

Soup Forest

The Story of the Woman Who Speaks
with Animals and the Former Mercenary

1

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Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary Vol.1

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SOUP NO MORI ~ DOUBUTSU TO KAIWA SURU OLIVIA TO MOTO YOUHEI
ARTHUR NO MONOGATARI ~

by Syuu

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Prologue

OLIVIA'S grandfather, the man who took her in and raised her, died at the age of seventy-eight. Her grandmother, who loved Olivia with all her heart, had passed only four days earlier at seventy-five years of age.

Her grandparents' friends were surprised the two moved on so close to each other, but they were both quite old for people in this country. This resulted in the reception at the restaurant after the funeral to have an air of resignation rather than sorrow.

All the funeral attendees came up to Olivia to give her words of consolation.

"They both lived long lives. It was just their time."

"It's because they were so close. I don't think they could bear being without each other."

"I'm sure they're happy to be together again in God's garden."

And, at the end, they all said the exact same thing:

"Olivia, try and keep your chin up. Feel free to reach out to me if you're ever in trouble. Jenkins and Marguerite cared about you more than anything. Don't hesitate to come to me for some advice. You're always welcome."

Olivia put on a brave face, thanking each and every one of them with a smile.

But, once the last person left, the oppressive emptiness of the restaurant overwhelmed Olivia. She headed into the forest, despite the late hour.

A sparrow she recognized flew ahead of her, flitting from branch to branch so Olivia could keep up. The sparrow's friends joined them, dancing along behind them in the same manner.

Olivia walked farther and farther into the forest, drawn by the flock of sparrows. They passed by a badger who trembled with fear at the depth of Olivia's sorrow, but it too abandoned its search for food and joined them.

They eventually came to a fast-flowing river.

She sat on a large, white rock by the river's edge and stared at the water, not seeing anything. The pain flooded from her heart in an unending deluge.

An otter husband and wife popped their faces out from the other side of the river, standing up several times to look at Olivia, shocked by the heartache flowing from her.

Sometime later, an old acquaintance, a fox, peered out from the edge of the forest. It came up to her, stopping about ten feet away, looked at her, and let out a whine. It was worried. *You hurt?*

"Hurt? I guess so. My grandparents died," said Olivia, painting an image in her mind of her grandparents in their eternal slumber. The adult fox seemed to understand. It came closer and rubbed its head against her hand, twice, then a third time. "Thank you. You're so kind," she said.

The fox eventually settled itself down to sit next to her. The badger was somewhat on edge because of the fox, so it sat a short distance away. The trees were filled with sparrows, robins, flycatchers, and thrushes. Those wild birds chirped amongst themselves every once in a while as they watched Olivia.

A large beast appeared from the forest on the other side of the river. The fox soundlessly disappeared into the forest in the blink of an eye. The badger was long gone. The birds exploded into chirrups.

Bear!

Bear here!

Danger, human!

Olivia slowly stood and crept backwards, keeping her eyes locked on the bear. Bears had incredible physical capabilities. Her grandfather, a former knight, had drilled that fact into her, but this bear didn't make any move to cross the river. Olivia couldn't feel any emotions coming from it. It just stood there on the riverbank, looking at her.

"It looks like you're not hungry. That's good for me," said Olivia as she continued backing away. Once inside the forest on this side, she turned and

walked as quickly as she could back home while periodically looking over her shoulder.

The bear watched Olivia leave then turned and vanished back into the forest.



WHAT Olivia didn't know was that the bear knew her. Fifteen years earlier, when Olivia was five, it watched over her as she escaped into the forest, waves of sadness washing from her heart as she did.

The bear was still young at the time and had been searching for food in the night forest. As it did, it sensed this mass of sorrow approaching from afar. In a state of confusion, it went to investigate this lump of sadness. The only thing in the forest that could threaten a young, fully-grown bear was another fully-grown bear.

After walking for some time through a moonlit forest, the young bear found it. A human—a human child running through the forest. Humans rarely if ever walked around at night, let alone a human child in the forest all by themselves.

Maybe hunters behind it, thought the bear. It inspected every sound and smell in the vicinity, but decided the child was definitely alone.

The child's small body released waves of sorrow, hopelessness, and fear. The bear had never encountered something like this, so it followed the girl while keeping its distance at all times. Its brown fur blended into the dark forest, and the child was in the grips of her own terror. She had no idea a bear was following her.

Eventually, the child fell asleep, leaning against a tree.

Child quickly get eaten, thought the bear. The forest was full of foxes and wolves. This tempting-smelling human child would be devoured with not a single bone left behind. For some reason the bear didn't really understand, it wanted to protect the girl. Perhaps it felt sympathy for the little creature and the hopelessness and fear it felt coming from her. It remembered once watching an elderly bear slip off a cliff and feeling its sorrow, hopelessness, and fear as it breathed its last breath.

The child slept soundly. Eventually, the sun rose.

Humans. Humans come.

The bear heard human voices. It moved away from the child and watched from the trees' shadows. It planned to leap out and drive the humans away if they tried to harm her.

"Jenkins, look! Isn't that a child over there?"

"It is, isn't it? Is she still alive?"

The two humans rushed over to the child, patted her all over and called to her.

"Hey there, little missy, are you out here all on your own?"

"Oh my, her arms and legs are covered in scrapes. What in the world happened? Her dress is soaking wet from all the dew. Did she really spend the whole night out here?"

The child opened her eyes, and the bear felt a tsunami of relief and happiness coming from her.

Probably fine now, thought the bear, and it turned and headed off in the opposite direction.



"JENKINS, why do you keep looking behind us?" asked Marguerite.

"You didn't see it, did you? There was a big, young bear near the girl. It left after we showed up."

"A bear?! Oh dear, we made it just in time. It would've eaten her if we'd shown up a little later."

"Hm. Yeah, that's likely," said Jenkins, but he didn't sound convinced. To him, it looked like the bear had been watching over the girl. *But that's crazy*, he thought, laughing the idea off.

He was carrying the little girl, who seemed happy to stay in his arms. The state and care put into her clothes, skin, and hair made him fairly certain she was a noble's daughter.

Marguerite, walking beside him, asked the girl, "What's your name, dear?"

“Olivia,” said the girl.

“Where’s your family? The people from your house?”

The girl looked frightened at the mention of her family. “Please help me!” she said. “Don’t send me back home, please! Please help me!”

Other than telling them her name, the girl just kept begging for their help.

Marguerite looked at her, confused, but eventually broke into tears because of how bad she felt for the girl in her desperate state. “Jenkins,” she said, “I think she ran away from home.”

“Seems like it.”

“Olivia, don’t worry. We won’t send you back home. You can come to our house. I bet you’re hungry. And you could probably also use a drink I imagine. Come on, let’s go together. I’ll whip up a lovely soup just for you. It’ll make you feel much better.”

That was how Olivia met her adoptive grandparents, Jenkins and Marguerite. They raised her with love, teaching her every single thing they thought she would need to survive.

Her grandfather taught her how to manage the household, how to fish (and everything she needed to know about fishing), and what she needed to be careful of in the forest. Her grandmother taught her how to cook wonderful food, how to make medicines, and how to diagnose common illnesses. Both of them taught her how two people who love each other care for each other.



