the study's doorway, finally came in. It seemed wary of the men, constantly on edge and prepared to flee at any moment, but it looked at Olivia.

"Hi, kitty," she said softly. "Do you know where the lady of the house or her daughter is? If you do, could you show us the way?"

This way.

To everyone but Olivia, it sounded like the cat simply meowed, but its tail went tall and it started to walk off. It walked a short distance, then turned back to check if the humans were following.

This way.

"Let's go," said Olivia. "The cat will show us the way. Cats are smarter than humans think."

"Uh, is that so?" said one of the guards, all three of them looking perplexed. Their minds were leaking thoughts like: Is this person all right?, A cat lead the way?, or I know Her Grace ordered us to do as this woman said, but...

The five people kept walking with the cat leading. They went downstairs and followed the basement passageway until they caught whispers of people talking.

Arthur immediately called out. "Is someone there?"

"Help! Oh, please help us!"

Arthur ran towards the panic-stricken woman's voice. Olivia and the guards followed, and the white cat raced ahead to overtake them all.

At the end of the passage was an iron grate door and six women on the other side. Several of them let out almost shrieks of relief when they saw Olivia and the men, their hands over their mouths.

Their hair was disheveled, and they wore expressions of exhaustion. Based on their clothing, the older woman in the back, the woman in her fifties, and a young girl were likely the members of the lord's family.

There was a heavy iron padlock on the door. Arthur asked the women inside, "Where's the key for this lock?"

"The master has it."

"We haven't been able to find him," Arthur said. "We're going to try and break the lock. Stand back."

At that, the three women in front of the door fell back. The men took turns slamming the lock, but it was so large and sturdy it just wouldn't give.

"Agh, it's stubborn," said one guard.

"And where the heck's the person who put such a massive lock on this door?" said another.

Hate him.

Olivia heard a quiet voice. It was the white cat. She crouched down and quietly spoke to the cat. "Do you know where the man who put this lock on is?"

He has clinky clinky.

"Where is he now?"

This way.

"You'll show me the way?"

Hate him.

Olivia felt a powerful disgust coming from the beautiful white cat.

Man this way. Clinky this way.

"Clinky" must be the key for the lock.

Arthur and Olivia followed the white cat, leaving the three guards to continue bashing at the lock. The cat walked quickly. The three of them went upstairs, went down a hallway, then, eventually, they stopped outside the kitchen.

He here.

Arthur gently pushed open the kitchen door, and he and Olivia went in to find the place a mess. They went around the prep table to make sure the lord wasn't lying on the floor behind it. Just as Olivia moved close to a double-door shelving unit, the cat screamed and Olivia heard, *There! He there!*

She didn't have time to run. The door of a large pantry near Olivia burst open

and a man came flying out. He was a large man, muscular with white hair, and wielding a butcher's knife as he came at her.

Olivia fell to the ground, trying to avoid the swinging blade, regret shooting through her mind as she thought, Why did I imagine a frail old man?!

The cat was shrieking, its fur standing on end, and threw itself at the man's face. Arthur also threw himself between the man and Olivia.

"Gah!" the man screamed, doubling over, a hand pressed to his right eye. The white cat sprinted away after having scratched his eye. Arthur's fist crashed into the man's side.

When the cat was a decent distance away, it stopped and turned back to face them. Its back was an arch, its tail as puffed up as a bottle brush.

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I break eye!

"Wait!" said Olivia. "We'll take him away."

Hate him.

"He's sick! Just wait."