OLIVIA stood looking at the moonlit garden, tense from the emotions brought on by the thought of beginning her life alone.

“Grandma, Grandpa, thank you for everything. It’s because of you that I can continue on alone. I kept it a secret from you, but I can hear peoples’ and animals’ inner voices. Yours too. I know you loved me from the bottom of your heart. Thank you so much. I’m going to stay here and make a living cooking soup, just like the soup you made for me the day you found me in the forest, Grandma. The kind of soup that makes people feel better. Please, continue to

watch over me.”

Chapter 1: Three Bean Soup, Rain, and the Mercenary

THE Soup Forest was a little dining establishment whose main offering was a different soup each day. They were usually hearty meals filled with fresh vegetables.

It was eight in the morning and the restaurant's owner, Olivia, stood in the kitchen, her warm brown hair pulled back to prevent it from getting in the way of her cooking.

"I think today I'll do a bean and bacon soup," she said.

It was spring, the season for fresh beans. Olivia had set the beans she got in stock yesterday to soak overnight, and it was about time to use the bacon she'd cured herself.

She lit the fire in her stove and set the pot with water and beans on it.

A pattering sound drifted in through the open window.

"The rain's started," she said, watching as the drops turned patches of the ground dark and smelling the scent of new rain. Her green eyes followed Rob, her dog, as he came back in through the doggy door with a resigned harrumph. He then cut right across the kitchen to his bed beside the stairs, where he turned circles several times before settling down on the mattress.

The rain quickly started coming down in earnest. She could hear the water sloshing as it rushed down the gutters into the rain barrels.

Soup Forest was a restaurant just off the road without any other buildings nearby. Olivia didn't think anything of this—she'd lived there since she was five—but most women who'd grown up in the city would be afraid, unable to live out there on their own.

"I'm not, thanks to my boy," she said, looking over at Rob.

He was lying curled in a circle, his tail tight against his body, but he opened his eyes and looked at her when he heard her.

“You’re a good boy, Rob.”

He stayed curled up, but the tip of his tail wagged back and forth.

Olivia smiled as she diced the bacon. She’d smoked it herself, and it smelled good.

Once finished with that, her eyes slid to look out the window again. “Oh, there’s someone there. I wonder if he’s all right.”

A man was walking down the road. There was nowhere for him to get out of the rain nearby, other than Olivia’s restaurant. He didn’t seem to be in a hurry to seek shelter, though. He walked with his head slightly bowed against the rain, each step taken at a leisurely pace.

Perhaps he noticed Olivia staring at him from the window, because he raised his head and looked at her. Olivia hurried over to the front door, opened it, and waved, and the man changed directions towards the restaurant.

Once she was sure he was coming, Olivia rushed upstairs to get a towel.

The bell above the door rang by the time she’d come back down with a towel. The man was standing in the doorway, dripping wet and looking around. He must have been surprised by all the pots with shoulder-high plants arranged around the room, jugs with ferns hanging from the ceiling, and dishes lining the windowsill with flowers in them.

“Would you mind if I waited out the rain from here for a bit, ma’am?” said the man.

“Not at all. Take a seat wherever you like, and you can use this to dry off. Do you have a change of clothes?”

“I do, but I imagine it’s soaked through, too. Would it be all right if I sat near the fire?”

“Of course, right this way.”

The man took off his coat, heavy with rain, and hung it on a coat hook near the door. Water dripped off it, quickly forming a puddle on the walnut hardwood floor.

“Ah, sorry. Your floor,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it, it happens all the time.” Olivia smiled and moved the bucket near the entrance under his coat.

Beneath his coat, he had only a thin shirt on, which clung to his muscular chest from the rain, showing his tanned skin. He was a large man, easily over six foot tall, with gray hair and warm brown eyes.

Olivia was alone in her restaurant with a man she didn’t know, but she wouldn’t be able to run her business if she focused on her concern and unease.

She led him to the kitchen, moved a chair near the fire, and gestured for him to sit.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No worries, just warm yourself up here.”

She hurried upstairs to see if she could find him a change of clothes. She pulled the loosest fitting shirt and trousers she could find of her grandfather’s old clothing from a dresser. When she came downstairs, she found the man sitting in the chair warming his hands by the fire.

“Would you like something to change into?” Olivia asked. “It’s just my grandfather’s clothing. You’ll catch a cold if you stay in those soaked things.”

“It may not be my place to say this, but you should be more careful,” he warned.

“What?”

“You invited a man you don’t know into your kitchen, then went upstairs. For all you know, I could’ve had a knife on me and attacked you,” he explained.

“Oh, that’s what you mean. Well, if you had tried anything, he would’ve rushed you and bit you,” said Olivia. The moment she did, Rob rose to his feet, locked eyes with the man, and moved so he stood between the man and Olivia.

“Hm, he’s well trained.”

“I trained him myself. Anyway, you’ll catch a chill if we keep chatting like this. Would you like to change into these?” she asked again.

“It’s much appreciated, if you don’t mind, ma’am.”

The man moved out into the front of the restaurant, and Olivia threw the diced bacon into a frying pan. Once it started sizzling, she used a wooden spatula to stir it, browning it on all sides.

She turned to check how the man was getting on, only to see the trousers were nowhere near long enough, but they were better than the soaking wet clothes he had been wearing.

“If it’s not too much trouble, could I wash my clothes while I’m here?” he asked.

“Feel free. The washing room’s through the door to the right of the stairs. You can use the soap that’s in there. There’s water in the jug, and the well’s outside.”

“Thank you.”

Olivia focused her attention on the soup. She set the bean and bacon soup to simmer, adjusting the stove so it didn’t boil.

The tantalizing aroma filtered through the restaurant as the rain continued to fall.

After a while, the man poked his head out from the washing room, holding the tub filled with his washing. She called out to tell him to hang it up on the drying line in there.

The soup was finished by the time he came back, as well as thinly sliced bread fried in butter until crisp and some scrambled eggs.

“Do you want to have some with me?” Olivia invited.

“Thank you. I was getting hungry. My name’s Arthur, by the way. Arthur Dariu.”

“I’m Olivia. Eat up before it goes cold.”

Arthur didn’t start eating until after she did. He carried a spoonful of soup to his mouth and, seemingly without meaning to, said, “That’s good.”

“I’m glad you like it. It’s the soup of the day.”

“Soup of the day? Does that mean you have a different soup each day?”

“It does. But, if there’s any leftovers, I’ll serve it the next day too. Some customers like it better that way, since the flavors meld together more and get milder.”

The next topic to come up was the number of potted plants in the restaurant.

“I renamed the restaurant ‘Soup Forest’ since all the potted plants I have make it feel like you’re strolling through a forest,” explained Olivia.

“It used to have a different name?” he asked.

“It was called Jenkins’s Diner originally. Jenkins is my grandfather’s name.”

“Hm.”

Arthur then told her bits about towns to the south, while she nodded and listened. He had a deep, gentle voice that was pleasant to listen to.

“Do you mind if I ask what sort of work you do, Arthur?” she inquired.

“I was a mercenary.”

“Was?”

“I quit. For fourteen years after I turned fourteen, I was a mercenary. Which makes me twenty-eight this year.”

“Really? I have helped my grandparents with this restaurant ever since I was ten. I’m twenty-five this year.”

All the dishes on the table were cleaned of food.