I break eye!
```

"No!" Olivia stood in front of the cat, her arms spread out.

The lord tried to swing his knife at Arthur again, but Arthur hit him with another punch, and he went down. Arthur bound his hands behind his back.

The white cat circled the lord, hissing and spitting, shouting the whole time, *Hate him! Hate him!*

Having heard the man's cries, the guards came running.

"Is everything all right?!" cried one.

"We're fine. I think he may lose his eye, though," said Olivia.

Behind the guards were the women, tottering, with the servants helping them walk. The three ladies of the house saw the lord, bound and on the ground, and looked relieved.

The girl, only in her early teens, hid behind one of the guards, her face poking

out just a little as she looked at her own grandfather.

They carried the lord out and left two of the guards to watch over him.

Olivia quickly threw a soup together in the disaster of a kitchen. There weren't any decent ingredients, but she managed to make a barley, egg, and onion soup with cheese. They called the maid hiding in the garden back in and they all became engrossed in eating the soup when it was placed in front of them.

They could finally ask what happened when they all calmed down.

The white cat sat on the girl's lap, purring the entire time.

Chapter 21: Competitive Annie and the Kind Goats

"OLIVIA, thank you so much. My maid sent that pigeon to help us, but the mansion it was going to in the capital already belongs to another noble. I'd given up hope, assuming even if they read the message, they wouldn't bother to come save us."

Olivia was talking to the countess, Lynette, who had finished reading the letter from Louise that Olivia had given her.

"It looked like the pigeon was attacked en route by a hawk or eagle," said Olivia. "It fell, wounded, and my cat caught it. It's safe and being cared for at my home though, so we'll return it as soon as it has recovered."

"Oh my. The poor pigeon, but I must say, it's nearly a miracle for us. Don't you think, Lady Mistral?" said Lynette's daughter-in-law.

Lynette had for some time been firmly pressing a handkerchief to her eyes, bowing over and over to Olivia.

"And anyone could have saved that pigeon, but it was you, someone who knows Duchess Arche. It can only make me believe God had a hand in helping us," said Lynette.

"Her Grace told me about your school days several times, which is why I went straight to her with the news," Olivia said. "Her Grace also said she would care for your granddaughter, Mabel, until she was old enough to marry and take on her title as Countess Mistral."

"Yes, she mentioned it in her letter. I really do appreciate it."

After that, Olivia asked how long ago the count had become dependent on alcohol and how much he normally drank, making notes of it all. They also agreed the count would be taken to Louise's mansion. The letter Louise sent Lynette said she would put the count in a medical facility in the capital.

"I think we should take our leave, soon," said Olivia. "You must all be tired.

Please take care of yourselves."

"Thank you, Olivia. Neither my mother, my daughter, nor I will ever forget what you've done for us," said the countess's daughter-in-law.

"And the soup was wonderful!" chimed in the granddaughter. "It's the best soup I've ever had."

"Thank you. And please give my regards to Her Grace," said Lynette. "I'll write a letter to thank her."

Olivia responded to their thanks with a smile, then she left the mansion with Arthur. They decided to transport the count in the carriage, restrained, since he'd lost his faculties. A guard remained in the carriage with him, and Olivia rode on Annie with Arthur.

Olivia was worried Annie would have a hard time carrying the two of them, but the emotions she felt from Annie were cheery. She was having fun, so Olivia decided not to say anything that didn't need saying.

They mounted Annie and just as they were about to head off, the white cat came running up to them.

"Hello kitty," said Olivia. "I'm glad everything turned out fine. Thank you for showing us the way."

"Meow!" It looked at her and meowed loudly.

Arthur saw a grimace flicker across Olivia's face. After they'd set off, he asked her, "What'd the cat say to you?"

"It said it wanted to break the count's eye. It was screaming that the whole time, ever since the count leaped out of the pantry."

"The cat must've been the target of some pretty bad violence. Either that, or it was really angry at seeing its family treated horribly. I once heard cats never forget a human who's harmed them."

"I think that's the same for dogs, and deer, and wolves, and goats."

"And people, probably."

"Yeah. But, Arthur..."

"Yeah?"

"I think humans can take the pain they feel in their bodies and souls and use it as fuel to grow."

"Yeah? I hope so."

"Both you and I have scars on our souls, but I don't want to live forever restricted by that pain."

"My old scars don't hurt me anymore. I still do remember them hurting, though."

"Yeah. What we have is the memory of great pain."

Olivia squeezed her arms tight around Arthur's waist and laid her head on his back. He replied with a gentle pat on her arms.



THE count was still deranged inside the carriage. Olivia couldn't possibly give him any medicine, so he simply writhed in there for a while, bound. The group kept going, stopping for breaks and sleep, and eventually arrived at Marlowe.

They delivered Count Mistral to Louise's mansion, and experts quickly came to take the old man away.

"Thank you so much, Olivia," said Louise. "If it went public the count had gone crazy and confined his family in a jail cell, they may have had their title reduced in rank. Or taken away entirely, in the worst-case scenario. But anyway, we'll have the count live somewhere nice and quiet until Lynette's granddaughter is old enough to marry a respectable man."

"I'm just glad I could help," said Olivia. "Arthur told me what you did for Freddy's Pharmacy. Thank you for such consideration."

"Oh of course, it was nothing. I cannot even put into words everything Marguerite did for me. The least I can do is look after you like this."

After they both finished thanking each other, Olivia went back to Soup Forest.

Lara rushed out of the restaurant the moment the carriage pulled up. Rob and Dale also came running out.

"Welcome back, you two!" called Lara. "I took care of the restaurant for you. I had to serve the same bean soup two days in a row, but it turned out fine since there weren't any customers that came for both days!"

"Thank you, Lara, you've been such a big help," said Olivia.

Waited! Waited for you! said Rob, leaping with joy.

Mates come home, said Dale, looking at them expressionlessly.

"All right, back to work tonight," said Olivia.

"I'll go let Freddy know we're back," said Arthur. "Annie, you take a good long rest. Lara, I'm going to borrow Greta."

"Sure!"

Not tired! I go! argued Annie, glancing over at the barn where Lara's horse, Greta, was. It seemed like Annie felt a bit of competition between her and Greta.

Arthur seemed to notice how Annie felt, but he didn't change his mind. "Annie, you're important to me," he said. "I'd be in a real bind if you push yourself too hard and end up hurt. I'll take you out tomorrow again, don't worry." Then, he whispered in her ear, "There's no one more important to me than you, Annie."

Annie suddenly behaved. She nickered and rubbed her long neck against Arthur.

"Thanks for understanding, Annie," he said. "All right, be a good girl and stay here."

"Arthur, you're a bit of a ladies' man when it comes to horses, aren't you?" Olivia remarked.

"I was thinking the same thing!" said Lara. "I kind of felt uncomfortable just listening."

"Oh, come on," he said. "I'm just caring for my precious horse."

Olivia and Lara exchanged a look and laughed as Arthur left. Olivia said, "What did I say?" and Lara replied with, "I know, right?"



A few weeks later, a letter arrived from Count Mistral via Louise. Olivia timidly opened the letter, worried it would be filled with insults as she was the reason he'd been shut up in a facility, but, contrary to her expectations, she found a letter filled with deep regret.

"I was desperate to raise my son as a warrior like me, and that is what killed him. It is my fault he took his own life. I never imagined it would come to that. If I only could, I would return to when my son was a child and redo our entire lives."

That was a general overview of the sort of things in the letter. Strength would be the pillar holding up his sense of self, as a famed warrior. But a son is a son. He is not his father.

Pain panged Olivia's heart as she thought of a person who had lost all hope in life to the point they would end it all. He must not have had anywhere to flee to. He couldn't run, leaving his wife, daughter, and mother behind. What must it have been like, living a life where every day was torture? Olivia couldn't even bear to imagine it.

And at the same time, she tried to imagine the feelings of an old man who had only realized his mistakes when his son died. How must it have felt to continue living after that? It hurt just thinking about it.

With nowhere to vent her sorrow, Olivia went to the goat barn and let Pete and Pepe out into the yard.

Yum, grass!

Yum, yum!

She thought of the heir to the Mistral title, a man she'd never met, as she watched the goats chowing excitedly on grass.

"If only he'd held on just a little bit longer, perhaps a path forward would have opened up..." she murmured.

Pete and Pepe stopped eating and came over to her, gently butting their heads against her. Her sorrow must have slipped out to them.

Hurt?

You hurt?

"I'm all right. Thank you, you two. You're always so kind."

She patted their backs for a long time.

Chapter 22: Chestnut Cream

AUTUMN marched on, winter drawing nearer. Every year, Olivia would think of how winter was approaching when she would get up at dawn and find her breath misting white in front of her while she was in the kitchen.

While she was halfway down the stairs, she heard Rob pattering over.

Wanted see you! Wanted see you!

It was his morning greeting. Every morning, he bounced around with excitement, as if it was their first time seeing each other in years.

Came. Food came, thought Dale, who was always waiting for food every morning. Olivia thought he would come upstairs to join her and Arthur in their bed when it started to get cold, but he just stayed curled up next to Rob.

Olivia filled a pot with plenty of water and set it on the stove. She fed the horses, Annie and Greta, and the goats, Pete and Pepe, while she waited for the water to boil. She changed out their water, too, then fed Rob and Dale next.

Rob nearly inhaled his breakfast, while Dale ate more slowly, though making chomping noises as he did. Olivia sipped a cup of tea while she watched Rob curl up in his bed once he finished and Dale carefully cleaned his face.

"Good morning, Olivia."

"Good morning, Lara. You could have a lie in, if you want to. A girl your age could really do with more sleep, don't you think?"

The two of them tackled preparing breakfast together while they talked. Today's soup was going to be a salty pork rib, spring onion, and carrot soup. Olivia's secret ingredient for this was garlic, and she tossed in some barley, too. The soup thickened as the barley boiled until it was soft. It was the kind of soup your body was grateful for after it was forced to huddle against the winter cold.

Arthur came down around the time breakfast was ready. Rob once again

shouted, Wanted see you! Wanted see you! while wagging his tail so hard it seemed about to fly off.

Dale just glanced at Arthur from the bed. Mate come. Slow.

That gave Olivia the impression Dale didn't dislike Arthur.

"I'm off work today," he said. "I was thinking I'd chop some wood. Couldn't hurt to have a bit more, right?"

"Right. You can never have too much firewood. Thank you for taking care of it."

The three of them checked in with each other about their plans for the day while they ate their breakfast of soup. Arthur was going to chop wood. Lara was going to work on grinding dried medicinal herbs into powder in addition to her apothecary studies. Olivia hadn't decided what she would do yet.

"What're you thinking of doing?" asked Arthur.

"Hm. I kind of want to make some chestnut cream today," she replied.

"I've never had chestnut cream, but it sounds delicious!" said Lara. "How do you turn those hard, dried chestnuts into a cream?" Her eyes were sparkling. She'd fallen in love with anything that had "chestnut" in the name ever since she had that first dried chestnut.

"Well, I've already nearly gone through all the dried chestnuts for cooking, right?" said Olivia. "So, I'll take what's left, soften them up, then add milk, cream, and sugar to make chestnut cream. It's heaven to eat it spread on bread. I was overwhelmed the first time I ate it, which was after I moved here."

"I'll do my work near you so I can watch you make it!"

"Maybe I'll make you my first taste tester, Lara."

"Oooh, yay!"

Arthur couldn't hold back his laughter anymore because Lara's grin was so wide it'd have to grow past her face to get any bigger. He pointed out her silly smile, but she didn't stop grinning.

Lara had mentioned at some point that, to her family, sweets were a luxury

you only got once a year. Sugar was obviously a luxury, but apparently, she never even got to eat fruit.

She really was treated like an indentured servant, thought Olivia, and that made her feel sorry for the girl, but Lara did have fond memories of her mother. She had things to help her through that time.

They are the barley and pork rib soup with bread, then each went to start their jobs for the day.

Olivia put a handful of sugar into a pot of lukewarm water, then added the dried chestnuts and let it all soak with a lid directly on the chestnuts.

"Keep the heat as low as you can until the chestnuts get soft again," said Olivia to Lara, then she went upstairs to get changed. She imagined it was going to snow soon, so she needed to put the cut, dry hay into the goat barn.

"This will be a good workout," she said.

Once she was in clothes she didn't mind getting covered in hay, she went outside, grabbed armloads from the pile in the front yard, and quickly made trips to the goat barn. Arthur was in the yard splitting wood with a satisfying, thunk! thunk! If he didn't get the wood chopped and stored on the firewood rack under the eaves, it would get damp and that would cause Olivia trouble later on, which was why he was working so hard. Everyone was busy with preparations for winter at the end of autumn.

While they worked, Max from the bakery came to deliver freshly baked bread. Max was in his fifties, and his son had taken over the baking part of the business, so Max focused solely on delivery now. He was also one of Olivia's regulars and a lover of soup.

He brought in large, long loaves of bread along with the boxes they came in, then Olivia served him a cup of mint tea even though it was outside normal opening hours, letting him slowly savor his soup until the restaurant opened properly.

"I'm going to make some chestnut cream today," Olivia told him.

"Oh? When'll it be done? I'll have to come back if you're going to manage to get it done by tomorrow."

"It should be ready tomorrow."

"You wouldn't sell me just the cream, would you?"

"I'm sorry that I have to say no to that every year. I can't make enough to supply your bakery, Max."

"We've tried making it a few times ourselves, but it never tastes or smells like yours."

"Haha, hmm."

"What's your secret?"

"There's no secret."

"Hmm, not sure that's the whole truth."

Olivia smirked, and Max declared, "I'll be back tomorrow!" as he left, as if that was his way of reserving his share of the chestnut cream.

"Olivia, do you really not have a secret trick for making your chestnut cream?" asked Lara.

"Hmm, if there is a trick, it just comes down to using the less sweet chestnuts for cooking, and saving the sweeter, stronger-flavored chestnuts for the cream."

"That's it?"

"Yep. That's it."

It was the squirrels that taught Olivia how to pick out the tastier chestnuts.

The squirrels remembered that Olivia would give them some of the chestnuts once she'd removed them from their burrs, which was why they'd sit stock-still in the trees watching Olivia gather them. Then, when she scattered some across the ground, they'd swarm the chestnuts and fight to be the first one to them.

"You don't have to steal them from each other! There's plenty for everyone," she'd tell them.

Olivia loved watching them skillfully peel the skin and spit it out before devouring the raw chestnuts inside. She watched them year after year, until she realized there were some chestnuts they warred over and others they didn't.

Her grandmother had told her to look for the ones that were big, round, and glossy, so she already knew that much. But she also noticed the darker-colored chestnuts were popular among the squirrels. She sampled the difference, and realized how dark or light the color was had a connection to how strong or not the flavor was.

There was one other important factor, too: the tree.

The same trees produced the best chestnuts every year, though she wasn't sure if it was due to better nutrition, better sunlight, or something else entirely.

Olivia memorized where the best trees were and put the chestnuts from those ones aside for her chestnut cream.

Any chestnut could be used for cooking, since you had to add seasoning anyway, but the flavor of the ingredients was the deciding factor for the final product when it came to chestnut cream. So, the only real "trick" was to remember which trees produced the best chestnuts.

The chestnuts were deshelled before drying, then rehydrated and smashed with the skins still on and worked into cream, milk, and sugar. Once nice and thick, it was sieved one final time, then it was done.

Olivia gave Lara the first taste, and, when she did, Lara clapped her hands to her cheeks and bounced in her chair. "Oh my gosh! How in the world could anything be so yummy!" she cried.

"If you like it that much, tonight you can go ahead and toast some bread nice and crispy, put a thin swipe of butter on, then load it up with as much chestnut cream as you like."

"But this is for the customers! Are you sure?" Lara was very cute. Hesitant to accept on the one hand, wiping the drool from the corner of her mouth on the other.

"I'm sure," said Olivia. "If it makes you that happy, I'm happy to let you eat all the chestnut cream this year."

"N-No, I can't do that. It's for the restaurant. It wouldn't be right. But, just tonight, maybe I could have three slices of toast with chestnut cream?"

"Go right ahead. Have four. Have five!"

That evening, the kitchen was filled with Lara's squeals of, "It's soooo good!" every time she took a bite of the freshly made chestnut cream. Arthur chuckled but didn't say anything. Rob seemed to get used to it right away, but Dale replied to each of Lara's squeals with a thought of, *Loud*, until she was done.

The next day, customers saw the sign that said there was chestnut cream, and they all ordered it. It was priced at one large copper coin per spoonful, which was one of the large soup spoons heaped full, so the customers kept coming with orders of, "Two spoons for me," or "Can I get three spoons on bread?"

Word spread quickly every year that Soup Forest had started selling its chestnut cream. The huge pot Olivia had made sold out in only three days.

"Oh, it's already all gone," said Lara.

"I'll make more next year. And if you help, I can double the amount," said Olivia.

"I'll definitely help then!"

I wonder if she'll be here next year, wondered Olivia. She'll likely leave if she passes the apothecary exam. It'll be lonely without her.

As that thought crossed her mind while washing the dishes, Arthur came from behind and gave her a gentle hug. "I'll be here," he said.

"Yeah."

Mates close, murmured Dale, making Olivia turn around to see him lying between Rob's forelegs, only his eyes moving as he looked at them.

Chapter 23: Pork Stew and a Snowstorm

THE first snowfall came on the first day of December.

Olivia hadn't seen any hedgehogs lately. They must've been hibernating somewhere safe. When she looked out the window, she only saw robins, plovers, and sparrows, the birds that didn't migrate for winter. The summer birds had all gone off to warmer places long ago.

Warm, came a thought.

"Hm?" Olivia turned around to see Dale sitting right in front of the restaurant's fireplace, his eyes closed. This was her first time having a cat as part of the family, and she was impressed when she learned cats were experts at finding the most comfortable of places.

Dale's primary haunts weren't limited to near the fireplaces or stove. If a beam of sun shone in one spot for a limited time, Dale was going to be there every day in that period of time, his eyes closed in enjoyment. It was like he could read the clock.

Rob, the big black dog, was filled with excitement ever since the snow started falling. He'd go outside and come back in several times before the sun even rose. When Olivia went to check on him, she saw him rushing at full speed across the snow. The normally mild-mannered Rob was gone. This Rob let his mouth hang open, his eyes squinting in a smile as he ran as fast as he could.

Olivia couldn't help bursting into laughter when she caught snippets of his inner mind, all *Woo-hooo!* and *Yahahaaa!*

He would have his fill of running after about twelve minutes then come back in, snowflakes clinging to his black fur, mini snow clumps smooshed between his paw pads. He'd then chug down some water, sit for a while, then go right back out.

Rob cold, thought Dale every time Rob came back into the restaurant. He'd comment on how cold Rob was even without touching him.

Olivia simmered a pork stew while sipping a cup of tea. It took care to do it properly, so as not to break apart the cubed pork while still cooking it until it could crumble at the touch of a spoon.

She'd put in a bundle of bay leaves and dried celery leaves tied together with string, but it was probably about time to take that out.

Lara was hard at studying for the apothecary exam which was held in the new year. Olivia noticed lamplight from the outbuilding for a while into the night. Even so, Olivia suspected Lara was trying hard to be up early when she heard the back door open.

"Good morning, Olivia. Sorry I'm late," said Lara.

"Good morning, Lara. Perfectly fine to sleep a bit more, if you like. You were up working late last night, weren't you?"

"It's all right. I want to help."

"I appreciate it. Today is pork stew."

Lara loved Olivia's stew. She squeezed her eyes shut and clutched her hands together in front of her chest out of sheer excitement and whispered, "I can't wait!"

The sound of footsteps came from the stairs and Arthur appeared in the kitchen, too. "Mornin'. Oh, pork stew? Will we be able to have some for breakfast?" he said.

"Yep. You have to warm yourself with something hearty on cold mornings," said Olivia.

Arthur washed his face with cool water from the bucket. He started to walk off with water dripping from his bangs, but Lara held out a cloth and said, "You're dripping." Olivia smiled. It was like he was the laid-back older brother, and she was the prim and proper little sister.

"Arthur, are you going to take lunch with you today? Or are you going to buy lunch in town?" asked Olivia.

"Uh, think I'll have something light in town since I'll be having the stew for breakfast. And then, if you don't mind saving me another bowl of stew for later? I want to have it for dinner."

"Sure. Not one bowl though. I'll save about three, I think."

"I'll come home as early as I can today. Just hope we don't get a lot of snow."

"I don't think it'll stick too much, since it's the first snow of the year. But I do worry, so please do come home early."

"I will."

Lara held back a smile as she made some tea. "You two get along so well," she commented.

"You think so?" said Olivia.

"Yep. I want to have a marriage like yours someday."

"Oh, is there someone you like?" inquired Olivia, expecting Lara to immediately say no, but was shocked when there was no reply at all. She turned around and saw Lara's face was a little red. Olivia's expression turned serious, and she moved over to Lara. "So, there is someone? Is it someone I know?"

"I don't know. He's a cobbler in town."

"A cobbler? At Hutton Shoemakers? Or Gruber Cobblers?"

"Gruber. His name's Colin. He's an apprentice there."

"Huh. How did you meet him?" asked Olivia, then Arthur tapped her on the shoulder. "Hm? What is it?" She turned around and Arthur was smiling awkwardly, which was when she realized how overbearing she was being. "Oh, Lara, I'm sorry. I was interrogating you about everything, wasn't I?"

"No, it's all right!" said Lara. "One time when I went shopping, I fell while I was carrying all my things. He ran over and helped me up."

"He's a nice boy, then?"

"He is! I was thinking I'd like you both to meet him someday. I kind of just started thinking of you two like my older brother and sister. I'm sorry, that's weird of me, isn't it?"

"It's not at all! It makes me happy."

"Olivia, should I go ahead and stir the stew? You don't want it to burn, do you?" said Arthur.

"Wait! I'll do it. The meat will crumble if you don't do it gently."

"R-Right..."

Olivia felt a small pang of loneliness as she stirred the large pot of stew. That's right. Lara is nearly sixteen years old. It's normal for a girl her age to find a boyfriend. I shouldn't be feeling sad about this. I should be happy for her.

Arthur smiled gently at her back while she gave herself that talking to.



A meaty stew was always well received on cold days.

Both at lunch and dinner, customers came in, shivering, their noses red from the cold, then sat down for a bowl of pork stew that put a smile on their faces.

"This tastes just like Marguerite's. Really takes me back," said one customer.

"You match the flavor just right," said another.

"I always look forward to this stew. Have ever since I was a single lad," said another.

That taste, passed down from Olivia's grandmother, brought out nostalgic stories about her. Olivia's soul felt warm as she watched her customers leave with looks of satisfaction, and the day went by without the first snowfall of the year gathering too high.

Arthur came home after it'd gone pitch-black outside, bringing with him a hunk of meat.

"Welcome home, Arthur," Olivia called.

"Thanks, Olivia. Got that beef shin you asked for."

"Thank you. I plan to simmer it with loads of veggies tomorrow."

"I passed by Gruber Cobblers today. The Gruber wife and husband and two young men were there. I wonder which one it was."

"Arthur! Did you go spying?"

"Only 'cause Lara's such a nice girl. I got curious. Was just thinking it'd be nice if she meets a boy as nice as her."

"I think so, too."

After that conversation, they agreed they'd invite Lara's Colin to Soup Forest.

He came on a day Soup Forest was normally closed and apparently asked for the evening off from work to come. Olivia was planning for them all to have an early dinner, then he could go back to town.

It just so happened that that day, the sky had been covered in thick gray clouds since morning.

I just hope we don't get a lot of snow today, thought Olivia, looking up with worry when Peep came flying by.

Olivia opened the window to let him into the kitchen, and he said, Rain! Rain lots!

"Thank you, Peep. Though, with how cold it is, I think it'll be snow, not rain. You should go in the horse barn so you don't get too cold."

Yes!

With that spirited reply, Peep gobbled down some breadcrumbs and flew off into the forest.

Olivia's worries were warranted. Huge snowflakes started falling in the afternoon.