“Everything was delicious,” said Arthur. “The soup, the bread, the scrambled eggs, everything.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. It’s been a long time since I’ve shared a meal with someone.”

Arthur raised an eyebrow slightly. “You really should be more careful. It’s not safe for a woman to tell a man she just met that she lives alone.”

“Huh, now that you mention it, it is a bit careless. But nothing bad’s ever happened before.”

“Disaster strikes last, ma’am. No one sees tragedies day in and day out, not

until one happens to them. I've seen it happen plenty of times."

"I'll be more careful."

"Please do. You seem like too good a person to let something bad happen to you."

"All right, well, I think I'll be a bit meddlesome while also being careless. Why don't you wait here while your clothes dry? You can whittle away the time reading a book, if you like. You can just stay right there in that seat for as long as you want."

The seat was on the verge between the kitchen and the restaurant front. Olivia's grandfather used to take his break there, reading a book while he sat.

Chapter 2: The Late-Night Visitor

THE rain gave way around noon, and the first customer of the day finally stopped by. It was one of her regulars, a man in his fifties.

“Good to see you, Joshua,” Olivia said.

“It really came down earlier, didn’t it? I managed to avoid the worst of it while out thanks to your weather forecast,” said Joshua.

“I’m glad I was on the money.”

“Could I get your soup of the day and a slice of bread? Oh, and a sausage,” said Joshua, placing his order after glancing at the blackboard on the wall that said, “Soup of the Day: Three bean and bacon.”

“Coming right up,” Olivia said as she moved into the kitchen.

Joshua took notice of Arthur sitting in the corner, his eyes landing on the too-short trousers and shirt sleeves. *Those’re Jenkins’s clothes, aren’t they?* he murmured in his head.

“Sorry for the wait,” Olivia said as she brought the food. “Here’s your bean and bacon soup of the day, bread, and sausage.”

“Looks great.”

Customers started trickling in. They were traveling merchants, local farmers, the man who delivered the meat—stopping for a bite while there—and even some who came all the way from town in carriages. The restaurant bustled with activity. Since it was so small, it only had five tables that seated four people each.

The last customer left around two in the afternoon.

“Arthur,” Olivia called to him. “How are you feeling about lunch? Are you hungry? You don’t have to worry about paying since I called you into the restaurant.”

“If you have any of today’s soup left, I’ll take another bowl of that. And I’ll be paying. For this morning’s food, too. I’ll feel better that way.”

“You sure? Well, if you insist.”

Arthur handled paying before she got the food, then settled down at a table. He only ordered soup, but Olivia said she’d worked up an appetite while she was busy and went ahead and sliced up two sausages, placed each sausage on a piece of thinly sliced bread, and served that along with the soup, then added in a side of asparagus she quickly boiled.

A little after they started eating, Arthur said, “You were right.”

“About what?” asked Olivia, looking at him with confusion.

“Well, the soup was great this morning when you’d just finished it, but the bacon flavor really got into the beans once you let it simmer for a while. It tastes completely different. You also have a really good knack for judging the amount of salt.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“All the customers today said they avoided the rain thanks to your forecast. What’s that about?”

“Oh, that. I just get a feeling whenever it’s about to rain. My grandmother used to say I was as sensitive to the signs of rain as a wild animal,” she explained.

“Hm.” Arthur fell deep into thought as he started eating again. Almost every customer had thanked Olivia for her weather forecast. *She must be really accurate*, he thought.

Rob came from the corner of the kitchen where he’d been sleeping, sat at Olivia’s feet, and whined. “Hold on just a bit,” she said, then stood and got some small pieces of boiled chicken from the kitchen. “Just a little bit.”

He scarfed it down then returned to his bed, his tail wagging. Olivia’s eyes were filled with tenderness as she watched him.

Arthur went out into the backyard to check on his clothes. He'd rehung them out back when the rain stopped, but it was still humid outside from that morning's rain. They likely wouldn't even dry by evening. He didn't mind, though. As he started to put his still-damp clothes on, Olivia hesitantly stopped him.

"This might be butting my nose into your business a bit too much," she began. "But it's going to rain again soon. I think it's going to be just as heavy as it was this morning, too. If you plan to head to town, it may be best to wait until tomorrow. I can't offer you a room in the house, but there is the barn, if you don't mind sharing it with the goats."

"It's going to rain again?"

"Yep."

He had a hard time believing that, though, so he went out of his way to walk outside and stare up at the sky. There were thick clouds, but also some patches of blue. He didn't think there was about to be another rainstorm.

Olivia looked at him with uncertainty.

"You wouldn't mind if I stayed here just a bit longer, would you?" he asked. "I'd like to be sure about your prediction."

"I don't mind at all. It's probably for the best, actually."

After about an hour, it really did start raining again, and it was fairly strong.

"Uh, just checking, but when do you think it'll let up?" he asked.

"My gut's telling me it won't stop until well into the night. I wish I could lend you an umbrella, but I only have the one."

"Guess I'll have to impose and take you up on that offer of the goat barn. I'll pay for the night's stay, and I swear I won't enter the house."

"There's no need to pay. And Rob would attack a bear if he thought I was in danger, so I'm not worried about that either."

"It's reassuring you have such a great bodyguard. And you have goats in the barn? I didn't even notice."

“They’re really well-behaved when it rains. They hate when it’s coming down like this. Let me show you inside the barn while it’s still light out.”

The two of them squeezed under the umbrella and walked through the rain from the main house to the barn.

“This is a barn?” Arthur asked, impressed. “Looks more like a detached annex.”

“It used to be. My grandfather always enjoyed lending a hand to others. He’d let travelers who had no other place to stay sleep here for the night. The bottom level is just a dirt floor, so I ended up making it the goat hut, but the loft is still fine for humans to use. If you don’t mind climbing up the ladder first, Arthur,” she said, indicating her skirt.

Arthur went up the steep ladder, using only his legs and right arm, he didn’t move his left. Olivia watched as he climbed, but then followed up behind him.

“Huh, actually looks pretty comfy,” Arthur observed.

“Right? I’ll get everything ready for you,” said Olivia. She pulled off the dust sheets from the furniture, including the bed. “Don’t worry about the mattress being in here all the time, I make sure to take it out in the sun on a regular basis. I’ll go get you a blanket.”

“I can do that.”

“You sure? Well, here’s your lamp. Feel free to let me know if you need anything.”

After that, the two ate dinner together, and Arthur turned in for an early night on the second floor of the goat barn, but he had a hard time getting to sleep. His left shoulder was aching from an old wound he got in battle, perhaps getting soaked like that from the rain was making it act up.

At some point, he realized the rain had stopped. *It really did stop during the night. Olivia’s kind of like a fortune teller, or a witch,* he thought, impressed.

He gave up trying to sleep, the pain was keeping him awake, and instead sat up and looked out the window. After some time staring into the darkness, he saw a light come on in the main house. *What’s going on?* he wondered, not

really focusing on it until he heard the bell over the door let out a quiet chime.

“She’s going out this late at night?” he said with surprise as he watched Olivia leave the house, a lamp in hand. Her black dog, Rob, was with her, but there was another dark shadow at the very edge of the lamplight, walking ahead as if leading her somewhere.

Arthur blinked several times in disbelief, then squinted into the darkness. “Is that...?”