Olivia and Lara were so worried about Colin that they took the carriage out to meet him, only to find him walking along the road that was already covered in nearly four inches of snow. Lara opened the carriage door and waved him over while Olivia called to him from the driver's seat.

"Hello! It's nice to meet you. Hop on in the carriage. I think the snow will get even deeper."

Lara jumped out of the carriage and briskly brushed the snow off Colin's head and shoulders. Olivia turned the carriage back towards the restaurant once she was certain the two were inside.

By the time they reached Soup Forest, the snow was up to six inches and not showing any signs of slowing down.

"You should stay here tonight," said Olivia. "I think even the carriage will get stuck in this."

"I can't be such a bother, it's only our first time meeting," he said.

"Colin, you'll collapse on the way if you try to go back now," said Lara.

"She's right," said Olivia. "There's nothing but snow out there. You can't do anything about that. Did you tell Mr. Gruber you'll be coming here tonight?"

"Yes. I told him I'd make it back tonight before I left."

"Then I'm sure he'll understand. Just look at that snow. We have a spare room in the main house. You'll stay in there."

"Uh... If you're sure. Thank you."

Colin seemed like a gentle young man. His eyes crinkled into cheery slits when he smiled. He was apparently twenty years old, and Olivia was relieved to know he seemed like a kind person.

Olivia served Colin a cup of tea while she looked out the window to the sea of white and wondered if Arthur would be home soon. She didn't think this amount of snow would cause him any trouble, being a former mercenary, but she just felt on edge the whole time she thought about him traveling through it, even if he was on a horse. She wanted to go out right away and find him.

But Arthur really hates it when I put myself in any sort of danger, no matter how small, she thought. She appreciated the joy of having someone worry about her, wanting to protect her, but, at the same time, she couldn't help being worried about him.

Arthur finally came home when the snow was knee-high.

Olivia rushed out to him and threw her arms around him. "Welcome home! You did manage to make it back early."

"Freddy told me to leave early. It's really piling up, isn't it?"

"It is. I decided to have Colin stay here for the night."

"That's for the best. You can't even find the road in all this snow. He could wander off the path and end up dead somewhere."

And so, Colin, Lara's love interest, came to stay in Soup Forest for the night.

They had pumpkin soup with a side of fried bacon, onion, and cheese, along with pickled cabbage and cucumber, soda bread baked with finely grated carrots, and plenty of fresh butter. They also had the leftover pork stew Olivia set aside for Arthur, and they all steadily dug into the feast.

Colin was ecstatic to be welcomed with the cooking Olivia put her all into and completely cleaned his dishes. "Lara's said she's working hard on learning how to cook from you, Olivia, and I can see why," he said. "Your cooking is amazing."

"So, you're why Lara's been so focused on taking notes about everything I cook," said Olivia.

"No!" Lara protested. "At first, I just wanted to learn how to cook good food."

Arthur and Olivia gave warm nods with looks that said, "Yeah, sure, of course. We totally understand," and Lara turned red. The meal for four ended on a pleasant note, and they all said good night to each other as they went to their separate rooms.

But, late that night, a visitor came to Soup Forest.

Chapter 24: The Guide Fox

A scratching sound. Rob whining.

Arthur woke in the middle of the night when he heard the sounds.

"Olivia, wake up. Olivia," he said.

"Hm? What?"

"I heard something downstairs. I'm going to go look. You lock the door and stay here. If you hear a struggle, move the bed in front of the door to barricade it. Don't come out, no matter what."

"All right. Be careful."

Arthur slipped his dagger into the holder around his waist, then also picked up his long sword. Olivia waited as Arthur slipped silently out into the hall then locked the door. Inside was warm and cozy, but the air in the room was chilly. She couldn't stop trembling from nervousness.

She pushed her ability to hear thoughts to its limits but found nothing. She strained her ears to pick up sounds and waited, but still heard no loud sounds from downstairs.

After some time, she heard the jingle of the bell over the door.

He wouldn't open the door if it were burglars, right? she thought. She debated whether she should unlock the door and go downstairs or not, but Arthur came back before she could decide. He knocked on the door, and she unlocked it, letting him into the room. He looked a bit flustered.

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"You've got a visitor," he said.
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"Me?"

"There's a fox."

Just as Olivia was about to run downstairs, Arthur draped a wool shawl

around her shoulders from behind.

"Thank you," she said.

"The snow's pretty deep out there."

She hurried downstairs and opened the front door, where she saw a fox in the snow that was about as high as her own knees. And she recognized the fox.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Humans. Die. Baby.

"I'll go immediately! Just wait a moment."

She ran upstairs and told Arthur what was going on while she changed.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

"Thank you. Can you tell Colin we're going out? And that we're borrowing Greta."

"Will do."

Arthur finished changing, went to Colin's room and knocked on the door to tell him what's going on.

"All right, let's go," Olivia called.

"Colin, if you could look after the place," said Arthur.

"But where are you going at a time like this?" asked Colin.

"We'll explain everything when we get back."

Colin had no idea what was going on. He watched in confusion as Olivia and Arthur got on the horses with their lamps before setting off into the deep snow. Rob tried to go with them, but Olivia told him no. Now he was just watching them go with sadness.

Colin locked the door, shivering as he did. He was going back upstairs when he chuckled to himself, remembering the animal he saw. "I must be half asleep, still," he said. "Thought I saw them going out into the snow being led by a fox. Urgh, it's freezing. The snow really chills the air."

He hurried back to bed, curled up, and tried to go back to sleep, but he was so

cold he couldn't drift off. He kept rolling over, but eventually gave up trying to sleep and went downstairs.

After standing in the kitchen for a moment thinking, he lit a fire in the stove. "Might as well warm up the kitchen. And they'll probably want some hot water for tea, and maybe they could use some warm water to warm up their feet too, when they get back. Don't want them getting frostbite."

He felt bad using the kitchen without permission in a house he was visiting for the first time, but eventually decided this was an abnormal situation and went ahead and boiled a big pot of water.

As he was adding a log to the fire in the stove, he heard a crunching sound. The back door opened, and Lara appeared, her feet crusted in snow.

"I rushed over to see what was going on because I saw a light..." she said. "What are you doing, Colin?"

"Arthur and Olivia went out somewhere."

"...Oh. Something must have happened. If that's the case, we should probably warm up the restaurant, too."

She brushed the snow from her feet and started moving briskly despite having just woken up. Colin thought about how his girlfriend really had things together, then said, "Do you have any idea why'd they go?"

"Hm, I don't know. Maybe there was an emergency with someone who's sick? Oh, yeah, that has to be it. Olivia's satchel with her medicines is gone. They must have been called out for someone sick."

Lara quickly got the fire going in the restaurant fireplace, then hung a big pot there, too.

"With this snow, I'm sure it'd be a good idea to boil plenty of water," she said. "And we should probably get some food ready so they can eat right away. Colin, I'm going to make something. You can go to sleep. There's still loads of time until sunrise."

"But this is an emergency. I don't want to be the only one lying around sleeping while everyone else is working. Tell me how I can help."

"That's sweet of you. All right, then, mind making me a cup of tea? With extra milk and honey. I'm going to make a simple onion soup."

Lara peeled onions, diced them finely, and sautéed them in butter. Colin thought she was incredible. He boiled a kettle of water and made her tea. When he handed her the teacup, he said, "Listen to this. Earlier, I'm pretty sure I was still half asleep, and I swear it looked like Arthur and Olivia were being led by a fox. That's crazy, haha!"

"Huh. So, it was a fox that came to see them?"

"Hm? You really think it could be? That's impossible."

Lara took her eyes off the sautéing onions to look over at Colin. She was smiling and her eyes twinkled like a mischievous child. "Maybe that sort of thing does happen. I kind of think it might. I wish I could've seen that, a guide fox. Hey, Colin, are you hungry?"

"Yeah, a little. Even though it's the middle of the night."

"If I made you a piece of toast with butter and raspberry jam, would you eat it?"

"Happily! Are you sure it's all right, though?"

"Of course. Though, it's kind of unfortunate that the first thing I ever make for you is going to be bread and jam. Oh well."

Colin's heart skipped when she said, "the first thing I ever make for you." If there was a first time, it meant there was going to be a next time. He couldn't help wondering when that would be.

"Anything I share with you is obviously going to be amazing!" he said.

"Aw, thanks."

Inside the restaurant was warm thanks to the fireplace and stove.

Elsewhere, however, Olivia and Arthur were following the fox down the snowy road. The two horses struggled to make progress through the snowbanks at night, but it was still faster than walking on foot.

Olivia called to the fox from above, "Is it still far?"

Nearby.

"And there's a baby?"

Baby die soon. Baby cry.

Olivia searched the fox's memories and found the sound of a baby crying inside a carriage. There wouldn't be just a baby, so she assumed there were also adults. Olivia was feeling panicked, worrying that this carriage might have lost a wheel and that their horses could have been injured if they had strayed off the road, which would also be bad.

Everything in sight was a single sheet of snow. It was impossible to tell where the road ended, and the unkempt lands began.

The fox traveled through the snow by leaping and at one point turned off the road towards a marsh. The area initially looked flat, but there was actually a slight decline that grew suddenly sharper. Once the sun was set, anyone not from the area wouldn't notice the slope.

Arthur and Olivia followed the fox down the slope and finally caught sight of the carriage. It'd toppled over on the slope. The horse was just about still standing, but it couldn't move because it was still attached to the carriage. It let out what nearly sounded like a scream when it saw Arthur and Olivia.

Help! Help! Can't move!

"We're coming to help right now!" called Olivia, and she and Arthur jumped down from their horses at the same time.

They hurried over to the carriage in the snow. There was no sign of the driver. Without saying anything Arthur quickly climbed up onto the side of the overturned vehicle and opened the door. While he did, Olivia unhooked the horse's harness to set it free.



"Driver's inside, too," said Arthur. "Could you give me a hand?" "Yes!"

Olivia looked into the carriage and saw the driver lying across a woman holding a baby as if protecting them. They were most likely unconscious. Arthur and Olivia worked together to pull out the driver first.

The driver opened his eyes and in a weak voice urged, "Please, save the lady and the lass."

Arthur next pulled the baby out of the carriage and handed her to Olivia, then slung the woman over his shoulder and climbed out.

They patted the woman's cheeks and rubbed her limbs while calling to her, somehow managing to get her to wake up, but she seemed incredibly tired. The baby let out a weak cry, but immediately fell unconscious again.

Then Olivia realized the fox was standing there watching them, unmoving.

"Thank you for letting us know about them. This is a thank you," she said, and she pulled some boiled chicken out of her satchel and threw it to the fox. It dexterously snapped it out of midair and disappeared.

"Arthur, let's hurry back."

"Yeah. Should probably go as fast as we can. I'll carry the baby inside my coat. We'll have to hope the adults will make it with the warmth from the horses."

They put the woman on the horse who'd been pulling the carriage, along with Olivia, and Arthur took the driver on Annie with him. Olivia pulled the woman close to her, so her back was pressed against her own chest, and rubbed her as they rode, with Greta following the other two horses.

On the way, the woman began shivering severely. Her body was trying to produce warmth. Olivia could even hear chattering as her teeth clattered together. She whispered in the woman's ear, "Do not fall asleep until we get to my house. Your baby is with my husband, being warmed against his chest. You don't have to worry about her."

The woman nodded as she was racked with tremors. They could hear a life-filled crying coming from inside Arthur's coat. He said something to the baby,

and the woman groaned, "Oh, thank God, she's alive."

Chapter 25: Onion and Cheese Soup

THE air on that snowy night was so cold it stung Olivia's face and prickled her lungs whenever she took in a deep breath.

These three were in real danger. They would have frozen to death if we hadn't found them.

That fox hated humans. Olivia wouldn't even claim the fox trusted her though they'd had several conversations using their inner voices. It most likely only came to inform her about these humans who were in danger so it could get a present from Olivia. Maybe it was hungry after failing to catch prey for some time and could no longer bear it.

We need to warm these people up as soon as possible, but the restaurant will be freezing cold. I'll start by making a fire.

She thought about the steps to take as she urged the horse on. She was surprised, though, to see the windows of Soup Forest lit up in the distance.

"Arthur! It looks like Colin's up," she said.

"I hope he warmed the place up for us."

"Well, he's up and got the light on. I'm sure he's warmed it up for us, too."

They got to Soup Forest and dismounted the horses. Olivia hurriedly helped the stumbling woman inside. Arthur helped the man, whose footing was a little steadier. The snow was shoveled away from the path that led from where people could stop their carriages up to the front door. Lara came bounding out before they even reached the door.

"You're back! Are they ill?" she asked.

"These two are frozen solid. They were unconscious in the snow," said Olivia.

"Oh no! Well, we've got the restaurant warmed up."

They went inside where it was so warm it was a relief just to step in. Olivia

found herself smiling as she said, "Oh, it's so warm. Thank you, Lara and Colin. You're a huge help."

"It was nothing," said Lara. "Those two are blue with cold. We have to warm them up right away."

"Could I ask you to get them something warm to drink?" said Olivia as they led the woman and driver over to a seat in front of the fire.

Lara brought out cups of onion and cheese soup, while Colin poured warm water in basins and placed the woman's and man's feet in them.

"Your body'll warm up faster if you warm your feet," he said, smiling gently at the woman.

She lowered her pale face in a bow. "Thank you so much. My name is Bethany Darleys. I got word my husband's illness had taken a turn for the worse, and I just couldn't sit there doing nothing. We left my parents' home because I insisted we go out in this snow. And look where it got us. I nearly killed Patricia and Charlie, too."

Bethany's teeth chattered as she thanked them, but Olivia was impressed at how strong-spirited this woman was even when her husband was in poor condition.

The baby started to cry. Arthur drew her out from his coat, and Bethany held out her arms to show she wanted to hold the baby. She then draped a shawl over her shoulder and chest because she wanted to feed the girl.

Olivia gave Lara directions on what to do. "Lara, could you boil me some water really quick? I want to put the baby in a warm bath."

"We've already got a huge pot full of hot water!"

"Smart girl. You're a lifesaver!"

Olivia poured cold water from the bucket of water from the well into the hot water in a basin to bring it to a moderate enough temperature for warming the baby. Lara waited for the baby to stop feeding, took her, undressed her, and then gave her over to Olivia.

The baby started to cry again once her clothes were off, but she went quiet in

the warm water, where she started to get drowsy. Once fully warm, Olivia redressed her in clothes warmed by the fire and wrapped her in a blanket.

"Lara, put hot water in two jars and wrap them in towels, then put them inside Bethany and Charlie's clothes," instructed Olivia.

"All right."

Bethany and her driver had finished eating their onion and cheese soup, along with some bread with honey. Color was finally coming back to their cheeks, but their expressions were still dark.

"How can I ever thank you?" said Bethany. "You've saved our lives."

"Ma'am, please forgive me. It's my fault the carriage overturned," said Charlie.

"No, Charlie. Like I said, it's my fault for insisting we go out into the snow at night. I couldn't even wait for a guard. I'm just glad you're all right."

"I had no idea what to do when you lost consciousness," he said. "If these two hadn't come when they did, we surely would have..."

There was no way the one man could carry both the unconscious woman and her baby through the snow. But if he'd left the carriage to try and get help, Bethany and Patricia would probably have died before they could get back.

What would I have done in that situation? Olivia wondered.

There were tears in both Bethany's and Charlie's eyes as they comforted each other.

Bethany seemed to realize something all of a sudden. "How did you know where we were?" she asked, looking at Arthur with a questioning look.

Arthur glanced at Olivia, looking lost for what to say since he wasn't very good at handling these kinds of questions. She smiled and calmly answered. "A few times each year, people get trapped there when the snow is piled high. It can get quite bad. I remembered that, and I just couldn't stand not checking. I decided to go look, with my husband's help."

"It's almost like a miracle," said Bethany.

"It might be. I believe it was God that made me remember just then," Olivia said.

"Oh. It must be. What a blessing."

After that, Bethany closed her eyes and folded her hands over her chest as she gave thanks in prayer.

Arthur and Olivia went into the kitchen and had cups of tea for themselves. It was apple tea, heavy on the apple, and loaded with honey. They blew on the hot tea to cool it as they drank.

Arthur's attention was partially on the restaurant as he asked Olivia, "Is it all right to explain things like that?"

"I think it is. People believe what they want to believe. All that matters is that explanation puts Bethany at ease. Telling her that a fox came to tell me about them will only cause more trouble."

"That's true, I guess."

They told Lara everything was all right now and sent her back to her room. Colin offered the room he was using for Bethany and the baby, and he and Charlie slept on the floor in front of the restaurant's fireplace, piling all the rugs and blankets they had in front of the warm hearth.

Arthur and Olivia went back to their room, too, but Arthur seemed to have something on his mind.

"What's wrong, Arthur?" asked Olivia.

"Darleys. I'm pretty sure that's a merchant company that hired me once when I was a mercenary. It's a big company. They deal in construction. Pretty sure they had a lot of workers, too. If the head of the company is in bad condition, it's not going to turn out good."

"Oh..."

That's where the conversation ended, though, and the two cuddled close and went to sleep.



OLIVIA woke after sleeping for about three hours. She gently slipped out of bed, away from Arthur, who was still sleeping. She then quietly added wood to the fire in the stove in the kitchen and started making breakfast, careful not to wake Colin and Charlie, who were sleeping in front of the fireplace in the restaurant.

She made an egg soup loaded with barley and winter vegetables, slices of bread fried brown in butter, and a side of spinach sautéed with her homemade bacon. The full menu was to restore strength to the two adults who had come face-to-face with disaster last night.

"Good morning. I'm feeling much better, thanks to you," came a voice.

"Oh, Charlie? Did I wake you?" asked Olivia.

"No, ma'am. I didn't sleep very well out of concern for Mr. Darleys. I imagine the lady will be feeling the same."

"He must be in poor condition."

"He is. He's been unwell for some time now, but it seems to have gotten much worse recently. If something happens to him, I'm not even sure what I would do..."

"Um, if you'd like, maybe I could help? A royal apothecary has given me permission to work as an apothecary. I'm sure you already have doctors looking after Mr. Darleys, but, please, if there's anything I can do, just say so."

Charlie just gave a noncommittal nod. He seemed uncertain.

Obviously, he's not going to want to entrust his master to me, a young restaurant owner from the sticks who calls herself an apothecary...

Olivia didn't say anything else on the subject.

Once the sun showed itself, Bethany came downstairs carrying the baby.

"Feeding a baby makes you hungry, I'm sure," said Olivia. "Please, eat as much as you like."

"Thank you. Everything smells so lovely that I woke up feeling hungry," said Bethany.

Her eyes were red. She must have been crying last night. She and Charlie ate, raving the whole time about how wonderful the food was, but then she immediately said, "I'm sorry, but I want to leave as soon as possible," once they were done.

"I understand," said Olivia. "I'll take you to the capital in our carriage. Let's head out soon, since we can only travel in this snow when the sun is out."

"I cannot thank you enough. I promise I'll repay you for this," she said.

Olivia just said, "I don't need any reward," then went about getting ready to go.

The restaurant was left in Lara's care again, and Colin went back to Marlowe for work, even though he was concerned for Lara.

As usual, Arthur insisted he go with Olivia, so they asked Colin to let Freddy know about what was going on.

"There's so much snow, Olivia, I doubt many customers will come into the restaurant," said Lara. "I can handle a few people on my own. Don't worry about things here."

Rob seemed to understand he couldn't come along without even being told, but he looked at them with dejection and thought, *Lonely. Sad.*

Dale had disappeared when the unknown people appeared in the house in the middle of the night, but he watched from the top of the stairs as they were leaving. *Going? Come back fast*, he thought with annoyance.

It was cold outside, despite being sunny. All four of them, even Charlie, gathered inside the carriage, dressed in thick layers. The carriage ran easily through the snow, pulled by three horses, and they arrived in the capital after three days of travel.

Chapter 26: The Darleys & Co. Doctor

DARLEYS & CO. was a conspicuously large company, even when compared to other companies in the main trading district of the capital.

The carriage stopped in front of the Darleys' home and office, and Charlie the driver jumped out and called, "I've brought Mrs. Darleys and baby Patricia!" which caused a gaggle of workers to fly out of the building.

"Mrs. Darleys! Welcome back. Come, hurry in," said an old woman as she took the baby from Bethany and nearly pulled them into the building.

Arthur and Olivia weren't certain if they should exit the carriage, too. An old man came rushing up to them and asked Charlie, "And these two are...?"

"These two saved our lives, Derek," said Charlie. "Our carriage toppled over in the snow, and we nearly froze to death, but they found us just before we did."

"You've done us a great favor, then," said Derek. "We must thank you somehow. Please, come inside."

"Um, but we..." Olivia didn't know what to do. She was certain they'd think they just wanted a reward if they went inside.

Arthur seemed to guess at Olivia's hesitation. He quickly, but not rudely, stopped Derek. "We didn't come along with Mrs. Darleys because we wanted a reward. We heard Mr. Darleys isn't doing well. My wife, an apothecary, was concerned. Her skills and knowledge are recognized by a royal apothecary. I'm sure you've already had doctors see Mr. Darleys, but she was wondering if she could be of any help."

Arthur normally said very little, but he was now talking a lot to explain the situation.

He's working so hard for me. I can't just stand here dilly-dallying while he's doing all that, thought Olivia.

She'd been hearing Derek thinking things like, The lady was saved by these

unrefined people? How many gold coins should I give them to get rid of them? which was making her start to regret coming all the way here.

"Pardon my rudeness," said Derek. "I'm sure the mistress wouldn't approve of my keeping you here talking on the side of the road. Please, come inside."

They've obviously only come all the way here for a reward, he thought at the same time.

Olivia had always protected herself by putting distance between her and people like this, but she gathered her courage as she thought, I'm going to give this my all, partially for Arthur who's so concerned for me.

"I wouldn't want anyone to think we're here just for money, so please let me make this very clear up front: We do not need any sort of reward," said Olivia. "Is there any way I could see Mr. Darleys?"

"The master? I'm sure you could, for a brief moment, anyway. This way, please," said Derek, while thinking, Someone this young calls herself an apothecary? How much can we really trust her?

For the first time in a long time, Olivia had to deal with the difficulty of people whose words didn't match what was in their hearts. She closed her eyes for a moment, finding it hard to bear.

She normally spent most of her life avoiding this sort of horribleness, unpleasantness, and this was only reminding her about that.

Derek led them past the office section of the building into the living area. They came to a door at the end of a hallway, which he opened and spoke into. "Ma'am, the two people who accompanied you wish to see Mr. Darleys."

"Please, bring them in."

Olivia and Arthur walked into a large room with plenty of sun. A fire was blazing so strongly it felt like walking into a wall of heat.

Bethany looked up at them. She looked like she'd been crying, but she nodded, which Olivia took as permission to come in. She moved over to Bethany's side.

"This is my husband, Samuel," Bethany said. "He's awake, so please, feel

free."

Samuel, the head of Darleys & Co., was wasting away. His eyes were sunken in, his pale, bluish skin was lifeless, and his lips were chapped.

"He's dehydrated," said Olivia. "Could I get a large amount of warm water? As well as sugar, salt, and two soup spoons?"

"Derek, would you, please?" requested Bethany.

"Of course, ma'am."

Olivia waited for Derek to leave the room then asked Bethany, "I assume you've called a doctor to see him..."

"They have, yes. Why?"

"Your husband is very obviously dehydrated. In that state, his body couldn't heal itself well even if it tried to get rid of his illness."

"Oh. Well, I'll make sure to ask the doctor about it next time he comes."

Derek came back with what looked like a maid who was carrying a tray with the things Olivia asked for. Olivia took the tray, roughly measured out some sugar, salt, and warm water into a cup, and stirred it with a spoon. She tastetested it herself, then gave Samuel one spoonful at a time.

While Bethany watched, she asked Derek, "Doctor Jean has come to see him, hasn't he?"

"Of course, ma'am. He was in just yesterday to check up on him."

Olivia jumped into the conversation before she could stop herself. "What sort of medicine is he giving Mr. Darleys?"

"A nutritional tonic, along with a treatment of bloodletting. He's making sure to get rid of all the blackened, dirty blood."

"Bloodletting?" asked Olivia.

"It's a treatment where the doctor removes the diseased, bad blood and disposes of it. Haven't you heard of it?"

Olivia stiffened and jerked around to ask again, "Dispose of? You mean he removes a patient's blood and disposes of it?"

"Yes, that's right. It's a cutting-edge treatment. Doctor Jean said the darker the blood, the worse the illness is," said Derek, while thinking, *Of course a country apothecary wouldn't have heard of bloodletting*.

While Olivia was shocked to hear of this, her mind immediately started racing to figure out how she could stop this absurd treatment.

Based on how Bethany and Derek acted, Derek had been working for the family for a long time and was fully in control of household affairs. Bethany may be the head of the family's wife, but she probably didn't have much of a say. That meant convincing Derek was going to be the faster route. She also got the impression he was the kind of person who would give in to a higher authority.

Olivia waited until Derek had gotten up and moved away to speak to Bethany. "Mrs. Darleys, I don't believe a royal apothecary would ever use this bloodletting treatment."

"Really? But royal apothecaries wouldn't ever help commoners like us, no matter how much money we offered them. The doctor we're using used to work for royals and nobles, but is kind enough to provide his services to commoners like us as well."

"Some royal apothecaries also have doctoral qualifications. I think they're trustworthy. I actually know someone. I think I may be able to pull some strings."

"Really?! I don't care how expensive it is, I'm willing to pay whatever their fees are. Could you please ask them to come?"

"I'll write a letter. I doubt he'll be able to make it today, though."

"That's fine. Oh, please, do write him."

Olivia asked Bethany for paper and pen and wrote a detailed letter to Doctor Ulysse at the castle about what was going on. Ulysse was the doctor who had realized the effect of bitter potatoes during the epidemic earlier. He was a quick decision-maker and adaptable to changing situations enough that he would go all the way to Marlais, where Olivia lived, in order to harvest bitter potatoes.

Once she finished writing the letter, she put it in an envelope and wrote her name, Olivia Eagleton Dariu, as the sender, then asked a servant who wasn't Derek to deliver it to the castle.

"I think things will go faster if you tell him it's from the apothecary who told him where the bitter potatoes were," said Olivia to the servant.

"Mrs. Olivia, apothecary, bitter potatoes. Yes. I'll be back shortly," said the servant.

Samuel seemed to want to drink as much of the slightly sweet, warm water with its salt and sugar as he could. He must have been very thirsty. Olivia was concerned he would vomit it back up if he drank it all too quickly, so she slowly spooned small amounts into his mouth.

It took quite a while, but he eventually drank two cups worth of the warm sugar water. He still couldn't speak, but he gave a tiny nod and closed his eyes. As he did, Olivia heard his inner voice. *Oh, that's a little better. But my toes are so cold, it hurts.*

"Mrs. Darleys," said Olivia, "could you touch your husband's toes to make sure they're not too cold?"

"Of course. Oh my gosh! They're freezing!"

"Then we need to get him a hot water bottle right away. Actually, three, if possible."

"Yes!"

Servants quickly brought the hot water bottles. Olivia put one at his feet and the other two beside either flank. A tiny bit of warm color returned to Samuel's cheeks as he started to breathe slowly in sleep.

"Thank you, Olivia," said Bethany. "His complexion is looking a little better."

"Um, this may not be appropriate to ask, but how old is Doctor Jean?"

"Around forty, I believe. He was apparently a doctor on retainer for a high-ranking noble in another country. Everyone in the capital currently recommends him very highly."

"I see," said Olivia, while thinking, Doctor Ulysse, please help.

If a doctor of high standing was drawing out people's blood and throwing it

away, he needed to be stopped. Olivia's grandmother has told her over and over again that blood fights disease, and that there is nothing unnecessary in a living creature's body.

While it might sound convincing at first that someone could recover from an illness by getting rid of the bad blood in their body, Olivia found it incredibly difficult to believe.



THAT night, she and Arthur got a room at an inn in the capital. They both kept telling each other how exhausted they were. They ate dinner then went up to their room.

"Olivia, I got to say, I don't like that Derek guy," said Arthur.

"I don't either. We can't leave things as they are, though. Having your blood drawn and thrown away every day... No matter how I look at it, I can't imagine that would be good for you. But I'm also worried about you getting fired from Freddy's Pharmacy."

"Freddy gave me permission for this sort of thing. He told me he'd never once complain if I took time off work to protect you."

Hearing that told Olivia how much people loved her grandparents. "It's thanks to my grandparents he'd say something like that. Those two took me in and loved me, and they're still protecting me. They left me with something valuable I can't even see."

Arthur nodded slightly without saying anything.

The next day, Charlie, the Darleys' driver, came to find them, and he seemed quite flustered. "Something horrible has happened," he said. "Mrs. Darleys told me to bring you as quickly as I could."

Olivia tried to ask what was going on, but Charlie just kept saying, "I don't even know."

All I did was give him water and warm him up. That wouldn't make his illness worse, thought Olivia, but she was still nervous as they entered the Darleys & Co. building.

The company was in an uproar. There were royal guards armed with swords talking to servants. What could possibly have happened?

Olivia was in shock, but Arthur moved over close to her side. "Looks like it's a pretty big deal," he said.

"It does."

And then Olivia heard a cheerful call. "Olivia! It's been too long."

"Doctor Ulysse?" said Olivia. "You're already here. Thank you!"

"I'm so glad you sent me that letter. We've been trying to catch this fake doctor forever."

"Fake doctor...? Fake? Doctor Jean isn't a real doctor?" Olivia asked.

"Well, more accurately, former doctor. He used to work as a doctor in another country but got obsessed with this bloodletting treatment and apparently caused several nobles to waste away to death. They took away his doctoral qualifications and were supposed to imprison him, but he escaped here to Sandwald before they could. And he's just gone right back to this bloodletting business. The master of this household was in bad condition after several rounds of this ridiculous treatment.

"Which is why I called the guard the moment I got that letter from you. They were quick to act once I explained to them Jean was a known criminal currently being searched for. Once they were ready to catch him, I had the family call for him."

"Oh my," said Olivia.

"Thank you for contacting me, Olivia."

"It was nothing. But, Doctor, how is Mr. Darleys?"

"I had a look at him myself. It wasn't good. He was severely weakened after several months of bloodletting and will likely need quite some time to recover. I believe his original illness is in his liver. But, in his case, I think he could still live a long life so long as he doesn't push himself and lives a healthy lifestyle."

Olivia felt comfortable with Doctor Ulysse's opinion, since he was young, hardworking, and known for his skill and knowledge.

"I hate to think about what might have happened if you'd come a little later, Olivia," he said. "But Jean will likely be tried in his home country now, and I'll be taking over caring for Mr. Darleys."

"Thank you. Hearing that makes me feel much better."

Bethany called over to them, so Arthur and Olivia left Ulysse and went into Bethany's room.

"Olivia, thank you so much for what you've done. Not only did you save me, my daughter, and Charlie, but you've even saved my husband. I will never forget what we owe you. I know you said you don't need a reward, but please, take this."

"No, thank you. I don't help people just to get rewards. I'm fine without, really. But thank you."

Bethany kept trying to say it was to show her gratitude, while Olivia kept refusing. Derek came in and said, "Mrs. Darleys, the guards are asking for you."

Once she left, Derek said to Olivia, "Mrs. Darleys won't be able to make time for you for a while, not with how busy the company is at the moment."

"I see. We'll be leaving then," said Olivia.

"Goodbye. You've done us a great service," he said, but thought, How dare you ruin my reputation! I was the one who introduced Doctor Jean to the family. A bumpkin apothecary shouldn't stick her nose in where it doesn't belong.

Underneath his veneer of courtesy, he was lashing out at Olivia. Her expression stiffened and she asked, "Derek, may I ask, who was it that brought Doctor Jean in?"

"My apologies, I cannot discuss company matters with a non-employee." There is absolutely no way I can let them know I met him at an illegal gambling den. I just hope he doesn't talk now that they've caught him.

"Right, well, I'll just be saying goodbye to Doctor Ulysse, then we'll be on our way," said Olivia.

"Of course."

When Derek remembered the gambling den, Olivia saw a brief flash of a cat

there.

Olivia and Arthur then went into Samuel's room.

Chapter 27: Snow the Cat

DOCTOR ULYSSE was checking Samuel's pulse. "Oh, Olivia. Are you leaving already? I'd hoped to talk to you a little about something, though," he said.

"We can talk some," she said, then she, Arthur, and Ulysse left the building so the three of them were alone.

"You already helped with the epidemic, now you're helping me out again. Thank you," said Ulysse. "There are surprisingly many doctors like Jean who get hung up on doing things their way. If a patient they're treating with bloodletting happens to get better on their own, they just assume it was their treatment and grow more confident."

"Oh."

"Olivia, I'm hoping to go visit your restaurant if I'm able to take a longer period off."

"I'd love to have you! And the area is full of medicinal plants and mushrooms. I'm sure there will be a plant that catches your interest."

"I am looking forward to the plants, but I'm also just hoping to try some of your home cooking."

"Please do. You're always welcome."

Arthur and Olivia left without saying anything about Derek. When they were going, Bethany again held out a leather pouch that looked like it probably had coins in it, but Olivia firmly refused.

Derek watched that exchange with an unamused expression, which made Olivia even more certain she didn't want to accept the money.

The moment she and Arthur were alone, he said, "Olivia, what's wrong? Something happened, didn't it?"

"Yeah. Derek apparently met Jean at an illegal gambling den. He was the one

who convinced the family to bring in Jean to treat Samuel."

"Huh. A gambling den? But even if we tell the guard about it, there's not much they can do if they can't get a lead on the location. Just wish we knew where it was."

"I actually think we might be able to manage something. When Derek remembered the location, there was a brief memory of a cat in the building. It's probably there to hunt rodents. It was white, with long fur and blue eyes. And quite large."

"Huh. And?"

"If that cat ever goes outside, then other cats will definitely know about it. Cats are very fussy about their territories. If I ask other cats where that white cat lives, we should be able to find the gambling den."

Arthur listened, nodding along in agreement. "Olivia. We're all the way out here in the capital. Might as well try and find the cat while we're here, don't you think?"

"Are you sure? I really don't want you to get fired from the pharmacy."

"I'll just work enough to make up for the time off when we get back."

"And I'll deliver so many medicinal herbs Freddy can't possibly fire you. As a thank you for always taking care of you."

"That's reassuring."

Arthur walked along with a smile, but inside, he was thinking about something else, about how he didn't like how that young, good-looking Doctor Ulysse smiled at Olivia. He's getting too friendly with my Olivia. Pretty sure he can find all sorts of good food here in the capital, he'd been thinking while he listened to their conversation.

But he wanted to avoid Olivia hearing those inner thoughts of his and thinking he was inconsiderate, so he focused on thinking about his dear horse Annie while they walked.

Olivia had already sensed Arthur's jealousy when she was talking to Ulysse. Right now, she couldn't get over how cute Arthur was for trying to hide that jealousy by furiously thinking about Annie while they walked.

The two of them went through the shopping district, bought some things while on the main street, then went down a side street. It had snowed in the capital too, but it was nothing compared to Marlais which had accumulated over fifteen inches. The snow that was here, though, had been pushed to either side of the roads and hardened into mounds as tough as ice, and the cobblestones were freezing.

As they walked down that cold cobblestone road, they saw a gray cat meander across their path. Olivia crouched so her eye level was lower and said, "Hello. We're looking for a white cat. Do you know it?"

The cat stopped and glanced at Olivia. Lots white cats.

"This one is big with long fur and blue eyes."

Uncommon human. The gray cat seemed to realize Olivia was sensing its thoughts. It approached, though wary, obviously on edge because of Arthur. Seeing that, Arthur slowly moved away from Olivia.

"Do you know the cat I mentioned?" asked Olivia.

That white cat friends with black cat.

"All right. Could you take us to the black cat it's friends with?"

Come.

The cat turned around and sauntered off. Arthur and Olivia followed behind it. Its paws moved quickly over the cobblestone ground until they came to an old multi-tenant building, where the cat went up the steps.

"Olivia, what now?" asked Arthur.

"It's all right. Cats are smarter than people think. If we just wait... There, see?"

The gray cat came back down the steps with a black cat behind it. They padded down the steps and over to Olivia. The black cat was very clearly on edge as it said to Olivia, What you do to Snow?

"The white cat's name is Snow? I want to go to the house Snow lives in. I promise we won't attack Snow or anything. Don't worry."

Fine. Snow this way.

The gray and black cats led the way, occasionally turning back and grumbling, *Humans slow*. They led Arthur and Olivia to a building even farther back from the main road than the back street they walked down. The buildings in the area were run-down, but this one looked like it was being maintained. The occupants must've had decent money.

This Snow house, said the black cat.

"All right. Thank you for showing us the way," said Olivia.

Want meat, said the gray cat. Apparently, it smelled the boiled chicken on Olivia. She pulled out the chicken she'd bought on the main street and tore it up a little before giving it to the cats.

Snow come, said the black cat.

"Hm?" Olivia looked up and saw a large, pure white cat looking down at them from the top of some stairs. She had no doubt that was the same cat that briefly flashed in Derek's memories. Once certain about that, she told Arthur, and they went back to their carriage.

"You sure it was the right cat?" he said.

"I am. I have no doubt that's the building with the illegal gambling den Derek went to."

"All right. I'll take over from here. I've got an in with the guard."

"Oh? That's amazing. You know someone in the capital's guard?"

"Don't look at me like that. It's not a big deal. You do remember how long I was a mercenary for, right?" he said with an uncomfortable smile while Olivia was looking at him with admiration. He was still smiling when Olivia kissed his cheek. "Well, anyway, just let me take care of it," he said.

Arthur drove the carriage to the main office of the capital's guard and went inside with Olivia. He had a quick exchange with the person at reception, and they were immediately led through to a room in the back. A man who appeared to be in charge came in and talked to Arthur in polite tones.

Olivia thought about how Arthur had been a famous mercenary, only to be

impressed with how famous he really was.

After talking for a little while with this seemingly high-ranking person, the two smiled and shook hands as Arthur said, "Right, I'll let you take care of it."



THAT evening, around ten o'clock, Arthur went to see what was happening at the building where the cat named Snow lived, with Olivia in tow.

The gambling den was in absolute chaos from the guards who had flooded into the building. Derek was among the customers who were dragged out. Olivia burst out laughing when she saw him.

Jean, the doctor Derek himself brought to the family, nearly killed his master, and yet, Derek was still only concerned about his own reputation. For some reason, Olivia just couldn't forgive him for that.

As they watched the bound men being dragged away, Snow came closer to their feet. It meowed, but, to Olivia, it sounded like it was saying, *Take with you*.

"Was your owner arrested?" she asked.

Owner taken away. Hate that place. Lots of men bully me. Painful.

Snow was a chatty cat.

Once Olivia took a closer look at Snow, she realized its fur was matted in several places. She would be hard-pressed to say Snow was lovingly cared for. Its long fuzzy coat made it look like a large cat, but she could feel Snow's spine when she stroked it. She could tell it was quite scrawny.

"We have another cat, a dog, goats, and horses at our house. If you're fine with that, you can come along," said Olivia.

I go, Snow replied immediately, then looked up at Arthur, wiggled its butt as it aimed, then leaped up at Arthur's chest.

Arthur was surprised, but quickly caught Snow in his arms. "Never had a cat do that to me. Hey, there. Do you like me? You want to come with me?"

"Meow!" I like you.

Snow purred in Arthur's arms. It leaned over and looked back at the building

only once, when they were just about to go around the corner.

Olivia could feel Snow's heart was filled with gentleness. Snow's memories showed one female employee at the gambling den who had been kind to it. She'd likely been arrested with the others.

But Snow's mind was already focusing on Arthur.

"Arthur's a very strong, kind human," Olivia said to Snow.

Good human. I like. Snow wagged its long, graceful tail, swiping against Arthur's arms. Arthur gently stroked Snow's back.

"Meow!" My good human.

"I think we're going to get along well, Snow," said Arthur.

And that was how Snow met Olivia and Arthur.

Chapter 28: Dale under Siege

SNOW was sleeping on the driver's seat of the carriage between Arthur's legs.

"Snow, aren't you cold? Wouldn't it be better to take a nice long nap inside the carriage?" asked Arthur.

"Meow." Leave me alone.

"The wind's pretty chilly, though."

"Meow." Here good.

Rude cat. Arthur my human, thought Annie.

Though Snow was responding to Arthur's sweet suggestions, she was insistent on doing things her way. Olivia couldn't help but smile at the heartwarming exchange, though Annie's thoughts that spilled in were not happy.

Annie the horse adored Arthur, and she apparently didn't like Snow, who was basking in Arthur's affection at the moment.

"Arthur, you're popular with both humans and animals," remarked Olivia. She didn't think she'd be bored during this carriage ride, not with listening to the cat and horse.

Every once in a while, Lara's horse Greta would say something utterly unconcerned like, *I no care*, and that, too, was funny.

Marlais wasn't that much farther.

"Lara, we're back. Thank you for taking care of things," called Olivia when they got home.

"Welcome ho— Oh, Arthur, why do you have a cat? It's so pretty!" exclaimed Lara.

"Hi, Lara. She belonged to someone in the capital, but they were arrested. And now she's our cat. Her name's Snow."

"A-Arrested...?"

"We'll tell you the whole story later," said Olivia. "First, I have to introduce Snow to the goats."

Olivia tried to take Snow from Arthur, but she said, *No!* and grabbed onto his shirt with her claws.

Rob was very welcoming to the cat. Big cat. Hi cat! Hello! I Rob!

Snow was uninterested. She didn't seem to dislike Rob, but also didn't show him any affection.

"I'll take her to Pete," said Arthur.

"I think she's basically your cat now, Arthur," said Olivia.

"Cats have always hated me. Snow's not a normal one."

"She's a smart one. She can tell you're kind."

Arthur smiled. Olivia held back a grin at how overjoyed he looked as the two of them went to the goat barn.

Thanks to Dale, Pete and Pepe were pretty used to cats now.

"Baa." Another cat came.

"Baa." Another cat.

That's all they said. They didn't seem too concerned.

"Olivia, Dale's not coming out," said Arthur once back inside.

"I saw him in a window upstairs when we came home."

"Did he say anything?"

"Well..."

She thought back to Dale's panic and smiled sadly. He was lying in a patch of sunlight upstairs and became so excited when he heard the sound of the carriage pulling up, thinking, *Come! They come back!*

But then he saw Snow in Arthur's arms as they came in, and it was suddenly all, Ack! Cat! Big cat! No! Cat no!

He ran off in a panic screaming that and hid somewhere.

When he did, he was thinking of the time the merchant's wagon left him behind and he was left alone walking along the road. Dale had apparently grown up in a city. He wasn't very good at hunting his own prey out in the wilds, so he was always hungry. Eventually, he'd come to a town or village and wander around to the humans looking for food.

The problem was, there were other cats living in these populated places, and they had their territories. No matter where he went, the boss cat would chase him away and try to bite him.

"I'll go look for Dale," said Olivia. "You give Snow some water. Then we need to bathe her."

Olivia went upstairs and searched for Dale. "Daaale. Where are you? Don't be afraid. You can come out."

No. Cat scary. Big cat scary.

"She's not scary. We felt bad for Snow because there was no human to care for her. I'm sure you and her will get along."

No get along. No need cat. Cat scary.

"There you are. That's where you were hiding."

No! No! I no go out!

Dale was in a corner under the bed. His body was all scrunched up, his eyes glinting yellow. He was normally very nonchalant, but it seemed he had quite the terrifying memories from his wandering times when he was chased, nearly bitten, and forced out of the boss cat's territory.

Olivia thought she generally understood what he felt, since his terror was leaking from his heart every once in a while, but she was still surprised at how extreme his fear of other cats was.

"Are you going to stay in this room forever?" she asked. "You know this house better than Snow does. It'd be nice if you could show her around."

No.

"All right. You can live here until you want to meet Snow. Do you want to eat dinner up here, too?"

Yeah.

"If you change your mind, just go say hello to Snow."

No.

Olivia gave a little sigh and left the room.

Arthur was sitting in front of the stove holding Snow after he washed her. Snow was busy licking her damp fur, and she was now as white as her namesake.

"How's Dale? He's not going to come say hi to Snow?" asked Arthur.

"Dale's afraid of cats. I'm sure he'll come out eventually. He's under the bed in our room right now. He said he wants to eat his dinner up there, too."

"Oh."

"When he was still a kitten, he ended up chased by every cat in charge. He's been through a lot. Cats can have scars on their hearts the same way we humans can."

"Is he going to be all right? Should we really leave him there like that?"

"It's fine. He'll come out eventually. Dale's smart and resilient."

After that, Dale spent a whole day in the upstairs bedroom. When he needed to do his business outside, he'd rush down the stairs at high speed and go out. Once he spent some time in the forest, he'd rush back up just as fast and bolt straight under the bed.

But then on the second and third day, he came out to the top of the stairs where he peered down from, eventually coming down a few steps until he was in the middle of the stairs.

Snow didn't seem to care about Dale. She was as at ease as if she'd lived there her entire life. She explored the gardens, peered into the forest, then came back and fell asleep in front of the stove.

Today, too, she walked around the garden, sniffing things. Olivia was with her

and looked upstairs to see Dale looking glumly down at Snow.

"Should be soon, now," said Olivia later.

"What do you mean?" asked Arthur.

"I was just thinking Dale will end his self-imposed besiegement soon."

"I feel kind of bad for him."

"Dale will do things at his own pace. Let's just keep an eye on it."

Snow would sometimes glance upstairs but seemed unconcerned.

She learned with one warning to stay in bed when there were customers in the restaurant. The moment anyone walked in, Snow would go over to Rob's bed in the corner of the kitchen and curl up. And Dale would watch her from the top of the stairs.

"Olivia, Dale's come out of the bedroom," said Arthur one day.

"Oh, you're right. Just pretend like nothing's out of the ordinary. If you call his name or something, he'll probably just go straight back under the bed. He's got his pride, after all."

"Seems cats and humans have a lot in common."

"They do. They're full of personality."

Dale spent more and more time looking down from the top of the stairs but didn't seem to have the courage to actually come down.

A week passed since Snow came, then ten days. The customers for the day had gone home, and Olivia and the others had finished eating their dinner as well. Lara had already gone to the outbuilding.

Olivia was chopping dried medicinal herbs in the kitchen. Arthur was searching for the drafty cracks in the restaurant walls and filling them in with clay plaster. "Winter dries out the wood which makes cracks," he said.

"Arthur, look," said Olivia as she indicated with her eyes towards Dale who was coming down the stairs, standing off against Snow, his back arched like a bow and his tail puffed up like a bottle brush.

Bed mine! thought Dale.

Huh? thought Snow.
That my bed!
Come.
My bed!
Come.
You no bite me?
I no bite.
You no bully me?
I no bully.
Really?
Really.

Dale turned himself diagonal to Snow, moved towards her, then away again, then back towards her, and repeat. Snow, lying in Rob's bed, watched Dale calmly, her long tail slowly swaying like she was waiting for Dale.

Eventually Dale booped his nose against Snow's, then pushed his head against hers.