The dark form was large and four-legged, and, no matter how many times he rubbed his eyes, it still looked exactly like a wolf. He leapt out of bed and quickly changed into his own still-damp clothes before strapping on his belt with his sword and dagger and rushing down the ladder.

The light from Olivia’s lamp was already far ahead, steadily moving deeper into the forest.

“This reckless woman...” he muttered. He didn’t understand why Olivia was with a wolf. After a moment of indecision, he followed them at a distance. He was good at tailing people. He put one foot quietly in front of the other, moving soundlessly.

They walked for about twenty minutes before the light ahead stopped. He quietly crept closer to get a better look. Olivia had hung the oil lamp on a branch and crouched down, her eyes on a wolf pup lying limply on the ground.

Chapter 3: The Den

ARTHUR took shallow breaths to keep the wolf from noticing him.

Olivia brought her ear to the pup, then rifled through her satchel before pulling something out. She seemed to be tending to it.

How exactly is she friendly with a wolf? The mother wolf even came all the way to her house to bring her here... thought Arthur. There was so much about this scene he didn't understand. He barely believed what he was seeing.

Eventually, Olivia appeared to finish her work on the pup. She lifted it up and she and the mother wolf turned to walk into the forest.

That was when Rob, the black dog, and the mother wolf stopped at the same time, their noses held high in the air, sniffing.

Damn, did the wind change directions? Arthur wondered.

The mother wolf charged in Arthur's direction. He clambered up a tree, sharp pain shooting through his left shoulder, but there was no point favoring it now if it meant his death. Rob was coming at him too, trailing behind the wolf.

Arthur rushed up to a high limb, high enough the wolf couldn't reach him, and stood there, looking at Olivia as if begging for an explanation.

"Arthur? Did you come to protect me?" she inquired. She didn't sound angry, just confused.

The mother wolf was snarling at him, her fangs bared. Rob was barking like crazy, but he didn't seem angry.

Olivia crouched down so her head was level with the wolf's and spoke to her. "I'm sorry. He's not a bad person. Please forgive him. He's a member of my pack. He's not your enemy. He will not harm your pup. Don't worry. And, Rob, quiet."

The wolf's fur was still standing on end, but she stopped baring her fangs at

him. Rob looked at Olivia and wagged his tail as if to ask, "I did good?"

"You can come down now, Arthur. Don't look the wolf in the eye. And don't come any closer to me or the pup," Olivia cautioned.

"All right. I came 'cause I was worried, but it looks like I stepped into something I shouldn't've."

"The pup isn't well. I'm going back to the den with them, but I can't just leave you alone here. Follow us, but stay at a distance. Rob will protect you from other animals."

"S-Sure thing."

Olivia carried the pup as the mother wolf guided them deeper into the forest. After walking for a short while, they came to a huge beech tree growing on an incline. There was a gap in the tree's roots that appeared to be the wolf's den.



Two more pups popped their faces out of the hole, having noticed their mother returning. They then spotted Olivia and pulled back into the hole, and out came another wolf, nearly twice the size of the mother wolf. That had to be the father.

The mother made a gentle crooning sound, and the two wolf pups came back out, scrambling over each other to be the first one, then racing around their mother in circles. They scuffled against each other, trying to be the first to push their muzzle into their mother's belly for milk.

Olivia gently placed the third pup in front of the den. The father lifted it by the scruff and carried it inside.

No one ever got to see wolves this close when they were rearing their pups. It was more normal for the wolves to viciously attack the moment anyone strayed too close. Arthur wanted to see more, but Olivia quickly moved away from the den, likely heading back to the house.

The two of them plus Rob walked through the night forest in silence. Olivia was first to break the silence.

"Arthur, please don't mention that den to anyone. I'd feel terrible if humans targeted them while they were raising their pups."

"I don't plan on telling anyone. But, could you tell me what that was all about?"

"You want to know? Why?"

"Why? A wolf came to visit you in the middle of the night, you gave medical treatment to its pup, who didn't seem like it was doing too well, and then it led you all the way back to its den. That's not something you see every day. Actually, no. It's more than just that. You talked to the wolf back there, didn't you?"

Olivia had to look up at him as they walked side by side. He saw a mixture of emotions on her face: sorrow, confusion, resignation.

"I wanted to give you a place out of the rain because you seemed to be having a hard time out there when I saw you walking in the rain," she said. "I wanted

to give you something warm to fill your belly with. I thought you probably didn't have a place to stay for the night, so I suggested you stay in the barn. But for me to offer that same courtesy to a wolf, you think that's wrong? It's fine if I'm kind to humans, but I have to explain myself if I'm kind to a wolf?"

"No, I didn't mean to say you had to explain yourself to me if you don't want to."

"You're just interested then? Or curious?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, that's it. And I was just worried about you. Though, I caused trouble just being there."

"I appreciate you coming to check on me because you were worried. Thank you for that. But I don't plan on explaining myself or anything about that wolf pack. I'm sorry."

"Uh, right. I made you angry, didn't I?"

"I'm not angry. I'm sorry if I sounded harsh."

After that, they walked in silence.

Once they reached the house, Olivia placed her hand on the doorknob, turned to him, and said, "Is breakfast at seven tomorrow morning all right?"

"Sorry to make you go out of your way, but yeah. Thank you. See ya at seven. G'night."

"Good night."

She went into the house and Arthur heard the click of the lock. Feeling better knowing she locked the door, he made his way to the goat barn. The two goats were there, bleating quietly in their sleep.

He climbed the ladder, undressed, and laid in bed.

"She talked to a wolf," he murmured to himself. "And the wolf understood her. Did she raise the wolf or something? But it looked like it was living a normal wild wolf life now. And was the pup sick?"

There were so many things he wanted to know that he wasn't sure he could sleep, but he slipped off before he knew it.

He had a dream that Olivia was playing tag with the wolf pups. He was watching them from up in a tree, feeling jealous.

Chapter 4: Spring Vegetable Soup and Olivia's Secret

OLIVIA woke to the morning sun slanting into her room. She hadn't slept enough since she'd come home so late last night, but she suspected she might just sleep until the first customers came if she went back to sleep now. Instead, she worked up her energy and got out of bed.

She went downstairs, washed her face, gave Rob his breakfast, and started preparing her own. After lighting the fire in the stove, she roughly chopped a head of cabbage, thinking about last night's events while she moved on to chopping onion, celery, asparagus, and carrots.



JUST after getting into bed last night, she'd felt someone approaching, their heart filled with worry and sorrow. They were very powerful emotions, suddenly and painfully gripping Olivia's own heart.

She quickly got out of bed and looked out the window to see a wolf. The memories flooding into her from the wolf made it clear it wasn't a dog. It came up the moonlit path, its head hanging.

Olivia quickly changed clothes and rushed down the stairs to open the door with an oil lamp in hand. There she saw the female wolf, stricken with grief.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked.

My baby hurt, hurt. Help, help, help.

Olivia didn't hear words. It was emotions and images flowing directly from the wolf's mind into her own. Her heart ached from the mother wolf's emotions, desperate, at a loss for what to do.

Olivia took a deep breath, pulled on her outdoor clothes, grabbed the satchel and water flask she had ready for this sort of situation, then she stepped out of the house.

"Let's go. Show me the way," she said.

Help, help.

“I will help. When did your pup become unwell?”

Dark forest. Baby hurt, very hurt.

“I understand. Let’s hurry.”

Olivia inspected the wolf’s emotions as they walked. It seemed like something had happened while the pup was playing. She thought of possible causes while they were on the way.

The wolf led her to the pup, who was lying listlessly on the ground. Every once in a while it made a retching sound, but nothing came out. It didn’t look like it had the energy to stand. Olivia looked around and found pieces of poison cherries in the pup’s vomit. Poison cherries were the red fruit of a wild bush. They were a little sweet, but also quite bitter, and contained a fairly powerful poison. They would be torture to a little body like this pup’s. The one saving grace was that the poison wasn’t generally lethal.

Perhaps the pup ate some while it was playing.

Olivia opened the pup’s mouth and pushed her fingers into the back of its throat, worried there might still be some poison cherries in its stomach. The pup retched several times, bringing up what looked like stomach fluids as well as the last remaining fragments of red fruit.

Next, Olivia poured a couple of drops of water from her flask into a wooden cup. She selected a medicine from her bag and placed just a tiny amount of powdered human antitoxin into the cup and mixed it until it formed a ball. After picking it up on one finger, she pressed it on the roof of the pup’s mouth, and then held its mouth closed so it didn’t spit the medicine back out. Then she waited.

Once she saw the pup’s throat move a few times to swallow, she lifted the pup’s head, poured plenty of water into the wood cup, and made the pup drink. She wanted to get it to drink as much as she could. It chugged down the water from the wooden cup.

“I’ll carry the pup back to your den,” said Olivia. “Are you still producing milk?”

Lots milk, many milk.

“All right. Have the pup drink plenty of milk. I don’t think it will die. It’d be best for it not to eat meat tomorrow, too. Just milk.”

My baby, love my baby, love.

Powerful feelings of affection poured into Olivia.

Just when she was starting to feel relieved, the wolf spotted Arthur. She couldn’t believe he’d followed her. Being a former mercenary must be why he was good at quietly following them, and his emotions were too calm for her to notice him either.



OLIVIA sighed, having finished chopping the vegetables. “He saw. I can understand why he’d have questions...”

She put all the vegetables in the pot and simmered them in a chicken bone broth. Once everything was just short of being fully cooked, she pulled the pot from the stove. She planned to make a fresh poached egg to add to the soup for each serving.

Arthur seemed like a tight-lipped man. He worried a lot, had a wounded heart, and seemed to have a strong desire to protect others, but he was so wounded that Olivia tried very hard to keep herself from feeling his emotions.

She put a small pot of water on the stove and brought it to a boil, then used her wooden spatula to swirl it into a vortex before dropping an egg in the center. She watched it for the perfect moment, then lifted it from the water, and she had her well-cooked poached egg.

She took a large, round loaf of bread and cut it into thin slices, which she then set on a grate above the stove, flipping occasionally until they were nice and toasted.

It will turn into a huge mess if I just talk to him about it, won’t it? she thought, feeling a bit glum.

She could feel humans’ and animals’ emotions. For humans, she couldn’t sense the details of what they were feeling and thinking unless she actively

reached out to try and read them. Human hearts were usually folded up on themselves in complex ways and shrouded behind layers of defenses. That's what it felt like to Olivia, anyway.

Animals, on the other hand, were bare and straightforward. Their minds leapt into Olivia's without her trying. There was nothing she could do about it, it just happened. She believed when she was just a little girl that everyone experienced the same thing, which was why she simply told everyone around her about all the thoughts and emotions that came pouring into her from others. The adults thought she was ill.

She had been the daughter of nobles, but her parents had grown tired of the constant nonsense she talked about. Her mother would hold her in her arms, sobbing, and her father suffered as well. Her grandfather told them over and over to send her to the convent because she would ruin the chances his other grandchildren had of finding a good marriage partner. He and her parents often argued over this, since her parents were against the idea.

But, one day, a woman from the convent came to get Olivia, and the two of them left in a carriage. Olivia felt her parents' emotions. Her mother was in pain, feeling guilt at abandoning her own child, while her father worried because she'd be taken so far away from them.

Their grief was so powerful that Olivia, only five years old at the time, found it difficult to breathe normally when she was close to them.

"Goodbye, Mother, Father," she said. Her parents were still sad and suffering as they said goodbye. Olivia's heart was banging in her chest because of those feelings.

She found her grandfather difficult to interact with because he was always annoyed whenever he looked at her. He was still annoyed by her the entire time he was looking at her, until she disappeared.

As the carriage moved down the road, the woman from the convent kept looking at Olivia, feeling disgust and disdain every time she did. Olivia sat in that small space, the two of them facing each other from either bench, and she despaired at the thought of living with this woman. She wasn't even old enough to have heard the word "despair."

A few days into their trip, Olivia was told to exit the carriage for a rest stop. She noticed the horse was looking at her with its wet, dark eyes as it munched on grass. Its mind flowed into hers.

Poor child. Painful place. Children cry. Children sad.

Olivia saw images of children sobbing. It seemed to be something the horse saw often.

"I need to pee," Olivia called loudly. The woman from the convent looked at her with irritation and pointed to the tall grasses of the field.

Olivia went into the grass and crouched down, then, staying low, moved through the field until she was well away, then she broke into a run.

She ran, and ran, and collapsed to take a break, then ran some more. She ran as long as her legs still moved. She'd never run so much in her life.

Eventually, the sun set. She walked through a forest so dark she couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. Day broke, and she walked again while the sun rose. If she was tired, she'd sleep a little, then walk again once she woke.

Her stomach growled, and her throat was parched. Her body ached all over, but she was so scared of the memories she saw from the horse that she tried as hard as she could to keep going.

But she eventually reached her limit.

I can't walk anymore...

Her last strength left her while she was still in the middle of the forest.

That's when they came, the old couple who'd gone out to pick raspberries.

"What's this? A lost child? Her arms and legs are all banged up."

"Did she spend the night in the forest? Oh, it must have been so frightening."

"Why don't you come home with us, little missy? You must be tired. You don't even look like you can say much."

"Yes, let's get you home and we'll take care of all these scrapes and give you some nice warm soup."



Olivia was saved by an older couple who had no children of their own, and they cared for her with so much love. They asked her all sorts of questions once in their home, but she just kept repeating, “I don’t want to go home. Please, please, let me stay here.” She didn’t say anything else.

In the end, the couple said, “Oh, you poor thing. Don’t worry. You can stay here,” while wiping tears from their eyes.

I don’t want to be sent away again, thought Olivia. From that moment on, she never mentioned anything about her being able to feel others’ emotions.

The old couple lived in a little restaurant on the side of the road, and Olivia joined them as family.



“G’MORNING, ma’am.”

“Good morning, Arthur. We’re having spring vegetable soup for breakfast.”

“Sounds great, like the sort of thing that cleanses your body from the inside out,” he said as he looked into his soup bowl then devoured breakfast with gusto. “Just having the egg in there makes a world of difference.”

“It does. It makes it heartier.”

“Your food’s incredible every time.”

“I’m glad you enjoy it.”

Arthur set coins down on the table to pay for breakfast plus extra, for the room he said, then left. He didn’t ask anything about last night—didn’t even mention it.