Come, thought Snow, and Dale hesitantly settled between Snow's paws. She narrowed her eyes and started licking his head. He closed his eyes in enjoyment.

The two purred together. Arthur and Olivia nearly wanted to burst into applause when they saw it, but they didn't want to scare the now-at-ease cats, so they just put their hands together.

"I'm so glad," said Olivia.

"Yeah, good thing it turned out like this," said Arthur.

No bed for me, said Rob.

"What?" replied Olivia. "Oh, you're right. Your bed is full now."

"Rob, tomorrow I'll make you a new bed," said Arthur. "Think you can hold on just for this one night?"

Rob whined. No bed for me.

"I'll get you a blanket, Rob," said Olivia. "Could you sleep in front of the stove, just tonight?"

All right.

The next day, Arthur, who loved working with his hands, made another bed for Rob, the same size as the one he had before, and Olivia lined it with a blanket. Rob stepped into it, seeming relieved to finally have a bed, and curled up. Dale immediately joined him in the bed, followed by Snow. Rob had to really pull in his paws in order for them all to lay down.

"Well, that was a failure," laughed Arthur. "I should've made the bed one size bigger."

"Kind of looks like it. Sorry to ask, but do you mind making another one?"

"Not at all."

"I'm so glad I have such a kind husband."

"Bit overboard to say that just for making a box. It's nothing."

Mates close.

Olivia looked back when she heard Dale's thought. He was practically glued to Snow's side and had turned just his head to look at her and Arthur.

Chapter 29: Beef Soup and the Golden Deer

IT was snowing again. Winter was in full swing in Marlais.

Olivia and Lara got in the habit of closing the barn door just before the sun went down every day. The high windows they left open in summer were closed now and wouldn't open again until spring.

They'd gathered all the sticks in the area and piled them up around the barn until they reached the roof. Those, along with the snow that piled on top, would prevent any of the chilly wind from getting in the barn.

The people of Marlais had been busy for months with preparation for winter. Olivia, too, had prepared, with deep holes she'd dug in the back garden to store vegetables in.

"Lara, how are your studies for the apothecary exam going?" asked Olivia one day.

"Good! I'm just marching on each day. I actually had something I wanted to ask you, Olivia."

"What is it?"

"Could I maybe live here for another year? Regardless of whether I pass or not?"

"I'd love to have you stay, but what about Colin? Perhaps it would be a good idea to ask what he thinks, since the two of you are together."

"About that..." said Lara, looking a bit embarrassed. "Colin said he doesn't mind. Neither of us are really where we want to be yet. We decided we should both focus on our own goals before we actually settle down together. We're just going to work hard and keep things as they are. Besides, I want to learn how to cook more from you."

"I can teach you as much about cooking as you like. Oh, I'm so happy you're going to be here longer!" Olivia rejoiced.

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"Thank you for letting me stay!"

"So, I take it you and Colin are going to live together someday?"

"Yep!"
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Even though Lara had been forced to work herself to the bone after her parents died, she wasn't afraid of people. Maybe it was because she'd been raised with such love before that. Olivia had been afraid of people until she met Jenkins and Marguerite, the people who raised her. Whenever she thought back to the little girl she was, who could only feel comfortable around plants and animals because they never lied, she wanted to comfort her and tell her she did a good job for trying so hard.

Then that little girl met Olivia's grandparents, people who told no lies, and then eventually Arthur. After that, she met Lara.

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"They're blessings," said Olivia.
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The soup of the day that day was beef with winter vegetables. Olivia marinated the beef in an abundance of fragrant herbs, then seared it in a pan with butter, along with the vegetables. This was then simmered with a bundle of bay leaves, thyme, and parsley stalks, with dumplings added at the very end.

It was a fragrant soup, especially with the dollop of butter added on top right before it was served to the customer. People loved a rich soup to protect themselves from the harsh cold of winter.

"Mm, smells amazing," said Lara.

"You can grow a bay tree when you have your own home," said Olivia. "If you grow it in a pot, you can bring it inside during winter. It's so sturdy, it's fine growing inside, too. And parsley is hardy, too. You can grow plenty of that, then dry it out and use it all year round."

"Right. Bay tree and parsley. I'll remember that." Lara was smiling until that point, but then her expression turned serious, and she lowered her head. "Olivia, you're the sister of my heart. You helped me even though I didn't ask

[&]quot;Huh?" said Lara. "What are?"

[&]quot;Oh, it's nothing. I'm just talking to myself."

for it. You've been so kind to me. I never thought there was anyone in the world like you."

"But I'm the one who should thank you, Lara."

"I just want to be of some use to you, Olivia."

"You already do plenty. It's thanks to you I can leave the house without worrying about the restaurant or the animals."

"I want to do more, though."

"Well, I appreciate it."

Lara was an honest person; her heart always matched her words. There weren't many people like that. To Olivia, meeting Lara was as much of a blessing as it would be to find a clear spring of water when you were dying of thirst.

At lunchtime, customers came in, their cheeks and noses red from the cold, and ate their soup while dipping their bread in it.

"Mm, that's good. Really warms the body," said one.

"Still haven't broken into the dried veggies, though, I see, Olivia," said another.

"I like dried veg," said the first.

"I remember whenever the restaurant started getting into the dried veg stock, Jenkins would keep saying, 'Wish spring'd come soon.'"

"Then Marguerite would chide him for complaining about the veggies."

"I remember that. Those were the times."

Olivia couldn't help smiling at the memories as she listened to the customers chatting while she served the soup. Jenkins, her grandfather, wasn't fond of dried vegetables, and her grandmother would scold him whenever he complained.

Olivia always liked the texture and sweetness of them, though, so her grandmother would always cut off any argument about it with, "Well, Olivia always eats her soup without complaining."

The customers went back to eating their soup and bread, chuckling as they talked about the past.

Olivia exercised the horses with Lara during her break after the customers left. They brought out the horses and walked them around, trying to get them to crunch down as much of the snow as they could. The snow on the streets always melted first where it'd been stepped on.

Her grandfather used to always say, "Spring springs from where your feet touch the snow." Her grandmother would reply with, "You just like that saying, don't you?" They really did get along very well.

Later that night, Olivia found herself suddenly awake sensing emotions she hadn't felt in a long time. She slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Arthur, but his eyes opened immediately, likely because of his long years as a mercenary.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Someone's here. I think it's him, the deer."

"What? He came back? I want to see him, too."

"You can come with me."

They both took off their pajamas and threw on several layers of clothes despite how hurried they felt, then went downstairs. They left out the back door since they thought Lara might worry if she heard the bell above the front door in the middle of the night.

The crescent moon shone crisply through the freezing air. They shivered in spite of all their layers.

With nothing in her head except how much she wanted to see the golden deer, Olivia crunched across the hardened snow to the forest. Arthur watched her go for a moment, then followed quickly behind.

They entered the forest and walked for a while to find the golden deer standing amongst the trees. He really did look carved from gold as he stood there, bathed in moonlight.

Olivia's body moved on its own. She rushed across the snow, crunch, crunch,

crunch, but then remembered the golden deer didn't like the smell of humans and stopped her outstretched arms.

"You came back," she said.

Humans saw me. Many hunters came.

"Oh, someone saw you again?"

I live in this forest again.

"I'm so happy I get to see you."

The deer looked at Arthur. Mate.

"Yes. We're living happily together," said Olivia.

The deer nuzzled his neck against her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "You'll smell like human."

Sure.

Olivia slowly brought her hand to the deer's neck, feeling his strong heat. She ran her hand down his neck and back, then touched his antlers. When they'd separated, they had been encased in soft, blood-rich skin. They were warm when she touched them then, but now they were as hard and cold as bone.

"You're going to live in this forest again?" she asked.

Forest peaceful. Live here.

"I hope it stays peaceful forever."

The golden deer didn't reply. He walked over to Arthur, who was a little way off, surprising him. He didn't move though, instead facing him head-on.



Mates be close for long time. Have child, come show me, said the deer, staring straight into Arthur's eyes, then it went back into the forest.

Arthur watched him go, overwhelmed by his presence.

"I can't believe he showed any interest in someone other than me," said Olivia.

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"He said something, didn't he? What was it?"
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Their gloved hands entwined. Those gloves were actually a wedding present from the wife of one of Olivia's regular customers, Joshua. They were knit from high-quality wool, and both Arthur and Olivia treasured them. Olivia's gloves had a white pattern of snow on a base of dark green, while Arthur's had the same snow pattern on a base of brown.

They walked in silence for a while, and a shadow about the size of a cat moved through the trees ahead of them. Arthur jerked. The shadow was flying, but there was no sound of wings despite its size.

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"It's a snowy owl," said Olivia.
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"They don't come until it gets very cold. They spend their winters here, coming from somewhere that gets even colder. They like the cold, but I guess winters in the north are just too much."

[&]quot;Telling us to live happily together forever."

[&]quot;That's it?"

[&]quot;He also said that if we have children, to come introduce them to him."

[&]quot;Oh. He wants to meet our kids if we have any?"

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;Urgh, it's freezing. We should head back."

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;Never seen one in this forest before."

[&]quot;This is where they go to get away from the cold?" Arthur asked, incredulous.

[&]quot;Seems so."

"There are all sorts of birds that leave Marlais to get away from the cold here. Surprised to hear there are some birds who think the cold here is just right."

"It's interesting, isn't it? We only notice them because we always live here. It really makes you notice the changing of seasons when you see how the animals who live in the forest also change."

Soup Forest came into view.

"Oh, yeah," said Olivia. "Lara told me this morning she's going to be staying with us for a little longer."

"Yeah?"

"I'm happy. But I think the parting will be all the more painful the longer she lives here."

"We might have a baby around the time she leaves."

"Maybe."

"I'm happy so long as I have you, Olivia."

"I'm happy having you, too."

They arrived back home, thoroughly brushed the snow from their shoes, and went inside.

"I'm freezing," said Arthur.

"Me too. But you're always so warm. We'll warm up quickly."

"And your feet are always cold. You can just warm them on me."

"It's nice to be able to go to bed without a hot water bottle."

"Glad I can be of service," he chuckled.

They went upstairs, and Olivia heard Dale, in the dark corner of the kitchen behind them, murmuring, *Mates, close*. There was also Snow complaining, *Door open, make cold,* as well as Rob muttering half asleep, *Running fun*.

The two cats and one large dog slept curled together in the large box Arthur had recently made for them. The two other ones they weren't using would probably turn into individual beds for them once spring came.

Olivia got into bed and fell asleep while thinking, Maybe I'll knit Arthur a sweater before winter ends.

Chapter 30: The Health Tonic

OLIVIA caught a cold, which didn't happen often.

Her grandmother would always say, "The secret to health is a stomach seventy percent full and sleep aplenty," warning against overeating and not sleeping enough. Olivia was careful to stick to that advice, which meant she was rarely laid up in bed with an illness. Until now.

"Olivia, how are you doing?" asked Arthur.

"My throat hurts. It should go away with some rest, though."

"It's 'cause you did all that traveling in the snow."

"I had no choice. Bobby at the poultry farm is getting on in years. A simple cold could be the end for him."

Olivia's face was flushed red from the fever, only her face poking out from beneath the heavy, winter blanket. Arthur wanted to stay with her, but she refused to let him stay since it wouldn't be good if both of them caught this bug.

"You need to go to work," she said.

"I know. Well, I'm off then. I'll come home as early as possible. You just stay there and rest."

"I will. Have a nice day, Arthur." She brought just her hand out from under the blanket to wave, then closed her eyes again. She'd been pretending she felt better than she did, but groaned in pain from her headache the moment she was alone.

Every joint in her body ached. She tried having some of the bitter potatoes that'd worked so well on the illness going around before, but it didn't seem to have any effect on this cold.

"Grandma said being sick can be a chance for learning, so long as it doesn't kill

you. She was right. It's this bad for someone as young as me. I can't imagine how horrible it must have been for Bobby."

Bobby, the poultry farmer, had helped his son with work even after he caught the cold. They only called Olivia in once he developed a wet cough.

He had a high fever, and his cough was quite bad. When she was checking up on him, she remembered feeling uneasy about whether or not she would be as filled with vitality at his age as he was.

A few days after her house call with him, she started having the same wet cough. She immediately realized she'd caught his cold. They sent word to her that Bobby had recovered, but she was only getting worse and worse.

Lara was handling the restaurant, and all the regular customers said things like, "It's not often Olivia ends up ill in bed," or "I hope it doesn't take a turn for the worse."

Olivia had absolutely no appetite but was constantly drinking the broth Lara regularly brought up for her and forcing herself to eat wheat porridge. She couldn't even get herself to finish one child-sized bowl. Her stomach ached, and breathing was painful.

Arthur came home that night, but Olivia's fever had only gotten worse by then, leaving her doing nothing but huffing as she struggled to breathe. She couldn't even really respond to his questions.

I have to reply, Arthur's trying to talk to me, but her body felt like she was sinking in mud. She couldn't sleep, but she was so tired.

Arthur was looking at her with such concern that she reached out to touch his cheek. "You're...cold," she said.

"I'm not cold. You just have a really bad fever."

Arthur's heart was wide open. Olivia could feel the sorrow and concern flowing from him. He held her hot hand in both of his and pressed it against his cheek as he said something.

Olivia had told him to sleep in the room next to this one until her cold went away, but she remembered vaguely wondering why he was with her late into the night when she was sick.

Breathing was painful, and inside her chest there was a gurgling sound, so Olivia tried to roll on her side. Arthur immediately seemed to guess what she wanted and gently moved her onto her side before rubbing her back. And he was saying something again.

What is he saying? she wondered.

Just as she was falling into sleep, her ears picked up what it was: "Mum, Dad, Liddie, please help her. I don't even care if you need to take time off my life, just save her."

Finally understanding what Arthur kept saying, Olivia's heart ached. She caught snippets of Arthur's memories, flashing in and out, from when he was a boy and watched over his entire family when they were sick, all by himself.

He'd cared for them, feeling hopeless. He didn't even know how to cook anything decent, so he simply boiled vegetables until they were soft, seasoned them with a bit of salt, and fed that to his family.

"I'll... I'll be...fine," said Olivia.

"Olivia! You're awake? Are you thirsty? Do you need me to massage anywhere?"

"I'll...be fine."

She felt bad for Arthur who was so concerned for her he couldn't even sleep, worried she might leave him like his family had before. Olivia reached out with both hands and cupped his face.

"What is it? You want me to do something?" he asked.

She just loved him so much. She gave a small shake of her head and closed her eyes. Her fever wasn't showing any signs of going away, and she had odd dreams.

She dreamed of herself listening to a cat telling her everything it'd seen, or listening to the sparrows tell her how they found delicious grass seed, or listening to the horses telling each other how they wanted to run more.

The animals were always kind to Olivia, if sometimes curt.

For the first time in a long time, she dreamed about her childhood, how she couldn't make friends with humans, but how she couldn't join ranks with the animals either, and it made her think she didn't belong anywhere.

Night came, and Arthur returned from work. He kissed Olivia's brow over and over, saying, "Get better. Get better. You will get better," almost like it was a spell he could cast.

"I'll...be...fine," she replied in a quiet voice, but Arthur's sorrow was so great it overwhelmed everything.

Three days later, Olivia's body finally started to fight off the cold.

Her fever started going down on the fourth day, and the pain in her joints receded. She could finally taste food again and even sit up.

By the end of the fifth day, she tottered downstairs and called Lara, who was reading one of Olivia's grandmother's books. "Lara," she said.

"Olivia! Should you be out of bed?"

"It's all right. I'm over the worst of it. Lara, could I borrow that book for a moment?" She took the book, moved a chair in front of the stove in the kitchen, and flipped through the pages.

"What are you looking for?"

"A recipe for a health tonic. My grandmother said it's a good idea to start drinking it once you're in your forties, but... Hm, I know it's in here somewhere..."

"Health tonic? I want to know about this, too."

"Oh, here it is. This is it for sure. Lara, could you try making this for me?"

"Leave it to me!"

Lara took the recipe upstairs to what used to be Olivia's room, found the dried medicinal herbs needed from the cabinet packed full of them, then came back down to the kitchen.

"So, I just have to measure these herbs on the scales and toss them in a pot?" she asked.

"Yep. It's just a bit tedious to make since it requires many different kinds."

"Don't be silly. This is nothing for me!"

Rob had his head on Olivia's knee the whole time, his tail wagging furiously.

Snow bounced up into her lap and purred, Been long.

Dale nipped Olivia's ankles, saying, You gone, I sad. It did hurt a tiny bit.

Eventually, the pot started to bubble, and the three animals ran from the kitchen into the restaurant saying, *Ew, smell so bad, bad smell.*

"I'm sorry, it does smell," said Olivia.

"And dogs and cats have a strong sense of smell," said Lara. "Right, so, it's been simmering for just about the twenty minutes it says in the recipe. Want to try some?"

"Yep. I felt so bad for how sad Arthur was when I was stuck in bed."

"I know what you mean. It almost seemed like his world was ending. It made me wonder if I'd end up making Colin that sad, someday."

"His world was ending... Yeah, that's exactly what he seemed like. I'm going to take this tonic every day from now on and be very careful, so I don't get another cold like that."

"Please do."

Olivia pinched her nose and downed the tonic in one go. "Urgh. That's not nice. But my grandparents drank this every day, morning and night, and they lived a long life."

"Maybe I'll try it. Urk. It's bitter. And kind of...grassy."

"Yeah. You did a good job making it. It tastes just like the tonic my grandmother would drink."

"By the way, Olivia, something weird happened. There were deer tracks in the snow in the garden every morning when you were sick."

"Deer tracks?" Olivia thought it must be the golden deer, though she obviously couldn't say that to Lara.

"It looked like this deer came every single night. And it must've been a pretty big one, based on the size of the tracks. I wonder what that's about."

"I don't know. Though, I imagine the deer will stop coming."

"Why do you think that?"

"I just have a feeling."

That evening, the customers who came to the restaurant would ask about the smell, and quite a few of them wanted to try it for themselves once Lara explained it was a health tonic.

"Would you stick some in a flask for me? How much you charging? Really? That's cheap. Think I'll buy more next time I come, too," said one.

"This is the one Marguerite and Jenkins used to drink all the time, isn't it? I remember that smell," said another.

"Those two were always in good health up until the day they traveled to God's garden. I want to be like that, too."

"If I bring you bottles tomorrow, will you sell me the tonic? I want to buy extra for the missus."

Lara was very insistent that it tasted terrible, but the customers, primarily middle-aged or older, just said, "I don't care about taste as long as it works," and said they'd still buy it even after having a taste test.

Soup Forest was never lacking in customers, not with how popular its soup, sides, and health tonic was.

One day, they once again sold out of both soup and tonic. Olivia decided to close the restaurant a little early and spend the time knitting a sweater for Arthur.

"Olivia, I'm home," he called when he came back.

"Hello, Arthur. Dinner will be ready soon."

"Were you knitting? If you're free to knit, you should be lying down."

"I'm fine. I'm completely back to normal."

"You work too much."

Olivia looked back from where she was reheating the soup and placed a hand on either side of Arthur's face while he was trying to see what she'd had in her hands.

"What?" asked Arthur.

"Every day I've been drinking the tonic my grandparents used to have."

"Are you feeling sick again?"

"No. It's for your general health. I'm going to outlive you, so I never make you feel sad."

Arthur pulled her into a hug as she looked up at him. "I hope you do just that. I definitely want you to outlive me."

"I know."

"I don't ever want you to worry me like that again."

"I won't."

"And give me some of that tonic, too."

"Sure, but I recommend having it with dinner."

"I can handle it if you can." He took a swig. "Urgh. Ack. It's like my whole mouth is filled with grass. And it's bitter. And sour!"

"I told you. Here. It's a bit better if you put some honey in your mouth."

Olivia put the spoonful of honey in Arthur's mouth, and he pushed it around. Even once they started eating, he kept grumbling, "Should've waited till after dinner."

For some reason, the foul-tasting tonic exploded in popularity and customers brought empty bottles whenever they visited Soup Forest.

Olivia, having fully recovered from her cold, was one day simmering the tonic in a large pot. She would pass it through a sieve and use a funnel to pour it into the bottles the customers brought.

Arthur frowned at this, saying she was only working more now, even though she'd just recovered from her illness, but Olivia insisted she wasn't pushing herself. "Besides," she said, "I never manage to use all the medicinal herbs I dry and store each year. I just end up throwing them out. It's good that I can use them like this. They start to lose their potency after summer, even being dried." Then she busily went to make the tonic.

The so-called Soup Forest Tonic sold well, the primary buyers being the restaurant's regulars, giving Olivia an unexpected income.

"Lara, use this to buy something," she said one day.

"Huh, a gold coin? Are you sure?"

"Yep. You helped make the tonic, after all."

"Thank you! I'm going to save this and use it to buy furniture when Colin and I move in together."

"Good idea. Once the snow melts, we'll go out together and forage for more medicinal herbs, then we will make lots of the tonic again."

"All right!"

Snow and Dale were complaining every day.

Gross.

Bad smell.

Rob had a better nose than the cats and never came back into the kitchen since the first day. Lately, he'd run away to some corner the minute they started boiling the tonic. Sometimes he'd even go out into the cold to escape.

Olivia's regular customers were all in good health that winter. No one died of contagious illnesses, and no one even ended up laid up in bed for a long time. They would tell each other, "I'm certain it's 'cause of that tonic," and some never stopped saying, "I want to keep buying it even once spring comes."

The goats Pete and Pepe actually seemed to like the smell of the tonic. If Olivia went to the goat barn after making it, they would baa at her and say, *Smell good*, and, *Tasty smell*, as they sniffed her.

Every morning since Olivia recovered from her cold, the first thing she did was go out in the garden and look for hoofprints, but there were never any.

"He must have been concerned for me," she murmured.

Even when I was a child and thought I didn't belong anywhere, there might have been animals like him who cared about me.

She'd never realized that before.

Chapter 31: Greta's Winter Blanket and the Pot Customer

IT got cold in Marlais in December. Arthur quickly chopped wood, which Olivia steadily used up in the stove.

"It's done! Now Greta can be both warm and cute!" said Olivia one day, looking with satisfaction at the horse blanket she held up in her hands. It was for Lara's horse, Greta, and made of a patchwork of square pieces of cloth cut from old clothes. It was filled with a thin lining of cotton and even had a backing to it.

"Thank you for making one for Greta, too!" exclaimed Lara. "You didn't have to. I'm sure she would've been fine as she was, but it does make me happy. Thank you so much!"

"Well, Annie has her fancy horse blanket, while Greta only has an old throw. I'm sure Greta wished she could be as cute as Annie."

"Maybe. I wonder if horses get envious like that."

"Oh, they do."



ON the first day of winter, Lara and Olivia had gone to change out the straw laid on the floor of the horse barn, where they heard the horses have a lengthy back-and-forth of neighs and whinnies.

It was nothing but noise to Lara, but Olivia could hear what they were talking about.

Olivia made me clothes. My clothes cute, said Annie, bragging to Greta about her horse blanket.

This warm. I no need clothes, said Greta, brushing off what Annie said by claiming she was satisfied.

That's when Olivia realized she'd let something slip because she'd been so busy with other things. She had made a warm horse blanket for Annie, but nothing for Greta, and now she felt bad that Greta only had an old throw blanket.

I want to let Lara study as much as she possibly can, so I'll just go ahead and sew Greta a new horse blanket, she thought. She only worked on it after Lara had gone to the outbuilding, since she thought Lara would feel bad about making Olivia do it and insist things were fine as they were if she found out she was working on it.

The cloth for the patchwork came from the large box overflowing with cloth. Olivia stared into the box and took out squares of fabric as she thought about a color scheme.

The cloth was from her old clothing as a child or used-up pieces from her grandparents' clothes, garments that held a lot of memories. She thought of things that happened when she was wearing those clothes or what her grandparents said to her when they were cutting up the old cloth to be used for patches.

One vivid red cloth had been the lining of a coat Marguerite had when she'd worked as an apothecary for Louise in the neighboring kingdom. "I was planning on giving it to you once you'd gotten big enough, but the bugs got to it at some point," her grandmother had said, seeming a little sad. "Bit of a shame, but we'll use it for patches."

A navy cloth was from Jenkins's uniform when he was a knight. "It was a training uniform from when I was young. I got the cuffs and elbows fixed so many times, but one day, the maid told me, 'Sir, this is at the end of its life.'" Olivia's grandfather had been whittling skewers for drying mushrooms when he told her that.

"Oh, and this one..." said Olivia, picking up a high-quality yellow cloth. It had been a sundress she'd received as a gift for her tenth birthday. Her grandmother had spent so much time sewing it.

"Once you grow out of this dress," she'd said, "set it aside and give it to your daughter."

Olivia treasured it. But, one day, she went running into the forest chasing after a bright blue butterfly, and the dress caught on some thorns. By the time she'd realized what she'd done, the front had already been torn wide open.

She cried all the way home, but her grandmother said, "Don't cry, Olivia. I'll sew it back up. You can wear it as everyday clothing, and then, once you can't wear it anymore, we'll put it in the patchwork box."

"Oh, it brings back memories every single time I look in here. But I need to sew, not get lost down memory lane. What color suits Greta?"

Annie was a warm brown color, so Olivia had made her blanket a base of green with pops of yellow, brown, and white.

"Greta's a dark, dark brown, nearly black, so maybe I'll do a red base."

There were burning crimsons, deep burgundies, and the russet color of fallen leaves. The broad palette of reds with white turned into a lovely color combination for a horse blanket.

She diagonally cut an old sheet into strips to make bias tape which she sewed around the edges of the blanket, then attached a long cord to the section that would fall at Greta's middle. It was the sort of horse blanket that you tied up on the left flank of the horse.

"I wonder if Greta will like it," said Olivia, once finished.

"I'm sure she will," said Lara. "Should we go put it on her now?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Lara had seemed the happiest out of everyone when she wondered if horses got envious, and that made Olivia smile.

The two of them went out to the barn. Dale, Snow, and Rob followed like there was no reason they wouldn't.

"Greta, Olivia made you a horse blanket. Want to put it on?" asked Lara.

"Neeeeigh!" But this warm.

Though Greta was essentially saying she didn't actually need it, Olivia could feel happiness flowing into her from the horse. She was a bit of a prideful

princess, it seemed.

The three onlookers were observing the situation from their feet.

Rob said, I no need that.

Snow said, Greta not upfront.

Dale said, Clothes scary.

Olivia had to bite her lip to keep herself from laughing at the three of them chattering, especially from Dale's, *Clothes scary*, comment. Dale had a particularly delicate ego which would likely be bruised if Olivia laughed.

Annie, who had been bragging about her own horse coat to Greta, was acting completely unconcerned with the entire thing. Olivia was impressed by the wide range of emotions horses have. They were practically like human girls.

"Right, we'll probably have customers starting to come soon," said Olivia.

"And today's soup is my favorite. It's so sweet and yummy," said Lara.

It was pumpkin soup. The pumpkins would start going bad if they didn't use them up soon. Olivia rehydrated dried clams in warm water, then simmered the water she got from soaking the clams with chicken stock and onions she sautéed with butter. The chicken stock, made from a chicken carcass, suited both the clams and the pumpkin well.

The soup was a hit at Soup Forest amongst both men and women for the pumpkin that crumbled at a touch, the clams with their hearty texture, the sweet onion, and the aroma of butter.

The bell above the door jingled and a man Olivia had never seen before came in. And, for some reason, he was carrying a pot.

"Hello. Feel free to sit anywhere that's open," said Olivia.

"Uh, actually, I didn't come to eat. I was hoping you might sell me some soup. Or do you not sell it in that manner?"

"I do. I'll go ahead and put the soup in your pot then, yeah? How many bowls' worth would you like?"

"Um, well, there are three people in my home, and I have made the trip out

here, so may I have six servings?"

"Of course. Take a seat here and wait a moment. Lara, could you give him some tea?"

"Yep!"

Lara served him a cup of today's tea, apple, and Olivia went to put the soup in the pot. Seven servings, even though he'd asked for six. *It might spill in the carriage like this...* she thought. She hated the idea of the soup she worked so hard to make going to waste, so she put the lid on the pot then wrapped twine around it to keep the lid down.

"Here you go. It shouldn't go splat all over the carriage even if it jerks and tilts about," she said, bringing the pot back.

"Oh, you tied it down for me. Thank you. I also have a question. What is it that the other customers are getting in those bottles?"

"It's a health tonic. My grandmother was an apothecary. She drank it every morning and night and lived a long life. The customers who knew about that wanted me to sell them the tonic."

"A health tonic? That sounds wonderful. Right, I'd also like to purchase this tonic. Though, I have no bottles. Will that be a problem?"

"I have empty bottles. Here you are. The tonic does taste very bad, though."

"It's medicine. I wouldn't expect it to taste nice."

"Oh, all right. I do recommend drinking it after eating. It's quite bitter and grassy."

"Thank you for the advice."

With that, the seemingly wealthy man of around thirty took his soup and tonic and left.

"Olivia, was that someone from Marlowe's villa district?" asked Lara.

"I'm not sure."

Their conversation ended there, and the man slipped from Olivia's thoughts.

But three days later, he returned with his pot.

"Hello," said Olivia. "Would you like soup?"

"Yes, I would. And I thought I'd also like to eat here first," he said.

"Of course. Please take a seat here."

"That pumpkin soup from before was wonderful. And the tonic tasted like it really did work."

Olivia smiled wryly at the considerate wording, "It tasted like it works," and served the man some tea. Apple, again today.

"I noticed last time, but this tea has an apple aroma, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes. I mix dried apple skin in with the tea leaves."

"And you don't charge your customers for it?"

"No. It's free for anyone who purchases food."

"Rather generous."

Is it? wondered Olivia as she gave a polite smile and took the pot from him. "How many slices of bread would you like?" she asked.

"Two, please."

The soup of the day was duck soup. Olivia first nicely browned the duck meat, then simmered it with loads of winter vegetables. She then added plenty of green onions, and the soft green onions entwined with the duck meat, making a tasty soup that warmed you from the inside out.

The side was a crudo dish made of raw trout (previously frozen), dried celery, onion, and carrot.

Olivia often went fishing now that the bears were asleep for winter. She'd hang the trout out the second-floor window to freeze overnight, then thaw them the next day to use in food. Marguerite drilled into her that you must not eat river fish raw, they must either be cooked or frozen first, and Olivia always followed that rule.

The man who brought the pot looked satisfied as he finished his lunch, then paid for the pot of duck soup and some tonic and left.

Chapter 32: The McCrossin Family's Cough

THE pot man came very early the next morning to Soup Forest.

"Is something wrong?" asked Olivia after rushing to poke her head out of the kitchen.

Pot man came inside looking very flustered. "I'm sorry to bother you this early. Are you an apothecary?"

"I am. Well, I've been given permission by a royal apothecary to call myself one."

"I hate to ask this of you, but could you come visit my house? My mother is struggling to breathe, but all the Marlowe doctors have given up hope and simply give her sleep medicine. I just want to ease her suffering. This probably isn't enough information to explain to you, is it?"

"I'll come right now. How exactly is she unwell? I'll bring different medicines depending on the symptoms."

Pot man rattled off his mother's symptoms. While he did, Snow walked up to him, her tail held high, sniffed the leg of his trousers, then said, *Ew*. With nothing more, she went back to her bed. Rob knew not to come out at times like this since Olivia didn't want him to startle the customers, but he was watching while wagging his tail. Dale hadn't left the bed.

"My parents are living with me, currently. We recently moved here as my father was urged to consider a change of location to improve his condition. He's improved significantly since the move, but my mother..."

"Right now, it's just your mother who's unwell?"

"Yes. She started complaining about her chest hurting sometime after we moved. This morning, she seems to be in quite some pain, saying she can't breathe very well. My father's looking after her right now."

Olivia hurried upstairs as she listened.

"What's wrong, Olivia?" asked Arthur.

"There's a patient. I'm going to the Marlowe villas."

"All right. I'll meet up with you around the time you finish checking them out."

Since Arthur worked in Marlowe, that would mean making him do two trips to the city and back in one day, but Olivia knew how much of a worrywart he was, so she just smiled and said, "Thank you."

The pot man introduced himself as Wilson McCrossin. He looked to be around thirty, had cherry-brown hair, warm brown eyes, and a somewhat slim build.

They arrived at his home, and he showed Olivia to the room where his mother was sleeping, and her eyes went wide the moment she stepped in.

Bookcases covered every single inch of wall space, and each shelf was packed full of books. Books that couldn't fit on the shelves were in piles that hid the floor from sight, leaving just a narrow path for people to get through.

Wilson didn't even say, "I'm sorry for the mess," or, "Watch your step," which told Olivia this was a completely normal sight for his family.

He went to the bed and helped his mother sit up. She seemed to be breathing painfully.

"Hello, my name is Olivia. I've come to check up on you."

"Thank you," said the woman. Huh, a young woman. Can she handle this? The woman, who appeared to be in her fifties, whispered uneasily in her mind.

"First, I'd like to take a look at your chest," said Olivia. She drew her cylindrical stethoscope from her satchel and warmed it in her hand. She opened the front of the woman's nightgown and gently pressed the stethoscope to her chest. Olivia didn't hear fluid, but the breathing sounded fast and painful.

"I'm going to put a damp cloth on your chest. It'll be chilly at first, but it'll warm up quickly," said Olivia. She then asked Wilson for a bottle of hot water and applied an ointment to thin strips of gauze while he got that ready. The ointment was a mix of beeswax and medicinal herbs, softened with olive oil.

While she was doing that, she opened up her senses to catch what Wilson's

mother was feeling.

"That smells nice," said the woman.

"It does, doesn't it? I sometimes put it on my hands. It works great when your hands are all dry and cracked."

"Is that so?" The woman also thought, It smells lovely. It makes me feel refreshed.

Based on what Olivia was hearing of her thoughts, she seemed to like the damp gauze. The air in the room was heavy, partially from the basin in front of the fire without a lid on it.

The piles of books on the floor also meant they likely weren't properly cleaning the room. Olivia could see piles of dust. *I wonder if it's like that...* she thought, casting her eyes casually about the room, wondering what she should do.

She'd once been to a patient who'd had the same symptoms. She tried all sorts of things, but the patient's breathing never got better in the slightest. It was nearly a year before they realized the illness was being caused by black mold growing beneath the wallpaper in the room.

They eventually had to tear down all the wallpaper, dry out the room, then put up new wallpaper, though they ended up selling the house and moving in the end. They said that no matter what they did, they couldn't stop the black mold from growing underneath the wallpaper or behind the bookcases.

I wonder if there's black mold growing behind these bookcases, thought Olivia, but she didn't know how to bring it up. The books belonged to Wilson's father, and Olivia didn't have to ask to know he loved them. Books were probably his entire life.

After thinking for a while, she came to the conclusion this woman likely wouldn't last if she stayed in this environment.

"This gauze is very effective," said the woman. "My breathing feels much better."

"It does seem better. Do you think you could move now?" asked Olivia.

"Yes, I think I could."

"I'd like to move you to a parlor or some other room. The air in here isn't very good."

"The air?" asked Wilson.

"Yes. If possible, I'd like your father to sleep in a different room, too."

"All right. I suppose they can go to the guest room on the second floor," said Wilson. He ended up carrying his mother on his back up to the room. His father walked up himself, a book in one hand. He didn't seem to be in bad shape.

A fire was lit to warm the chilly guest room. Olivia held a bottle wrapped in cloth to Wilson's mother's chest, and his father started reading.

The woman shortly dozed off.

"Wilson, could I talk to you for a minute?" said Olivia, calling him out into the hallway, then they went to the room with all the bookcases.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm concerned about what might be behind the wallpaper there. Could you try peeling back just a tiny bit to let me see what's behind it? I think there might be mold growing there."

"Oh. Mold?"

"Some people start to have difficulty breathing, like your mother has been, when there's a lot of black mold. It's different for different people though. Some don't show any symptoms, but it can't be good for your father, either."

Wilson first moved the stack of books in front of the bookcase closest to the bed, removed all the books from that case, and moved it while trying to avoid the piles of books on the floor. He slowly peeled back the wallpaper in that section, and the entire back of it was pitch black with mold, just like Olivia suspected.

"Oh, God," gasped Wilson.

"I thought so," said Olivia. She rushed to open all the windows in the room as the smell of mold grew stronger. "I think this mold is what's causing your mother's symptoms," she said. "But I get the impression the books are your father's life."

"Yes, you're right there. Both my mother and I have given up on reasoning with him when it comes to the books."

"Then, he needs to accept that books are books and shouldn't be in the room they sleep in. And it's probably best not to spend too long in this room without regularly airing it out."

They left the room, and Wilson bowed his head to Olivia. "I feel much better knowing what's causing it," he said. "You are an incredible apothecary."

"I only knew because I had a patient before with the same symptoms."

After that, they had the usual exchange where he tried to pay her and she refused, which he thought was strange. She knew it could become a hassle if she accepted money from this family when she didn't from any other family. Instead, she suggested a compromise.

"How about you keep coming to my restaurant to enjoy the soup and tonic? That's payment enough for me," she said.

"You are not greedy in the least. You don't charge much for the food in your restaurant, either."

"I earn only what I need, and that's fine by me. The medicinal herbs I use are a gift from the forest, after all."

Wilson looked at Olivia in awe, then sighed. "If you asked me, I could increase your profits, making you earn more. But I imagine you have no interest in that."

"I don't. I'm very happy as I am. I couldn't want anything more."

When Olivia said that, Wilson's heart and mouth both said the same thing. *I'm interfering, aren't 1?* "Well, if that's the case, I'll stop all this unnecessary meddling. I'll be by to purchase your soup again. It's just a shame it's too far for me to visit every day."

"My husband works in Marlowe at Freddy's Pharmacy. If you like, I could have him take the soup that far."

"That would be about two miles, hm? Well, if it's not too much of an

imposition, I'd like to ask for a standing order of three servings a day. And any sides, if you have them. Mother and Father both enjoy your food as well."

"All right. Thank you. Feel free not to accept the delivery if you don't need it that day."

Later, Arthur came to meet Olivia and they left the McCrossin home.

"Thanks for meeting me, Arthur," she said.

"Not a problem. You finish all right?"

"Yeah. I did accept a request for you to deliver food though. I hope that's all right. You'd only have to take it to the pharmacy, though."

"Enough for this household? Of course that's all right."

"Oh, good. Business is booming."

Olivia beamed, but she was focusing all her energy on thinking about today's soup, which she was doing because she'd heard a passionate thought from Wilson when she'd left.

I'd marry that woman if she wasn't already taken. She's beautiful, a wonderful cook, and kind. What a shame. Oh, but perhaps this husband of hers isn't such a great man. I could... Yes, that's it. I'll see what sort of man he is when I go pick up the soup.

Even if Arthur couldn't hear everyone's thoughts, he could hear Olivia's, but he wasn't as practiced at it as she was. He shouldn't be able to hear what was on her mind unless she let her guard down a lot.

On the way back to Soup Forest, Arthur just kept hearing thoughts about soup ingredients and the animals' cute antics.

The cats and dog came to meet Olivia when she got home. She picked up Snow and said to her, "I'm back, Snow. You didn't like the smell of Wilson's trousers, did you? Did they smell like mold?"

It smell bad. You smell bad too, now.

"Oh. Well, guess I have to change then," she said, picking up Dale who had appeared by her feet.

No! No!

Despite all his protestations, he let Olivia hold him. He hadn't seemed to really dislike being held that much lately.

Rob's tail wagged as hard as it could while he waited his turn.

"Sorry for the wait, Rob. How in the world are you such a good boy?"

He was ecstatic as she rubbed him up and down and kissed him on the snout. Love you! Love you!

"I love you, too, Rob."

Arthur watched with a smile as he sat beside Lara eating breakfast. He accidentally let a thought slip. When's it going to be my turn for her to tell me she loves me? And he didn't realize she had heard.

Olivia wrapped her arms around him from behind while he ate and said, "All right, it's your turn, Arthur."

He turned bright red, realizing only then she'd heard.

Mates close, murmured Dale from behind Olivia, and she chuckled.

Chapter 33: How Olivia Met Rob

OLIVIA watched Rob sleeping in front of the fire and thought back to when she first met him. His former owner was one of her regular customers who had since passed on to God's garden.



"HELLO, Isaac. I haven't seen you in a while," she said.

"It has been a while. But I'm feeling good today, so I thought I'd try coming out here."

Isaac was a seventy-five-year-old former lumber merchant living in Marlowe. He'd been living an easy, carefree life ever since he retired, but Olivia had heard his health wasn't the best lately.

"Just kind of feel like I lost a lot of energy after Jenkins passed," he said. "And I had this cold that got real bad. I'm fully recovered now, though, so no need to worry."

"You were very close with my grandfather for a long time."

"Partings sting all the more when you've lived as long as I have. Nothing you can do about it, though."

Listening to their conversation was a female servant who'd been with Isaac for several decades. She was also well over sixty years old.

Isaac and the woman had a peaceful conversation as they enjoyed their soup, but, when they were about to make their way home, Isaac said to Olivia, "Olivia, do you have any interest in owning a big dog? I have puppies that've just been weaned from their mother."

"A dog?"

Two years had gone by since her grandparents had passed away in quick succession. She knew animals didn't live long, and the thought of growing

attached to a dog only for them to die before her... She shook her head. "Not now," she said. "I really appreciate the offer, though."

"Don't worry about it. A dog should be your partner in life. If you're uncertain, then it's best not to."

With that, Isaac left.

The next month, Olivia received a letter from him. It said the woman who had been with him in the restaurant had become unwell and retired from her duties. Isaac tried to convince her to stay with him anyway, but she told him she couldn't possibly remain if she wasn't being useful, and then had her son come get her.

This had all made Isaac unhappy. He decided to sell his mansion in Marlowe and go live in the capital, where his son operated a merchant company.

The letter ended with this: "Do you remember the puppies I mentioned? I've found homes for three of the four. There's only one left. Would you think about giving this last puppy a home? These sorts of dogs are energetic and love playing in water. I'd be really happy if he could live with you, since you live right next to the forest. I won't force you, of course, but I would like you to think about it."

While Olivia felt a bit put on the spot, the letter did make her lean towards accepting the puppy. She thought Soup Forest would be much better for an active young dog compared to the capital city, especially when she considered how much this house and the forest had healed her soul.

On her day off, she walked all the way to Marlowe to visit Isaac without stopping or slowing. He was out in the garden with a completely black puppy. He looked like he'd aged significantly. His wife had passed quite a while before, and now the woman who'd been there with him for so long was gone as well.

"This is the little guy," he said. The puppy was trying to rush forward despite Isaac having a hold of his collar. It seemed he wanted to jump up at Olivia. His huffing sounded painful as the collar cut into his neck.

Olivia immediately picked the puppy up and looked into his eyes.

Love you! Love you! Love you so much!

They'd met less than a minute before, but the puppy was already tackling Olivia with affection. She cradled his warm, heavy weight in her arms and thought, I don't want to let him go.

"I'll take him," she said.

Isaac's response was a smile, and the black puppy was officially part of Olivia's family.

The puppy was bouncing around the entire time Isaac's carriage was driving them back to Soup Forest.

"Welcome home," Olivia told the puppy when they got back.

Love you! Love you!

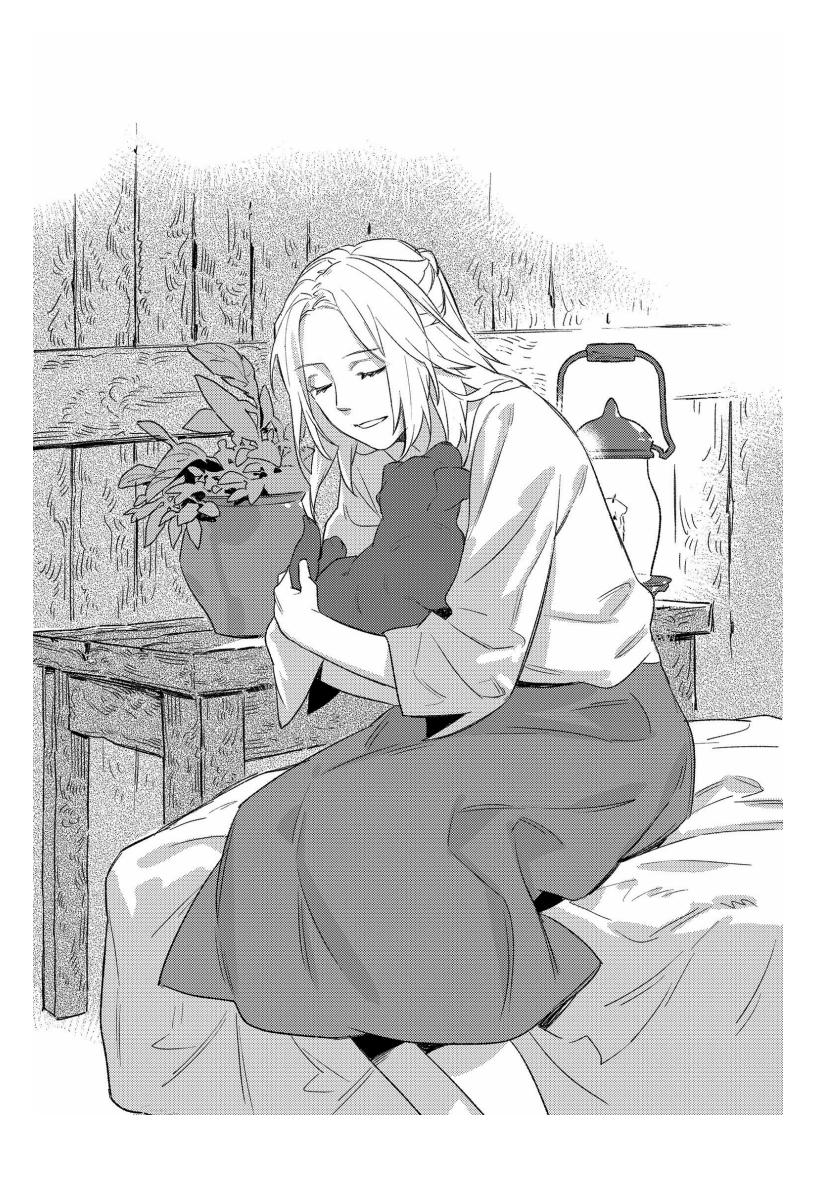
Olivia named the puppy Rob, and they spent the rest of that day playing together while Olivia gave him treats. Rob was full of energy throughout the whole day, but started to whine that night when it was time to go to sleep.

Sad. Missing. Mommy...

The puppy cried for his mom as he lay on the old blanket Olivia had put down in the corner of her room.

Isaac had given her a packet of paper with instructions on how to raise Rob, and the incredible amount of writing covering each sheet was testament to how much Isaac loved the puppy. Those papers said that if the puppy seemed sad at night in the beginning, Olivia should pet him and talk to him.

"It must be sad to be away from your mother, but I'll be your mother from now on, all right?" She stroked his back as she said it, and Rob calmed down a little. She picked him up, feeling his weight and warmth, and realized something.



"This puppy is healing me."

She thought she'd saved a puppy who hadn't found a home, but she'd found she was the one being saved. She thought she'd become used to the loneliness of missing her grandparents, but holding that puppy was bringing life back to her heart in the same way cool water brought life back to a parched throat.

"Rob, you're going to live here with me from now on. I'll be your mother. Take your time growing up. And, please, live a long life."

From that day on, Rob was Olivia's friend, family, and companion.



ROB grew quickly into an adult dog with glossy black fur and a reassuring companion of nearly eighty pounds who enjoyed the forest and the river, and quickly picked up Olivia's training.

He was also the only living creature that continuously supported Olivia and healed her heart, until that one fateful rainy day when Arthur arrived.

"Rob, take life slow. Live a long life," she said gently to Rob when he was three years old. He was sleeping, his tail wiggling slightly.

Arthur watched them and could feel Olivia's fear of the day she would lose him. I need to live long, he thought. I need to watch out for my health to make sure I don't make Olivia sad.

He poured the tonic that had become all the rage at Soup Forest lately into a cup and downed it in one swig so he wouldn't taste it.

"Urgh, it's so gross," he said. "I'll never get used to that taste."

"You say the exact same thing every time you drink it," said Lara.

"Are you used to it then?"

"Yep. I just accept it for what it is when I drink it, and my health has been great thanks to it."

"You'd probably be fine without it, anyway. You're still young."

"I want to be healthy, for Colin's sake."

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"That so?"
"Yep."
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Olivia came back into the kitchen. "I think I'll go out to the river today and cut some ice."

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"I'll do it," said Arthur.
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"I will, too," she said back.

"No, I don't want you falling into a frozen river. You can take over carrying the ice."

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"Why? I've done it every year by myself. It's fine."
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"All right, we'll do it together."
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The trio took Rob and went to the river. They decided to build a large fire before starting to take out the ice.