Feeling relieved, Olivia packed her satchel with medicine, and headed out towards the wolves’ den, Rob in tow. She hurried so she could make it back before she had to open the restaurant.

Chapter 5: The Villa Visitor and the Hedgehogs

OLIVIA kept going towards the wolves' den but found herself lost on the way. She asked a wren looking at her from a branch above for directions and it led her by flying from branch to branch. The wren immediately knew who she was talking about because there weren't many wolves in this forest, and even fewer raising pups.

"Thank you, you were a big help," said Olivia.

Good weather!

It seemed it wouldn't rain today.

The father wolf came out of the den as Olivia moved closer. *Baby move*, he thought.

"Your baby's doing better? That's good. I came to check on it. How should we do it?"

I bring baby. The father wolf went back into the den and came out carrying the pup by its scruff.

The pup looked much better. It sniffed excitedly as Olivia moved up to it. "You're looking energetic. You must not be in pain anymore. But I still think you should take some medicine."

Gross, gross, no!

"I know, it doesn't taste nice, but you'll get better faster if you take it. Your mom will bring you some meat back if you do. You want to eat meat, don't you?"

Meat!

The word "meat" conjured up images of whole moles and mice in the pup's mind, as well as chunks of meat from larger animals that its mother chewed up and spit back out for it to eat.

While she was talking to the pup, Olivia slipped her finger into a shot glass she had in her pocket. She'd secretly made up the medicine in advance, and now lifted it up on her middle finger. In the moment the pup was distracted by thoughts of meat, she held the pup by its scruff with one hand and opened its mouth with the other to pop in the medicine and hold its mouth shut.

No! No!

The pup thrashed about, clearly not enjoying the medicine, but reflexively swallowed the little ball of medicine down.

Olivia turned to the parent wolves, who were watching with concern, and said, "I think it'll be fine, now. Have your pup drink plenty of milk and water. I doubt it'll eat poison cherries again, but make sure your other pups know to be careful. Well, that's it from me."

The wolves weren't even paying attention to Olivia anymore by the time she was walking away. Their hearts were filled with love for their child. That sort of frank, intense love was blindingly overwhelming.

She walked through the forest, her own heart filled with warmth. While walking, she came upon an area filled with the same poison cherries the pup had eaten. There were ripe ones, which were a bright red, not quite ripe ones, a pale pink, and still hard ones, an astringent green. Berries of all stages were in abundance.

"These will go for a nice price in town," said Olivia. They made a wonderful pickled side dish that helped prevent indigestion after eating if you sliced them in half and soaked them in water to remove the poison, then pickled them in a sweet vinegar mixture.

Olivia went about picking the berries. The forest's bounty was an important source of income for her.

As she walked, she used her handkerchief to grab some raspberry branches and snap them off. She could root the cuttings near the fence at home then, as they grew, they would intertwine with the fences and give her the joy of raspberries next year.

When she made it home, she let the goat couple out of the barn.

“Baaa!”

“Baaa!”

They were happy. They started playing, the two of them (Pete, the billy, and Pepe, the nanny) reared on their hind legs and headbutted each other over and over. Their horns cracked together with such a sound that Olivia worried they might hurt each other. It was thanks to this young couple that Olivia didn't have to worry about weeds growing in the yard.

“Want to eat some grass?” asked Olivia.

Grass!

Yummy grass!

She went into the kitchen and began cooking for lunch. Along with today's spring vegetable soup, she was going to serve a salad of boiled chicken breast with spring onion and bell pepper, as well as thinly sliced bread toasted with butter and herbs.

The wren had told her the weather was good, meaning it wasn't going to rain. While she cooked, she planned to wash her sheets and the sheets from the loft in the barn once she was finished with lunch.

The restaurant was busy at lunch. There was a whole family who'd come from one of the villas because they had heard such good things about the restaurant in town.

“Marlais is such a lovely area,” said one of the villa family members. “You have the ocean, the mountains, and a town nearby. There's an abundance of food. There are even old ruins to see. Most importantly though, the weather is just so pleasant and warm. I love it here. When my husband suggested building a villa here, I thought, isn't it just a bit too...*rural*? But I feel at ease now, knowing I still have everything I need here.”

“I'm glad you like the area. I love Marlais,” Olivia replied.

Marlais was a region at the southern end of the Kingdom of Sandwald. The Marlais family had ruled over it for generations, and the family itself had quite the history. The current lord decided to take the area—whose economy had

previously relied entirely on fishing and farming—and convince the rich and famous to build villas there, but he hadn't sold the land itself to them. It was only on loan. It was the only way to get the landowners to agree.

And it turned out those commoners with deep pockets living in the capital city liked the idea of owning a second home like the nobles often did. They must have also been looking for an outlet for their excess riches, because all sorts of wealthy people—merchants, investors, importers—came to build villas in Marlais one after another.

They threw their coin about without care to build homes, hire servants, eat out, and decorate their new villas, bringing more money to the residents of Marlais than they'd ever had before.

Even the Soup Forest saw visitors from the villas every now and then.

Today's visitors looked out into the garden at the bird feeder and chattered amongst themselves with excitement.

"Mother, look! There's a beautiful bird there on the bird feeder. I've never seen one like it."

"Oh, you're right, it is lovely. It's such a bright blue. I never imagined birds could be that color."

"It's a blue-and-white flycatcher," said Olivia. "They eat insects, but every once in a great while, they come to eat fruit like that. I don't see too many of them at the bird feeder."

"A blue-and-white flycatcher? How pretty."

The family from the villa seemed happy with their seat near the bird feeder and said they'd come again as they left.

After lunch, Olivia washed the laundry and hung it up out back to dry, then raked out the straw from the barn and replaced it with fresh straw. One of the farmers who came to the restaurant regularly would bring her the fresh straw in his wagon. In exchange for a meal, he'd also haul away her old straw, which he'd set to compost and use as fertilizer for his fields.

That evening, there was a steady stream of customers. Olivia had her own

dinner of leftover vegetable soup and bread, then folded the laundry, and stepped into the yard before starting to study.

She sensed something coming. Emotions from several creatures. Excitement, pure excitement. *They must be small animals.* Eventually, a mother hedgehog popped into the garden, her row of tiny baby hedgehogs following behind. Male hedgehogs weren't involved with raising the young.

Hedgehogs' favorite foods were worms and grubs, but they'd also eat fruit, bread, and vegetables if they were there.

Olivia scattered the shreds of chicken meat she pulled from the bones she'd used to make the soup broth. Once on the ground, she called to the hedgehogs. "Come and eat!" In her mind, she thought, *Go on, go ahead and eat.*

Wild animals didn't understand the words she said, but they could feel the feelings and intentions behind her words. That meant they were very good at telling when she was lying or putting up a front.

The mother and four baby hedgehogs scurried over.

Yummm!

So yum!

Yummy-yum!

The little ones apparently liked the chicken. They chomped and nibbled at it as Olivia watched. The mother must have been quite hungry, too, because she fell on the food with such focus nothing else was in her mind.

"Producing milk must be making you that hungry," said Olivia.

Meat! Yum!

The mother enjoyed the chicken as well. Once it had all gone, the five hedgehogs disappeared, off to somewhere else. All that was on their minds from the moment they came to the moment they left was a single thought: *Yum!*

And Olivia found that adorable.

That evening, Olivia sat and read one of the books on medicinal herbs that her

grandmother left her. Her great-grandmother had apparently been an expert in the field. Olivia's grandmother had taught her the basics, but there was so much more to learn left in these books, handwritten by her great-grandmother.

"Rob, it's my goal to learn every last thing in these books," Olivia declared.

Rob opened one eye and looked at her, but then went right back to sleep.

That night, a light was still on until late in the Soup Forest. It drew in a moth, which became a late-night meal for the gecko clinging to the glass.

Chapter 6: Spicy Pork Cheek Soup and Freddy's Pharmacy

THE capital of Marlais was the town of Marlowe, which was located about six miles east of Soup Forest. It took about an hour to get there by carriage. The town was named after the first head of the Marlais family, Marlowe Marlais.

Arthur was there now, looking at a bulletin board in an employment agency.

"Hmm. Guess a twenty-eight-year-old with no accounting knowledge or crafting skills doesn't have much choice in terms of jobs that offer lodging and a decent wage," he muttered.

He still had plenty of money saved up from when he was a mercenary, but he knew his coin purse would empty quickly if he kept living in rented accommodations without working. Out of the various hiring ads on the board, he picked out one that said, "Freddy's Pharmacy, recruiting shop attendee and herb gatherer. Can provide lodging."

Arthur had gathered some medicinal herbs as a mercenary, in addition to working as a guard. He had a general grasp of the more basic plants.



"YOU'VE got quite the physique, there, don't you? What sort of work did you do before this? Military?"

"No, I was a mercenary."

"Ah, that explains it. You know something about medicinal plants?" asked Freddy, the man who owned the shop.

Arthur listed off all the names he knew, and Freddy nodded along.

"That's plenty. Anything you don't know, you can look up in one of my field guides. And since you were a mercenary, I don't need to worry about you if I send you out foraging."

And, with that, Freddy signed the paper from the employment agency and handed it back to Arthur.

Arthur took the paper and said, "The flyer said you could offer lodging, too."

"I've got an empty room on the second floor of the shop. It's tiny, though, just enough space for you to sleep. Is that good enough? I don't live in the shop, so you'll have to sort out the food yourself."

"If it has a roof and a bed, then it's good enough for me."

"It's yours then. You can start using it tonight."

"Thank you."

"I know this is throwing you right in, but could you collect these plants tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," said Arthur, taking the list of plants Freddy needed. With that, he had a room and a job. He went and told the employment agency Freddy had signed the contract and turned in the document.

You know, maybe I'll go back to that restaurant for dinner, he thought. He figured it would take him two hours to walk there, and that was just one way, but the tender taste of Soup Forest was enticing him.

During his mercenary days, he would be given military rations, but they were always forced to fend for themselves if they finished the rations off. He just ate whatever he could find on the battlefield. He didn't care what it tasted like, so long as he could have a full stomach to fight on.

"Four hours round trip?" he murmured. "No, that's too much. How crazy would I be to spend four hours just to get some food?"

Instead, he wandered the town. There were loads of shops and stalls, with plenty of cheap food that still looked tasty enough. He walked down a bustling street, his eyes roving as he tried to decide what to eat, but then he stopped.

Agh, nope. I want that soup. If it's on my mind that much, I might as well just go.

It wasn't like him to waffle on a decision so much. He turned and headed off towards Soup Forest with long strides.



IT was around then that Olivia was working on dinner. Today's soup was going to be a spicy broth with pork cheek and scallions.

Pork cheek was sold in chunks with the skin still on. You could buy a whole head of pork for half the price of any other cut. She remembered her grandmother saying, with a mischievous smile, "This pork skin is chock-full of nutrients. You can make a lovely broth if you boil it along with the cheek meat. Part of me wants everyone to know, but if they did, they'd buy it all up and I couldn't have any. So, I keep it my little secret."

And it was also true that a pork head's worth of skin wasn't a sight for the fainthearted. This was the whole skin, from the neck up. Most women would be loath to have that in their kitchen, and most men would look at it with disgust, too.

It wasn't so bad once you got used to it, though. Olivia diced the skin with practiced hands, boiled it once really quick and changed out the water, then boiled it again while skimming off the fat and scum that rose to the surface. She then simmered it with the scallions and fragrant herbs, infusing it with flavor as the gelatin from the skin thickened the stock.

"Mm, it's starting to smell good." Olivia heard a fluttering sound and then a sparrow appeared at the kitchen window. "Nice to see you, Peep. What's the weather going to be like this evening?" she asked the bird.

Rain! Rain! But just little rain.

"Rain, hm? The air does feel a bit heavy. All right, here's a little thank-you for telling me. Eat up." As she spoke, she laid tiny scraps of the boiled pork skin and breadcrumbs on the windowsill.

She'd found this sparrow, who she named Peep, when it'd fallen out of its nest as a chick after being attacked by a crow. The crow didn't eat Peep, though. It must have been full after eating the other chicks in the nest.

Olivia kept watch to see if Peep's parents would come back, but they never did. She had no choice but to scramble to find tiny bugs to feed Peep, which thankfully allowed it to grow up fine. Now it lives out in the world. Thinking

back to it, Olivia couldn't help remembering how difficult it'd been to gather the bugs. It made her admire parent sparrows for being incredible enough to do it.

Peep now visited whenever it might rain to tell her the weather forecast. It never stopped by when there was a run of sunny days. It was cute how faithfully it came to inform her of the rain.

Yummm!

"It's nice, isn't it? Come again, any time."

Peep wiped its beak against the window frame to clean it off, then flew away.

Around four o'clock, when it was still a little early for dinner, Olivia heard the bell at the door chime.

"Hello— Oh, Arthur?" she said.

"I wanted some of your soup, so I decided to walk here," he said.

"You walked here? From where?"

"Marlowe."

"Oh, well, thank you for coming so far. Here, have a seat. It's still a little early for dinner, but would you like a bowl of spicy pork cheek soup?"

"Spicy pork cheek soup? Just hearing that makes my mouth water."

Arthur sat in the chair in the corner, the one that used to be Olivia's grandfather's favorite spot, and looked with joy at the soup Olivia brought him. She was serving today's soup with a salad of diced ham and cabbage, a side of pickled poison cherries, and dumplings in a basil sauce.

"This is so good," said Arthur. "I knew I made the right decision coming here. I never realized how amazing basil tastes. And smells."

"Thank you. Seeing you enjoy the food makes me hungry."

"Why don't you eat with me, then?"

Olivia hesitated a moment, but then decided to take him up on the offer.

She thought back to five years ago, when she was twenty. Her grandmother died at the age of seventy-five, and her grandfather passed in his sleep only

four days later. His heart had apparently given out. Her grandfather was seventy-eight at the time. Both of them were very old for people in this country.

At her grandfather's funeral she laughed with tears in her eyes, asking why he'd been in such a hurry to leave, but everyone at the funeral had said it was for the best that they went together since they were so close.

They'd both lived long lives, and so her grandfather's funeral was fairly cheery. She'd cried at her grandmother's funeral, but her grandfather's was filled with the sharing of happy memories, and a few tears. She had nothing but good memories of her adoptive grandparents.

"Food really does taste better when you have someone to share it with," Olivia mused.