The first step of cutting the ice was using a harpoon-like tool Olivia's grandfather ordered to open a hole in a spot where the ice was thick, then they could use saws to cut cubes out of the ice.

Arthur sawed, while Olivia and Lara moved the blocks. Rob started huffing as he watched. He wanted to fly into the river, once Olivia gave permission.

When they finished cutting out all the ice they wanted for the day, Olivia said, "All right," and Rob leaped into the river. As always, he played in the small open area until he was shivering.

Olivia and Lara quickly dried him off after he got out of the water and warmed him by the fire. They carried their large load of ice back to the cave, then returned to Soup Forest.

During the whole time, Rob was thinking, So fun! Was so fun!

After returning to the restaurant, the humans had warm apple tea and bread with honey, while Rob had a meal of chicken and barley. He was so tired from all his playing that he snored after falling asleep in front of the fire. Snow and

[&]quot;Yes, let's."

[&]quot;I want to go, too!" said Lara.

Dale, who had waited at home for them, snuggled up to Rob and slept too.

Rob smell like outside, murmured Dale after sniffing him.

It was sometime later that Dale would go on his own, unwanted, adventure.

Chapter 34: At the End of Dale's Stroll

IT was the end of December, and the year was coming to a close.

Dale was out for a stroll, walking through the afternoon sun along the snow-covered road. He didn't usually go too far from the house, but there was a reason why he was all this way out today: he'd found wild rabbit and fox footprints near Soup Forest and found himself quite a way away after following them.

It looked like a competition between the fleeing rabbit and the fox whose pursuit never flagged, and that excited Dale, who'd grown up in a city.

At some point, the rabbit's footprints disappeared, replaced with the heavy scent of blood, immediately cutting off the story the tracks told.

I get eaten.

That's when Dale finally realized he might also be eaten by the fox. He was hurrying back the way he came when a wagon stopped by him, and a voice called out.

"Hey! You, you're the cat from before. Haven't seen you in ages. Can't believe you're alive! Huh. You've gotten bigger. So, you've been living out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Huh? This person...

It was the merchant who'd left while Dale had been out playing. Fond memories welled up of Dale spending a whole month with this man while he fed him, and they traveled together.

"Would you look at that, you're alive."

"Meow!" Long time no see.

Dale butted his head against the man's leg when he got out of the wagon, and the man stroked his head and back. This made Dale happy. He purred sweetly and rubbed his entire body against the man's shin. "Hah, good boy. You're so clever. You remember me. Hup!" The man picked Dale up. "Your coat's so shiny, you almost look like someone's taking care of you. And you've put on meat. You must've gotten way better at hunting. Well then, I think I'll have you come deal with my mice."

Then the man put Dale in an empty wooden box, closed the lid, and set something on top.

Huh? Why? No! I go home! Go home! Want go home!

"Haha! Don't be so angry. Relax. I'll take care of you now."

The wagon set off, and Dale could see the scenery passing by through a hole in the box.

Dale frantically screamed, *Help! Snow! Rob! Help!* but he was so far away that Olivia didn't even pick up his inner cries.



IT was around dinnertime when Olivia began worrying about Dale when he didn't return. Dale was young and had never once forgotten to come eat his food. He was always sitting in front of his food bowl right at food time so precisely it was almost like he could read the clock.

He does go to play in the forest, but he gets so scared of the wild animals that he never goes in too far. I wonder what happened.

She couldn't go looking for him while she still had customers, so she decided to start her search in earnest once she'd shut the restaurant after seven that evening.

"Lara, I'm going to go look for Dale," she said. "You stay here. Arthur should be home soon."

"Then I should go to look, and you should wait for Arthur."

"No, I want to go. Please, keep an eye on the house for me," said Olivia while thinking, I'm the one who can hear Dale's voice.

"All right. Be careful though. It's pitch-black outside."

Olivia put on several layers of clothes underneath her leather coat. The

darkness was inky black outside the lamplight, and everything was silent because the shallow piles of snow absorbed all sound.

"How odd," said Olivia. "Dale doesn't normally go walking around in the cold and dark like this. Something must have happened. Rob, can you search the area to see if you can find which way Dale went?"

Yes!

Rob went in circles around the yard sniffing, then popped out onto the road like he found something and continued directly south. Luckily, it hadn't snowed since Dale disappeared.

"His scent will disappear if the snow piles up more. We need to find him quickly."

Olivia followed Rob at a jogging pace. She wanted to ask the wild birds, too, but they were already asleep.

"Dale! Come out! Dale! It's time to eat!"

Rob continued steadily. He stopped several times to sniff. When Olivia brought the lamp closer to the snowdrifts one of those times, she noticed the rabbit and fox tracks. And then the cat tracks.

No way.

The cat tracks, which she assumed belonged to Dale, seemed to follow the rabbit and fox.

"The fox wouldn't attack Dale if it made a successful hunt, but what would happen if Dale showed up just after the rabbit escaped? Dale would be much easier to catch than a rabbit."

Rob continued at a quick pace. They were already over three miles from home.

I thought he was so timid. I can't believe he wandered this far away.

Olivia's stomach clenched painfully as she imagined horrible things.

Rob stopped, having seemingly found something.

"Woof!" Smell blood.

"No, oh no, oh no..."

Here! indicated Rob and Olivia brought the oil lamp close. There was a clump of brown fur and a small splash of blood. Olivia picked up the fur with numb fingers while a terrible vision flickered across her mind.

"No... This isn't Dale's fur. This is rabbit fur," she said.

It looked like the fox had been successful.

Rob busily sniffed the area then whined. *Dale smell no more,* he thought, looking at Olivia sadly.

If the fox caught a rabbit, it wouldn't then attack a cat. Maybe he was caught by a different animal? But I don't see any other animal tracks. Why do his tracks and scent disappear here?

Olivia circled around that spot, searching far off the road, but neither Rob's nose nor Olivia's eyes or heart found any signs of Dale.

"What do I do? Dale, where did you go?"

"Hey! Olivia!" came a call.

"Arthur? You came all this way," she replied to Arthur, who was on his horse.

"I was worried. It's dangerous to walk around in the dark alone like this."

"Arthur, Dale's tracks just disappear. He just vanished."

"Where? Here?"

"Yeah. It looks like he was following the tracks of a rabbit and a fox. But then, here..."

"Don't cry, Olivia. It'll be all right. You go home, I'll keep looking. Don't want you to catch a cold."

"I can't. Something happened to Dale. His scent and tracks just disappear all of a sudden... Urgh, no, I can't just stand here crying right now. I need to look for him."

"Take a deep breath. You can't hear his mind?"

"No. I can't hear anything."

They searched for another hour after that, but there was no sign of Dale.

"Let's go back for now," said Arthur. "It's dangerous to keep at it."

"Yeah... You're right."

The two rode Annie back, with Olivia talking about all her worst fears along the way. "I can only think of one reason why his tracks and scent would just disappear like that. A hawk. If a hawk picked him up and took him away, we wouldn't be able to save him. Those talons tear in deep, all the way to the organs. We can't save him. I... I've seen animals that went through that before."

"Just hold up a second, Olivia. You once told me you saw Dale's past. You said there were all sorts of different people who fed him and gave him different names."

"Yeah. He likes people. I saw a lot of people all over the place spoiling him."

"And you said the last one was some guy in a wagon who left him behind?"

"Oh!" Olivia turned to look at Arthur, hope in her eyes.

"Maybe he was being all friendly to some person in a wagon and they took him with them."

"Maybe. Oh, maybe. That could definitely happen with Dale. And he never bites or scratches even if he is always saying he doesn't want you to pick him up. That could be it. He got in a wagon. That would explain why his tracks and scent disappeared!"

"It would. I think that's what happened."

"Yeah. Yes. He might have just decided he likes some person in a wagon more than me," Olivia said sadly.

"Don't think so negatively. Anyway, let's just get home and have food first."

"Right. Dale might have taken a liking to that person, or maybe he just wanted to go on an adventure."

And if that had happened, there was nothing Olivia could do. This road connected the capital with several other cities. Wagons and carriages came and went from all sorts of different places. If Dale was in a wagon, there was no way

they were going to find him.

Besides, if he decided to go with the wagon...

When Olivia got home looking crestfallen, Snow came over and said, Dale?

"We didn't find him. I'm sorry, Snow."

Hmm. Snow lashed her tail back and forth, then slowly went back to bed. If Dale like it here, he come home.

"Snow..."

If he like it here, he come home, she repeated.

Lara was there, so Olivia just went over to Snow and rubbed her head, but she agreed.

Dale would come home if he liked it here. If he found a place he liked more, he wouldn't. Isaac, Rob's former owner, said, "Dogs get attached to people. Cats get attached to places."

"You're right, Snow," she said. "Cats are free to walk around outside. He'll come back if he likes it here."

So long as he's not too far away, she thought. If he was hundreds of miles away, he'd never make it back walking on little cat legs.

Olivia sat down in a daze. Snow, who wasn't normally that clingy, jumped onto her lap.

I here. No cry, she said, gently licking Olivia's hand.

Chapter 35: Homeward Bound

DALE screamed for a long time trapped in that wooden box. Eventually, though, he stopped screaming and started thinking. He was never very good at that, but he knew with all his heart that he wanted to go home.

Scream no make go home, he'd finally realized.

Then he started trying to open the box. He stretched out and pushed up on the box, but it fell back in place the moment he let go.

Want go home, he thought, peering through the cracks to the outside world.

The wagon traveled steadily on, moving farther and farther from his beloved home.

No can go home. He curled up, hopeless, but that's when the box opened from the outside.

"Hey, Squirt, time for food. All I've got is bread. You'll have to make do with that," said the merchant as he tried to stick a piece of bread in the box, but Dale jumped up and leaped from the box with all the force he could muster.

"Hey! Wait!" shouted the man.

I go home!

He ran at top speed the opposite direction the wagon was heading. His body told him what direction home was. He rushed along the road heading ever farther north.

But he wasn't used to running long distances and quickly ran out of breath.

The man wasn't chasing after him, which let Dale relax, and he continued to walk steadily on.

Hungry. Want eat meat.

The road was flanked by forests, and Dale could sense birds, squirrels, and

mice. He had no choice but to go into the forest, where he caught a mouse and ate it. But the forest was dark, and the road was going to get dark soon, too.

Foxes scary. Wolves scary.

Remembering the rabbit blood he'd found on the snowy road, he moved away from the forest and kept walking along the darkening path. He ate a little snow because he was thirsty.

Cold.

The snow leeched heat from inside him. His instincts told him it was bad to eat too much snow, so he continued walking while thirsty instead.

He went north, frightened by any sign of animals moving in the forest. He walked all through the night, eventually giving into fatigue and resting at the base of a tree.

Rob's bed...

Fond memories of the soft bed in a warm room filled his head as he curled up to sleep, but he heard a horse-drawn vehicle stop. Was it that merchant? Dale jumped up then realized he recognized the scent coming off the person who came out of the carriage.

Huh? Same smell...

The man smelled just like Olivia's room upstairs that had all her dried herbs. The familiar aroma drew Dale in, and he approached the young man.

"Huh. It's not often you see a cat so far away from any human houses. What's going on?" he asked.

"Meow! Meow!" Hungry. Tired.

"Are you hungry? I'm not sure if I have anything cats can eat..." The young man went back into the carriage and rummaged through a sack to bring out some bread. "Bread is all I have that you might be able to eat. The only other thing I have is salty dried meat. Can you settle for the bread?"

"Nom nom nom." I eat. I eat.

The man smiled as he watched Dale wolf down the bread. "You only have one

eye, don't you? I'd feel bad if you were eaten by a forest animal. Why don't you come with me?"

When Dale heard that, he hurried to clamp his jaws on the bread and move away from the man. *No. I go home.*

"What? You don't want to come with me? You don't have to get all poofy like that. I won't force you if you don't want to. All right, One-Eye, just watch out for wolves."

The carriage left, taking the man, Doctor Ulysse of the capital, along with it. Word had been sent that the prince ruling over the southern region, the king's younger brother, had come down with a severe illness. Ulysse was dispatched by the king to take care of him and was now on his way back after treating him.

"Right. Soup Forest was on the side of this road, wasn't it?" he said. "I'd love to stop by and have some of Olivia's home-cooked food." He got into the carriage and said to the driver, "You can set off again. There's a restaurant on the left side farther along. I'd like you to stop there."

Dale watched the carriage go while he finished eating the bread, ate a small mouthful of snow, then started walking again.



"DOCTOR ULYSSE, it's been a long time. You look well," said Olivia.

"It has been a while. I'm doing all right, despite neglecting my own health. All the doctors in the castle are unhealthy from lack of exercise. We're just too busy for it."

"Why don't you sit down here?"

"Actually, I was hoping I could sit at the table in the kitchen."

"What? But that's sort of..."

"I can speak with you if I sit there. I can't stay too long, after all."

"Oh, I see. All right, then."

The only customers in the restaurant were Ulysse and his driver, but it sounded like he wanted to talk to Olivia even while she was preparing his food.

"I'd like to order food for my driver, too," he said as he sat at the table in the kitchen reserved for family. He glanced towards the corner as he did and saw Rob and Snow curled up sleeping in the box bed there. He smiled and said, "Oh, you have a cat too? Not just the dog."

"Yes. I actually have two cats, but one went missing a few days ago. I've been so worried."

"That is concerning."

"I'm so worried about him that I can barely sleep. Well, here's your soup of the day. It's carrot, onion, and walnut potage."

"It's a beautiful color."

"And tastes nice, too. Oh, by the way, Lara here, is planning on taking the apothecary exam next year. I'd appreciate it if you could show her the ropes if she passes," said Olivia, indicating Lara.

"It's nice to meet you, sir. My name's Lara, and I'm studying for the exam right now." She gave Ulysse a sunny smile and bowed.

After that, Olivia and Ulysse discussed medicine while she began carving the pork roast that was the day's side for the soup. Her hands stopped midway though as Ulysse spoke.

"Your pets seem so happy," he said. "You know, I saw a cat on the way here. It must've been living in the forest since there were no houses anywhere nearby. It only had one eye. The forest must be a cruel place to live."

"Doctor Ulysse! That cat, what color was it? Was it black-and-white with a little brown mixed in?" asked Olivia.

"It did have a little brown, but it was mostly white and black."

Olivia moved closer to Ulysse. He leaned away slightly, taken aback by how frantic she seemed. "On its face, did it have a mask split right in the middle?"

"Uh, yes, it did. Wait. Your cat that went missing, was it a black-and-white cat with one eye?"

"It was! Where did you see Dale?"

"It was about four hours ago, so over three miles away, just off the side of this road."

Lara and Olivia looked at each other.

"Olivia, should I go? Or do you want to go?" asked Lara.

"I'll go. I'm very sorry, Doctor Ulysse, but I have to go look for Dale."

"What?" said Ulysse.

"Lara, I'm borrowing Greta."

"Of course!"

"Wait! I'll go too," said Ulysse. "We'll go in my carriage. I'll show you where he was."

"No, we might not see him from a carriage. I'm going on the horse. I'm sorry," said Olivia.

Even so, Ulysse couldn't bring himself to eat after that. He went to the driver and said, "I'm sorry, but please wait here. I'm taking a horse and going back up the road," and then he left the restaurant.

He saddled a horse from the carriage, but Olivia was already far in the distance by the time he started riding. Well. Seems I'll have some difficulty getting my opportunity to have a nice long conversation with Olivia.

He spurred his horse on after her, feeling disappointed over his poor luck. When he pulled up alongside her, he said, "Olivia. It's quite a ways still until where the cat was."

"I know. But Dale went missing five days ago. When I think of how hungry he must be..."

Ulysse casually rode on her left side. She looked at him, her emerald eyes misting and sparkling in the sunlight. The moment those eyes looked at him, Ulysse felt something grip his heart, painfully, almost, but he quickly reprimanded himself. *Calm down. She's married.*

"I should have made him come back with me," he said. "He sniffed me, and I gave him some bread, but he didn't like it when I tried to pick him up."

"Really? He's normally so friendly. Maybe something bad happened to him." Everything Ulysse said made her heart ache. *Is this how human mothers feel about their children?* she thought while scouring the sides of the road. She was determined not to miss him.

Ulysse eventually gave up trying to talk to Olivia and instead focused entirely on watching the left side of the road for Dale.

Several hours passed from when they left Soup Forest, and they'd returned to the spot where Ulysse saw Dale. They stopped their horses and searched the area.

"Dale! Dale! Where are you?" Olivia shouted.

"Come on out, One-Eye!"

Despite both of them calling, Dale didn't come out.

"He probably got a lot closer to the restaurant after I saw him," said Ulysse. "Maybe we missed him on the way here."

"Yes. Let's go back and search one more time. Oh, but you need to be getting back to the castle. We'll manage here. I'm sorry you had to deal with this the one time you got to visit the restaurant."

"It's fine. I'll help you search again. I'll just tell my boss I developed a stomachache on the way and had to stop for a rest."

Olivia wondered if it was all right for a doctor to use an excuse like that, but two sets of eyes would be better at spotting Dale than one, so she decided to take Ulysse up on his offer.

But they didn't find Dale, not even by the time the sun began to set. Olivia took Ulysse back to the restaurant knowing he really should be leaving soon.



AROUND that time, Dale was riding a fox.

Home. My home.

Dale was in a good mood riding through the forest on the back of the very same fox that told Olivia about the humans that nearly froze to death in the

snow.

Warm here, thought Dale.

Sensing those carefree emotions from Dale made the fox sigh, though it continued to walk with Dale on its back. Dale was six and a half pounds despite having lost weight, making it a somewhat painful going carrying him on its back for such a long distance.

The fox's territory was a huge twenty square miles, which it maintained even though some portions did overlap with the territory of other foxes.

The fox had gone out to the fringes of its territory to hunt where it found a scent it recognized near the boundary between the forest and the road, as well as the sound of a cat crying, *Hungry. Want go home.*

Hunt cat, get meat, thought the fox. It moved without sound from the forest towards the road, and the familiar scent grew stronger. The memory of that scent was tied to memories of the most delicious meat ever. Scent of that human.

It was a complex scent, the smell of several medicinal plants mixed in with the aroma of human food. Olivia appeared in the fox's mind. The fox knew that the human would give it meat, but only in exchange for something.

The fox looked at the cat again. Cat territories weren't that large. The fox realized it wasn't normal for the cat to be this far away from the restaurant.

Maybe I take cat.

If the fox took the cat back, maybe it would receive meat. The fox continued to a spot where it could see the road and peered at the cat from inside a bush. The cat was walking slowly, crying the whole time.

Dale leaped straight up in the air the moment the fox appeared from the forest. He turned his body sideways and arched his back, all the fur on this back and tail standing on end. *Stay away!* Go away!

I no eat you. I take you, said the fox.

Dale was still cautious but showed interest in what the fox said. My home?

Place with black dog and female human.

Dale's fur went back down, and his body grew smaller. *There! We go there!* He immediately believed the fox and approached it.

The fox was exasperated by the fact that Dale would approach it without questioning it. No fox pup would ever do something that stupid. Foxes taught their young to live their lives wary of everything.

Parent cat no teach this cat anything. The fox even pitied Dale. You dumb.

Dumb? Why?

The fox didn't answer. It lay on the ground. Dale approached it without suspicion since it showed no signs it would attack. He sniffed the fox then rubbed his face against it.

Dumb, the fox thought again.

The fox would normally have the urge to leap at Dale and snap his neck in its jaws, if it weren't for the delicious meat awaiting it. It decided on that meat rather than Dale and held back the urge to bite.

Get on, dumb cat.

Sure!

The fox made Dale get on its back, knowing that would be faster than plodding along at the cat's pace, then the fox moved swiftly through the forest. Not the fox, nor Dale, nor Olivia realized they passed each other on the way.

Dale, the source of all this hubbub, was lulled to sleep by the fox's warmth and the steady rhythm of its movements. His eyes opened when he was about to slip off the fox's back. He wriggled back into the center and closed his eyes again. It was a deep sleep since he hadn't slept much in the past several days.

The fox, with Dale on its back, arrived at Soup Forest deep in the night.

Get off, it said and threw Dale to the ground with a thud.

Ack!

Dale looked around. When he finally realized where he was, he rushed full speed in through the pet door in the kitchen, disappearing into the house.

The fox stood perfectly still, waiting for Olivia, hunger gnawing at its belly. It

kept grumbling to itself, *So hungry*, and eventually the door opened, and Olivia stepped out.

"Thank you for helping Dale and bringing him home. I have a reward for you," she said.

The fox didn't understand the human words, but it could feel Olivia's overjoyed heart. It understood it was likely receiving a gift for bringing the cat back.

The fox reached its head up and snatched the soft meat out of the air that Olivia tossed to it, immediately feeling the juices fill its mouth.

It scurried away into a nearby thicket just in case another animal might come by and steal the treat. Holding the meat down with its forepaws, it tore into it with its sharp teeth, easily pulling it apart.

Mm, yum.

It split the rather large hunk of meat three times and gulped it down then licked its chops. The meat and fats were delicious enough to induce ecstasy.

The fox looked back and saw Olivia standing there looking at it. Then it disappeared into the forest. It felt comfortable around her, the female human, but it didn't trust her mate. Its instincts were insistent that the male human was dangerous.

I go back to den.

The wonderful flavor of the fats lingered in its mouth as it walked through the forest in a good mood.

Inside the house, Dale was focused on eating. He buried his face in his food bowl and noisily wolfed down the food. Lara, Arthur, Rob, and Snow all watched.

Yum! Meat so yum!

Olivia, having returned from the entrance, was watching Dale, smiling as tears streamed down her face. Snow and Rob had rushed over to Dale when he came in but then immediately backed away. They were still sniffing him with wrinkled noses as he ate.

Dale smell bad.

Dale smell like fox.

Having filled his belly, Dale lay down in front of the fire, but Arthur quickly picked him up. Dale squirmed in protest, but Arthur kept a firm hold while Olivia washed him.

No! No!

"No, Dale. You probably have fleas," said Olivia. "Plus, Rob and Snow won't sleep next to you if you keep on smelling like the fox."

But, still, no!

They washed him, toweled him off, then set him to dry in front of the fire.

Love Snow. Love Rob, he said as Snow and Rob finally let him come near them. This time, they let him settle in the bed to sleep.

Dale was out instantly. Olivia went through his memories and got a general idea of how Dale found his way home.

Later that night when they were in bed, Arthur was shocked when Olivia told him about Dale and the fox.

"You mean you're the only one the fox trusts?" asked Arthur.

"I wouldn't call it trust. More like...it considers me useful. I think it probably carried Dale home hoping it would get a reward."

"It's like you get to see a fairytale world."

"I was just as shocked as you are. I mean, a fox put a cat on its back and carried it all the way home? Does that even happen?"

"Well, I know I'll at least sleep better after seeing you relax."

Olivia was asleep before Arthur could even finish his sentence.

Chapter 36: Meetings and Partings

"TODAY'S soup of the day uses dried vegetables. Will that be all right, Your Grace?"

"Of course it's all right. Marguerite always used plenty of dried vegetables during the winter. I love that it brings back those memories."

Louise was visiting the restaurant for the first time in a long time. She normally came in alone while her attendants and driver waited in the carriage, but her lady-in-waiting, driver, and guards also came into the restaurant today.

"Eat up, everyone. Have as many servings as you like," she said to them.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

They did of course choose a table some distance from Louise, but they showed no hesitation in taking her up on the offer. They even looked with curiosity at all the potted plants set around the restaurant or hanging from the ceiling.

How sad. This will be my last time here.

Those inner words and feelings of pain slipped into Olivia's heart as she was about to return to the kitchen.

What? Last time? she thought. She nearly turned back towards Louise but forced herself not to. She needed to make food for six people. She didn't want to make a mistake because she was too busy thinking about other things.

"If this is her last time," murmured Olivia, "then I'll just have to make it even better than normal. I'll ask why once she's finished eating."

Today's soup was dried vegetables with chicken thigh meat. It was a simply seasoned soup with large chunks of chicken thigh and plenty of dried vegetables.

And that's why Olivia went all out on the side dish. It was trout she'd fished

herself which she then pan-fried. She mixed a generous helping of dried basil in breadcrumbs she'd made by roughly grating bread, which she used to bread the trout before frying it in butter.

"This trout brings me back," said Louise. "The powerful flavor of the basil makes the trout all the more delicious." She was happy as she finished her food.

Olivia watched for when she was done to bring out some tea. "Is there something special about today, Your Grace?" she asked.

"You're an observant one. This is the last day I'll be coming here, Olivia. I'm returning to Arche." Louise smiled as she said it, though Olivia could sense a firm determination there. "Ever since the duke died and our son took up the title, I've been living here however I please, but I cannot let this be where my grave is. I am of Arche, now. I should be going back. I owe that to the people of Arche."

"You'll be missed."

"The royal family will be taking over the land the villas are built on in my stead. They're sending someone to manage the land. I'm sure they'll visit your restaurant as well."

Louise, who had looked out for Olivia in so many ways, had been with Olivia's grandmother for more than twenty years. There was something so incredibly sad about losing this connection.

"I'm sad to see you go, but I understand you have your position to think of," said Olivia.

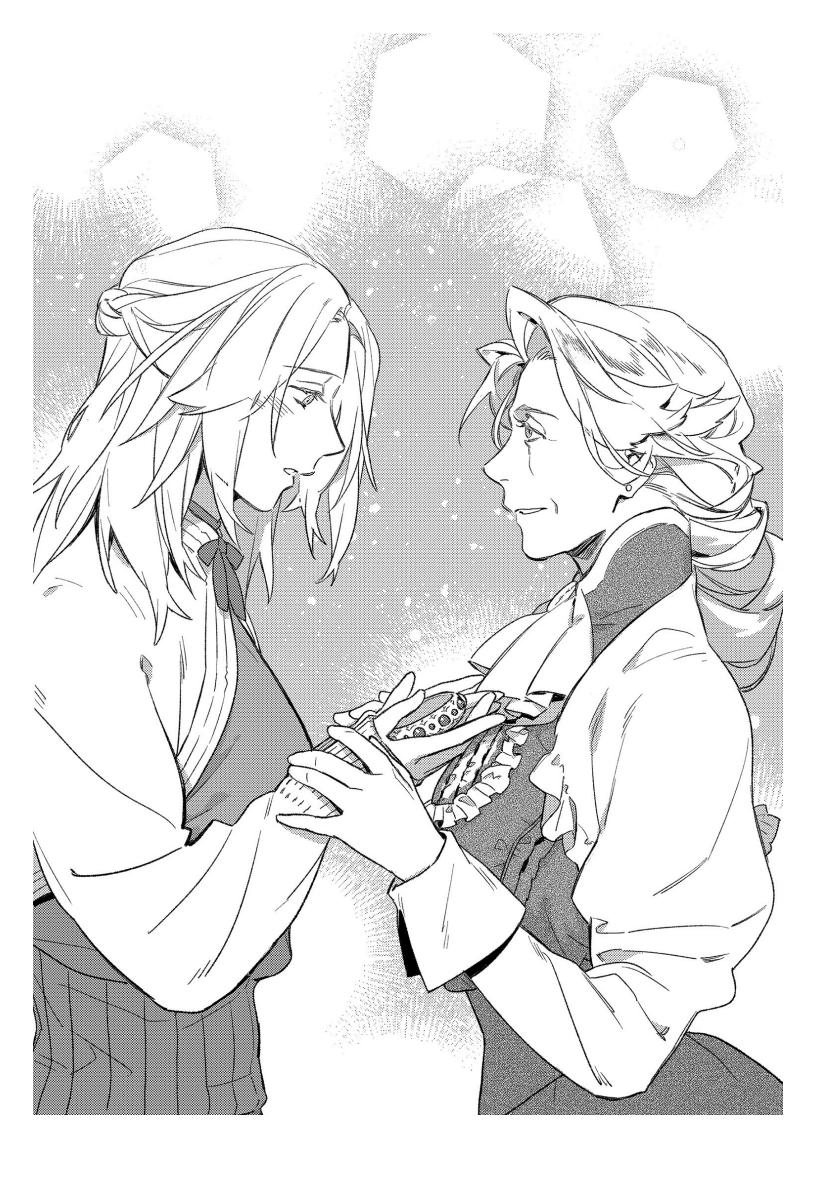
"Yes. My final duty is to give the people the knowledge that the duke and duchess lie together in peace. I don't face this return with negative emotions. I can live happily wherever I am. That's my special ability. I'm sure I will enjoy being in Arche. And that's what's most important."

Louise stopped there and looked at Olivia before saying, "I plan to tell Marguerite, when I see her next, all the stories I've been witness to of how the granddaughter she loved so much is living happily with such a dependable husband. I'd like to give you this as a parting gift."

Louise closed Olivia's hands around something chill to the touch. It was a

bracelet, gold studded lavishly with gems of a deep azure.

"But this..."



"It's a bracelet with lapis lazuli gems," said Louise.

"I can't possibly accept something this valuable."

"I want you to. It's thanks to you that I had such a lovely time living here in Marlowe. Coming here makes me feel like I'm meeting Marguerite again, like I can tell she's happy."

Louise was normally so stoic, but Olivia noticed the tears now filling her eyes and that nearly made Olivia shed her own tears.

"It was for my sake that my father refused to allow Marguerite to return to Sandwald. And with Jenkins being refused his request to retire from the knights, I made it so two people in love were forced to live so far apart for twenty-four whole years. I may not have had a say in the matter, but I am truly sorry. But whenever I said so, Marguerite smiled and told me not to worry myself over it. It was still painful, though."

Olivia listened, unable to say anything because she had seen just how much her grandparents loved each other as they'd raised her.

"This bracelet can in no way make up for the regret and pain I feel, but perhaps it will serve you some purpose sometime. If you happen to need money, you may sell it. If you do, go to this store in the capital."

Louise handed Olivia an elegant white card.

"I couldn't sell it. I'll treasure it for the rest of my life," said Olivia.

"Olivia, I just want you to live happily with Arthur, a life of smiles and laughter."

With that, Louise Arche gave a graceful smile and left.

She asked Olivia not to watch her go because, as she said, she never did like that.

Later that evening when Arthur came home, he stared for a while at the bracelet while he listened to Olivia tell him about Louise, then said, "Probably shouldn't show this to people. I'm not an expert on gems, but I'm sure these are really expensive. The gold seems pure, and the color and finish on the lapis lazulis seems as good as it gets. We should think of somewhere we can store it."

"That's a bit of a hassle. The only real place I have for storing things is in a drawer."

"I'll think of something. I can even make something."

"Thank you."

Sparkly.

"What?" said Olivia.

Sparkly.

It was Snow. "Snow, do you like sparkly things?"

Not like.

Snow's mind was filled with images of the people in the gambling den, and one of them was a woman in fancy clothing. Her flamboyant outfits always included bracelets, necklaces, and rings.

"Hello, my little princess," she would always say as she stroked Snow. "Petting her gives me good luck."

"The person you liked at the gambling den was a woman who always wore bracelets," said Olivia.

Yeah.

Snow seemed to tire of that conversation after that. She butted her head against Rob, then curled up and went to sleep.



SEVERAL days after Louise left, a pair of customers Olivia didn't know came to the restaurant for the first time. They were a man and a woman in their late thirties and were surprised at the sheer number of potted plants in the restaurant.

"Hello," said Olivia. "Feel free to sit anywhere that's open."

"Could I have the soup of the day and two slices of bread, as well as the side? And the same for my wife," said the man as the couple sat at a table by the window to look out it.

The way he ordered made it sound like someone recommended this place to them, Olivia thought.

"Olivia," said Lara. "They look rich. Do you think they're from the villa town?"

"Lara, every single customer who comes here is important. You'll treat them the exact same you treat anyone else, all right?"

"Of course!"

Lara took the food out to them and had a pleasant conversation with them. Olivia focused on cooking while feeling relieved they didn't seem like difficult people to deal with.

After some time, Lara came back to the kitchen with their empty dishes. "I think they're definitely from the villas. And they said the food was wonderful."

"Oh, that's good."

I won't see Louise again, which is sad, but I will meet new people like this. I'll do what Louise said and live my life filled with smiles and laughter, thought Olivia.

Snow rubbed her face against Olivia's leg. Dale was by her other leg.

Hurt? asked Snow.

Hurt? asked Dale.

"It hurts a little, but I feel better with you two here. Thank you."

Love you! Love you! cried Rob.

"Thank you too, Rob. How about I get some goat milk from someone and we all enjoy some goat milk together when spring comes?"

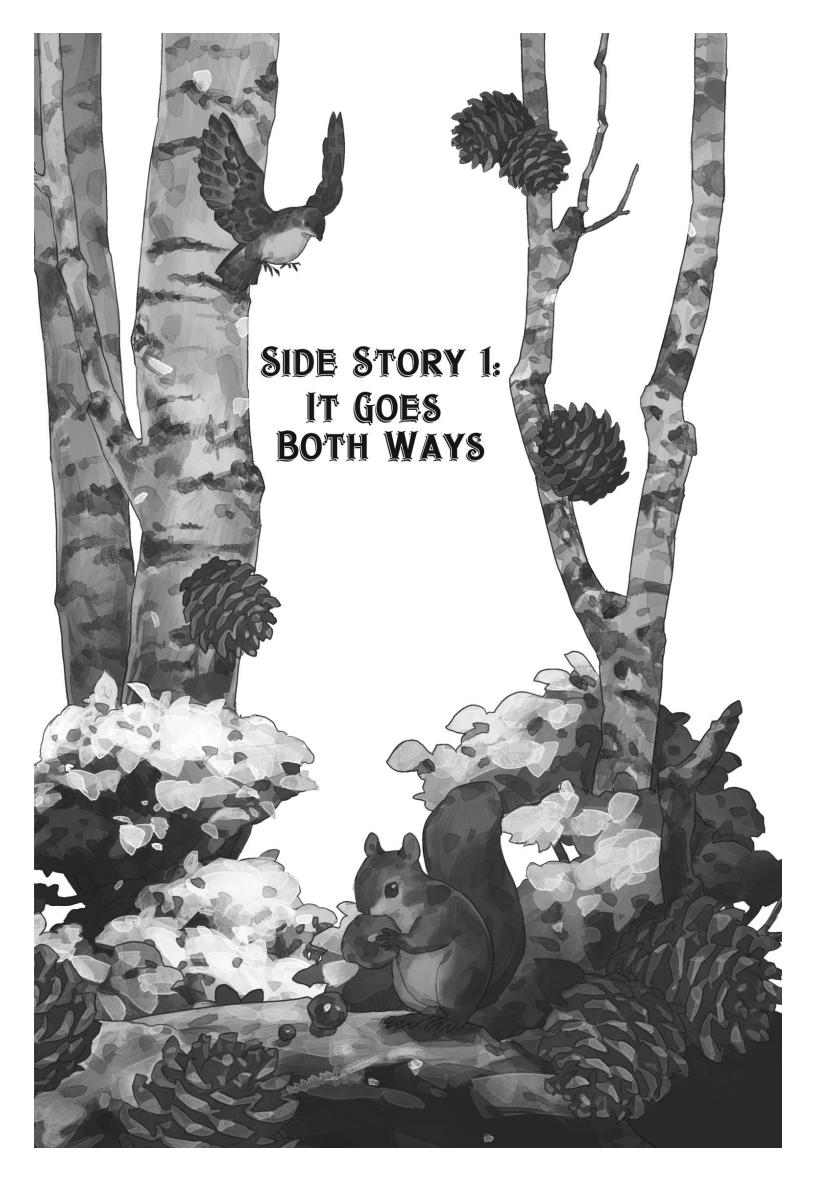
Dale and Snow looked at her blankly, but Rob knew what goat milk tasted like, and his heart soared. Love goat milk!

There was a time when Rob first came to live here when a customer gave Olivia some of their goat's milk, and she gave some to Rob. He must have really liked it if he still remembered.

It was currently the end of January, and Pepe's belly was growing larger. Olivia suspected they would have a goat kid in the summer.

"After a parting, there are new meetings," Olivia said. "I can't wait to meet this new baby goat."

"Definitely!" said Lara. "There are new hellos waiting for us!"



ARTHUR was an honest man who had never concealed anything from Olivia. Or he hadn't, *before*. And there was a reason he was now. He'd recently been keeping a tiny secret from her.

The secret started with blueberry wine.

Joshua, one of the restaurant's regular customers, came by to eat carrying with him a large bottle of blueberry wine. He said it was a present.

"It's about time to drink the wine I set to ferment in the summer. It's a good batch," he said.

"Thank you for giving me some every year. I can't wait," said Olivia.

"Well, you're always sharing your medicines with us. This is just a small way of giving back what we owe you."

"And it makes me happy."

Olivia loved the blueberry wine Joshua's family made, so she gladly accepted the gift.

She showed Arthur the bottle the moment he got home from work. "I got this as a present. Joshua's family is famous for their blueberry wine."

The wine, a lovely color of deep burgundy, had large chunks of blueberry settled in the bottom. Arthur smiled. "Look at that. Blueberry wine. I've never had that before. Used to have some cheap, strong alcohol made from wheat when I was a mercenary."

"You like to drink? I've barely ever seen you drink at home, though."

"I wouldn't say I like drinking alcohol. Basically just drink it socially. I get a serious headache the next day whenever I have it. You?"

"I...have never had a headache from drinking."

"Really? Makes me jealous."

That night, they had the blueberry wine with their dinner.

"Oh, it's so good," said Olivia. "I could drink gallons of Joshua's wife's blueberry wine." She drank half the bottle on her own.

Despite drinking that much, the only effect it seemed to have was turning her cheeks slightly pink. Arthur watched her thinking she didn't get drunk.

The two of them finished cleaning up after dinner, took baths, then got into bed.

"Today I made a chicken and vegetable soup, the restaurant was busy all day, and I got to drink wonderful blueberry wine. The day was filled with good things!" Olivia exclaimed.

"I'm glad you had a good day." That's when Arthur realized Olivia was chattier than usual. She seems in good spirits. Maybe she is a little tipsy.

Just as he was about to fall asleep, he realized he could sense Olivia's thoughts. He saw a scene where Rob and Olivia were talking inside the empty restaurant: *Hedgehog eat vegetables*, said Rob.

"Oh? The ones in my vegetable patch?" asked Olivia.

Yeah. I barked.

"Thank you, Rob. You're such a good boy." She stroked his round head, and he wagged his tail.

Is that a dream of a happy memory? wondered Arthur, smiling. He tried to go to sleep again, but then he started seeing images of Lara.

Olivia was saying to Lara, "You would never have had to feel that way if I'd met you sooner. I would have taken you in and raised you here."

Arthur was surprised to see Olivia say that before sobbing aloud.

He'd known that Olivia was outraged that Lara had been treated like an indentured servant who wasn't even paid for her work, but he hadn't heard anything about her crying about it.

He sat up in bed and looked at his wife's face. There were tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, I get it," he whispered.

In real life, Olivia never showed extreme emotions, though he wasn't sure if that was just her innate personality or if something about her life taught her to act that way. He'd never seen her outraged, bawling, or even ecstatic.

"But you don't hold back your feelings in your dreams."

Sympathy and an urge to help her filled his heart. He stroked her hair carefully so as not to wake her. Again and again, he stroked her hair as he whispered, "You can show your emotions in front of me."

Then he went to sleep filled with love for his wife.

The next morning, he woke before Olivia and looked at her face as she slept.

Olivia's eyes popped open at the same time as always and she said cheerily, "Good morning, Arthur," as she sat up.

"Morning. Doesn't seem like you have a headache."

"Nope, no headache here. I feel as good as can be, all my fatigue washed away from a good night's sleep. Right, shall we give today's work lots of energy, too?" she said, then got out of bed and went downstairs.

Arthur lay there thinking for a while. "It's always been me that falls asleep first and wakes up second. That's why I never realized Olivia has those vivid dreams, I guess." Then he shook his head. "Uh-uh. That's not good. I can't be snatching looks into Olivia's dreams. That's not a classy move."

He pushed thoughts of Olivia's dreams from his mind for the time being.

After coming home from the day's work at the pharmacy, he found Olivia and Lara chatting happily together.

"I'm home," he said while coming in. "You two look like you're in a good mood."

"Welcome home, Arthur," said Olivia. "A customer gave us some honey today. I was just asking Lara what we should do with it."

"Yeah?" Hearing about the pleasant conversation filled Arthur with warmth.

They ate dinner, then went to bed, with Olivia falling asleep again before him.

I need to hurry up and get to sleep, too, he thought and closed his eyes, but saw instead images of Olivia talking to an old woman. Is that...Marguerite?

He opened his eyes and looked beside him at Olivia. She was smiling as she

dreamed.

"You have sharp eyes, Olivia," said the old woman. "Good eyes for finding medicinal herbs."

Olivia smiled with joy at being complimented, then her dream quickly shifted to an old man.

"Let's go fishing, Olivia. Want to see who can catch the most?"

"Fishing? Yay! I won't lose to you in a fishing competition."

Arthur had a feeling that second one was of Jenkins. He was a slim man with white hair smiling kindly at Olivia. Wish I could've met Jenkins, Arthur thought. Wish I had a chance to talk to both of them.

He was enjoying her dreams. The scene changed to the river, a refreshing breeze coming off the water as sunlight glittered on the surface. It was beautiful.

Olivia and Jenkins sat in the shade of the tree throwing their lines in the river, bringing up fish after fish, smiling each time.

There was also a dream of Olivia walking through the forest with the golden deer, or of her playing in the river.

Olivia's dreams seem to mostly be things that really happened, thought Arthur.

Those dreams were as beautiful as jewels to him. But he did feel guilty.

It doesn't matter how good the dreams are, it's not right to go peeking into them.

Arthur, being as conscientious as he was, told Olivia everything about seeing her dreams.

"I'm sorry. I saw your dreams. Over two nights, too," he said.

"Oh, you did? What sort of dreams did I have?" Olivia didn't look surprised or angry.

Arthur was honest about everything he saw.

"Those are all things that really happened," she said. "How nostalgic. Quite

interesting those are the sort of dreams I had."

"You're not angry?"

"I'm not angry. You only picked up the dreams I was putting out, after all."

"All your dreams were good. Which is why I couldn't help just watching, rather than waking you up. Sorry."

"Well, it goes both ways. Don't worry about it. It's actually better that you don't wake me. I'd never get enough sleep if you woke me up every time I started dreaming," she said with a smile.

"Goes both ways...? What? Wait, do you see my dreams too?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

Arthur's heart started racing. What kind of dreams do I have? I don't remember dreaming at all. And they're dreams, they could've been about anything. They wouldn't be anything that could hurt Olivia, would they?

He was so taken aback he didn't realize his thoughts were leaking out to Olivia. She chuckled, thinking he was so cute. "It's all right, Arthur. I haven't seen any dreams you need to be that worried about."

"Uh... Mind if I ask what kind of dreams I had?"

"Of course not. I've seen dreams where you were sitting around a campfire eating skewers of meat with the other mercenaries."

"Oh. Yeah. We did that a lot."

"There was another dream about you winning an arm-wrestling competition."

"That happened, too. Was I smiling when I was having those dreams?"

"Yeah. You looked like you were having fun." She then paused for a few moments before saying, "There was another one where you were working as a guard for a noble family. Where a beautiful noble girl was causing you trouble by constantly flirting with you."

"Ack! Uh, well, yeah. That did happen, too. But I didn't—"

"I know. If she made an advance, you just gave her a cool, 'I'm working, my lady.' But you were thinking about how beautiful she was."

"Urgh..."

Olivia put on the sort of constructed smile she used for people she didn't know and said, "It's fine though. It doesn't bother me."

"It clearly does bother you. But it was a dream. I can't control my dreams."

"I know. They're dreams. You can't do anything about them. And you can't do anything about the fact that you're popular with the ladies. And you can't do anything about the fact that a beautiful lady caught your eye."

"Come on, Olivia. We're talking about a job that was ten years ago. I don't even remember what she looks like."

Olivia burst into laughter. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I swear I'm not angry. I'm just teasing."

"Really? Thank God."

"I've seen people's dreams so many times since I was a child. I don't think there's anything I could see there that would surprise me. We humans can adapt to anything."

Arthur gently took her hand. "I'm guessing you've probably seen some scary dreams, too," he said.

"Yeah. But I have you, now. I'm not afraid of people like I was before, thanks to you."

And so, Arthur learned another of Olivia's secrets.

"I think you're so strong because you've had to overcome these things," he said.

"Maybe. Probably. Welp, I need to get up and get to work," she said with a soft smile as she went to the kitchen.

Side Story 2: What Enola Wants

A woman Olivia didn't recognize was standing outside the restaurant looking at the "Closed" sign with consternation.

Olivia opened the door and asked, "Can I help you?"

The woman, in her forties most likely, looked relieved and said, "I'm sorry to bother you while you're closed, but you wouldn't happen to have cherry tea, would you?"

"I would."

"My name is Mildred. I'm a servant at one of the mansions nearby."

Olivia saw the woman struggling with what she was going to say next, so she invited her into the restaurant.

"My master would like to speak with you..." she said once inside. "But he can't leave the house because of an injury he had six months ago."

"He wants to talk to me?"

"I don't know what about, specifically. I understand it's a lot to ask since you have your business to look after, but would you please consider going to see him?"

Mildred's heart was as apologetic as her words, and also filled with a strong compassion towards her master.

Refusing would make things very difficult for her, thought Olivia. And she doesn't seem to want to cause me any harm.

Aloud, she said, "All right. I'd be happy to visit as long as I can wait until the day my restaurant is closed. Where do you live?"

Olivia's acceptance seemed to take a weight off Mildred's shoulders. She quickly told Olivia the address then left, saying she'd send a carriage for her on the day.

On the day the restaurant closed, a carriage came just as promised at the agreed-upon time. They were going to the next village over. Olivia didn't remember ever hearing the name of Mildred's master, Henry Archibald, but one look at the carriage as she got in made her think it had to be a wealthy household.

She was even more taken aback by how luxurious the mansion was when they arrived.

This Henry Archibald must be nobility, she thought.

The front door opened while Olivia was still feeling flustered, and Mildred jogged over. "Ms. Olivia, thank you for coming. My master is eager to meet you. Please come in."

Olivia entered the mansion as Mildred urged. She then led Olivia to a room where a man in his fifties was waiting in a wheelchair.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," said Olivia. "My name is Olivia Eagleton Dariu."

"And it's a pleasure to have you. Thank you for coming. Please, take a seat," he said.

Mildred said she was going to prepare some tea and left the room, then Henry broached the subject. "I once visited your restaurant while on a hunting trip ten years ago. I imagine you wouldn't remember me."

"Were you... Yes, you were riding a pure white horse, weren't you?"

Henry looked surprised, an expression that turned to joy. "You do remember. The horse's name is Enola. She's here in the mansion still. The problem is my condition. I'm unable to properly exercise her."

"Couldn't you ask someone else to do that?"

Henry shook his head. "Enola won't let anyone but me ride her, though I think you may have a chance. If she does let you ride her, I'd like you to take her. Would that be too much of an imposition?"

Olivia quickly skimmed Henry's heart, but she couldn't pick up anything.

"You said something to Enola that time ten years ago when we visited," he

continued. "I was watching from up in the saddle. You'd only just met her, but she let you touch her. I couldn't believe my eyes."

Olivia listened without saying anything. She didn't want to say anything she shouldn't.

"It's incredibly rare for Enola to allow someone she doesn't know to touch her. Even my attendants were shocked. It turned out there was a small thorn stuck in her leg, wasn't there?"

"Like I explained at the time, it just seemed from the way she was walking that there was something wrong with her leg."

"Even so, it made me believe you and Enola could get along very well."

Mildred came back then with cherry tea, which the two drank together.

"Ah, it's wonderful," said Henry. "There are shops that sell cherry tea in the capital as well, but the aroma of this one is far superior."

"I'm sorry to rush things, but may I see Enola?" asked Olivia.

"Of course. Let's go right away." Henry rang a gold bell and Mildred quickly came back into the room. "To the stable," he said.

"Yes, my lord."

Mildred pushed Henry's wheelchair out of the room with Olivia walking behind, her mind racing. I wanted to talk to Enola alone, but I don't think that's going to happen. How do I check how Enola is feeling without revealing my ability?

Enola was just as white and beautiful as she was ten years ago. She stared at Olivia and the others as they approached.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet, Enola," said Henry, and Enola's moist black eyes turned to Olivia.

"Hello, Enola," said Olivia. "We met ten years ago. Do you remember?"

You make thorn pain go away.

Olivia nodded in confirmation without saying anything. "My lord, may I touch her?" she asked.

"Please. Just be careful."

Olivia reached out and gently stroked Enola's muzzle.

"I knew it," said Henry. "You are special. She'd normally back away or shake her head to prevent anyone from touching her."

"I see." Olivia now turned to Enola and said, "Enola, I'd like to try riding you and taking you for a run. Would that be all right?"

All right.

The answer was clear to Olivia, though it just sounded like a snicker to everyone else.

"Could I perhaps borrow some riding breeches?" she asked.

They quickly found some riding breeches, and Olivia changed and climbed quickly into the saddle. Henry and Mildred's eyes went wide.

Olivia and Enola first walked slowly around the large track, gradually picking up speed until they were running at quite the pace. That's when Olivia started talking to Enola.

"Your master wants to give you up."

No want leave.

"I didn't think so. You want to stay with him, don't you?"

I stay here.

"All right. Here's the plan: if I talk to you in front of him, shake your head when I say something you don't like. Try it."

Enola vigorously shook her head.

"That's it. Now, if you are happy with something, nod your head up and down. Try that, too."

This time her head went up and down by a lot.

"Do that if I talk to you, but also if your master talks to you. All right?"

Enola nodded.

Olivia drew Enola up in front of Henry, who had been watching, and

dismounted. "Enola's a smart horse," she said. "She's actually responding when I talk to her. She wants to stay here. Isn't that right, Enola? You want to live here?"

Henry's jaw dropped open when he saw Enola nod. "Incredible. That's not just a coincidence, though, is it? Enola, I can't ride you anymore. But this woman will care for you and exercise you. I want you to live with her."

Enola shook her head. Henry frowned, and his eyes went misty.

"She is really clever," said Olivia. "Enola, you want to stay near Lord Archibald, right?"

She nodded.

"With that being the case, I'm afraid I won't be able to take Enola," said Olivia with a smile.

Henry went quiet. Enola moved closer to him and gently rubbed her huge head against his.

"Oh, Enola. What a lovely girl. You want to live here?"

There were tears streaming down his face, and Mildred's.

"Enola," he said. "Promise me you'll let others ride you. That will make me feel so much better. If you want to stay here, let others ride you. All right?"

Enola nodded vigorously over and over.



OLIVIA watched Mildred and Enola fade into the distance after dropping her off home and thought, *I'm glad*.

Glad what?

"Oh, Snow. I'm glad that white horse will be able to live with the person she loves."

Hm. I love here. I love Olivia.

"I love you too," said Olivia as she picked Snow up, and Dale came running over too.

Pick me up too!

"All right, here's a cuddle for Dale."

Snow quickly slipped from Olivia's arms.

Olivia mine! said Dale.

Snow turned to him and meowed. Olivia Arthur's mate.

Meh! I know!

Olivia laughed.

Afterword

HELLO, this is Syuu. Thank you for picking up the second volume of *Soup Forest*. The basic setting of *Soup Forest* remains almost the same in this volume, detailing things as if a fixed camera has been placed on the edge of the forest to record what's going on there. The camera follows and records Olivia, who lives on the edge of the forest. Meeting and parting with various people, Olivia continues to make soup on the edge of the forest with the animals. The forest animals live determined lives, sometimes relying on and sometimes using Olivia. In a world where nature plays the leading role, the animals are dedicated to surviving and passing on how to live to the next generation. Olivia is a woman who respects such animals and lives in both their world and the human world, keeping a certain distance from both.

This time, Lara, who's not afraid of others, appears in the world captured by the camera. Although Lara grew up being confronted with the ugliness of the human heart, she has almost no fear of people. Lara's heart is always open to the outside world. By interacting with such a bright and strong woman, Olivia once again reconsiders how she interacts with others. In the main story, Olivia expands her world on the human side, and the biggest change is that instead of reading other people's minds one-sidedly as before, she comes to understand them through interaction.

Furthermore, being recognized as having knowledge equivalent to that of a royal apothecary is an unexpected boon. A new door has opened in Olivia's human world. What kind of world is on the other side of the door? Please look forward to how this unfolds in the main story.

Soup Forest is the story of Olivia, whose interactions with others help her grow as a person. Even as the seasons and the people and animals who come and go from Soup Forest change, the camera remains ever-focused on Olivia's growth as a person. This volume sees the appearance of a parrot, the golden deer, rabbits, robins, the cats, Dale and Snow, the horses, Annie and Greta, and a fox. It's a lot of fun to write the animals' inner thoughts. The pure and tough animals liven up the main story.

Soup Forest is a fairy tale for adults, to soothe their hearts. Please enjoy this

story of humans and animals that unfolds on the edge of the forest, along with Muni's beautiful illustrations.

On this lucky day, October 2023.



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato



When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Reat LID Her Fiance and Found True Love

By BlueBlue



Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken



A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.