"It changes the taste?" asked Arthur. "I've always eaten alone. There were other people on the battlefield eating at the same time, but it never felt like we were eating together..."

Olivia sensed the shrouds around Arthur's heart open slightly, so she forced her mind to focus on memories of her grandparents, or thoughts about Rob or the goats.

Seeing other people's inner world wasn't pleasant, and it was sometimes a huge blow to her own psyche. She'd experimented with methods for preventing people's thoughts from wandering into her own ever since she was about fifteen or sixteen, but she'd yet to perfect those techniques.

Humans' emotions only really flowed into her when that person was gripped by a powerful emotion, since humans normally kept their hearts hidden. It was draining to have those feelings forced on her.

"I'm really glad I decided to come here. The food was great," said Arthur.

"Thank you. It's going to rain soon, by the way. Please feel free to stay here for a while until it passes." Olivia gathered the dishes onto a tray and brought them into the kitchen.

Arthur gazed at all the potted plants in the restaurant, hesitating to ask why she thought it was going to rain, but then decided to wait until Olivia chose to—or not to—tell him.

Chapter 7: Cherry Tea and Rain

IN the end, Arthur decided not to ask Olivia about her rain forecast. He remembered all the people who wanted to know what it was like to be in a war once they learned he was a mercenary.

“Nothing admirable ever happens on a battlefield,” he would say, and they’d all be disappointed. It was painful having people asking him questions about this and that, so he decided he shouldn’t pester Olivia with questions out of his own simple curiosity.

There were some mercenaries who loved combat and telling tales of their heroic deeds, but there were also those whose hearts couldn’t bear to continue taking the lives of others. It was normal for the latter type to just disappear one day.

Arthur found himself rather renowned as a mercenary during his fourteen years on the job, and he made a tidy sum as a result. But, one day when he was twenty-eight, he woke up and just thought, *I can’t do this anymore.*

It came out of nowhere, like some string holding up his spirit had been cut.

I can’t fight anymore. I can’t kill anymore.

He knew immediately these emotions wouldn’t just fade away. That day, he submitted his withdrawal paperwork to his mercenary company. The company’s head was shocked and worked hard to convince him to stay, but Arthur just listened to him in silence and then said, “Captain, I can’t do it anymore,” with a soft smile.

The captain froze. “Ah. It seems not. That’s a shame. But, Arthur, you’ve done great work. You take care of yourself, you hear?” And then the captain walked with him all the way to the exit.

He’d seen that expression Arthur had now several times before on other mercenaries who’d quit. It was a sort of fatigue you saw in people who’d given

up entirely on mercenary work. There was no one in the world who could change the mind of a man with that expression, no matter how hard they tried.

Then Arthur walked for more than twenty days straight. While he walked, he came upon Soup Forest and met Olivia.

“I got a job at an herbalist’s shop,” said Arthur. “Have you heard of Freddy’s Pharmacy in Marlowe?”

“I definitely have,” Olivia said. “I study medicinal herbs myself. I go to Freddy’s Pharmacy to buy the plants I can’t find in the area. You’re going to be working there? Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I already got orders to go find some plants tomorrow, so I think I’ll stop by Soup Forest again.”

“What do you need? Depending on what it is, I might be able to show you where you can find them. Oh, though, you’d have to wake up incredibly early if you want to get here in time to go into the forest with me. That won’t work, will it?”

“Actually...” started Arthur, but he stumbled to say anything further.

“Hm? Do you mean to say it’s all right?” Olivia ventured.

“I tend to wake up early anyway.”

“Let’s go together, then. The last time I went picking herbs with company would’ve been when my grandmother was still well enough to walk. Must be about eight years ago, now. It’ll be fun.”

“What time should I meet you here?” Arthur asked.

“Seven would be too early, wouldn’t it? Eight, then?”

“Seven’s fine.”

“All right. I’ll look for you at seven. Now that that’s settled, have a cup of after-dinner tea.” Olivia poured him a cup of tea that, for some reason, smelled rather sweet, despite the fact that he didn’t see her put sugar in it.

“Huh, this smells sweet,” he observed.

“It does, doesn’t it? It’s a blend of tea leaves and dried cherries. They’re these

tiny itty-bitty cherries that grow on the mountains. They're too small to eat. I pick them and dry them."

Arthur was secretly shocked by this. In all his life on the battlefield taking others' lives, he'd never imagined a life where someone picked cherries to make tea, and that thought made a huff of laughter break out of his chest.

"Uh, hm?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I shouldn't've laughed. I just realized there's a lot about the world I don't know."

Olivia felt his emotions flowing into her, without her trying to reach for them. They were tender, warm, gentle feelings. *I wonder what part of that conversation made him feel that*, she thought, smiling despite not understanding the change in his emotions.

"I started working as a mercenary 'cause I had trouble feeding myself when I was a kid," Arthur said. "I never realized someone could live such a peaceful life. Huh. You pick cherries and make tea. Maybe I'll try picking cherries next year, too."

"It takes patience, but you have a delicious cup of tea waiting for you at the end," Olivia said.

"Yeah, that sounds nice. Honestly, it sounds amazing."

Olivia could feel that he genuinely felt that with every fiber of his being. He was filled with such warm emotions that it made Olivia happy too.

Just then, a huge ruckus came from the goat barn.

There were shouted sounds of baaing along with scuffling and a powerful anger that rushed into Olivia. She ran out of the restaurant before Arthur could ask her to stop, so he followed after her. Rob, who had been sleeping, leapt up and raced past Arthur.

Olivia opened the door with a bang and went into the barn to find the goats filled with rage. Their heads were lowered, ready for a fight. She looked around to see what the matter was and saw a huge snake rearing its head towards the goats. It looked like the goats had tried to stamp on it several times.

Olivia saw Arthur pull the large knife from his belt and shouted, "Wait! I'll make it leave!" Then, quieter, she said to the snake, "There's no food here for you. Go back to the forest. We'll have to attack you if you stay here. Go home. There you go. Don't come back here again. You understand, right? Go home."

The large, reddish-brown snake swayed its head side to side as it watched Olivia. To Arthur, it looked like the snake was taking Olivia's words very seriously.

Then, the snake flopped its top half down and slithered out the door. Olivia followed behind it at a walk, watched to make sure it went back into the forest, then came back into the barn. Rob was glued to her side the whole time, his fur standing up.

"There, there, Pete, Pepe. That was a scare, wasn't it? It's all right now," she soothed.

"Baa!"

"Ba! Baaa!"

"Yes, you did a great job, both of you." She rubbed their necks and flanks as she spoke to them, then gestured for Arthur to leave the barn with her.

They went back into the restaurant without speaking. There was a customer waiting when they got back in, who glanced at Arthur following behind Olivia.

"I'm sorry for the wait, Allen," said Olivia. "Please, sit wherever you like."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" Allen asked.

"There was a snake in the barn. The goats were making a real fuss," she explained.

"You're so close to the forest here, it must've just wandered in."

"Seems like it. Anyway, Allen, today's soup is a spicy pork cheek soup."

"Ah, that's one of my favorites. Can I ask you for an extra-large helping?"

"Of course you can. It's coming right up."

It was around then that Olivia's prediction came true, and the rain began to fall.

“Hm, it’s raining,” said Allen. “Olivia, do you think it’ll last long?”

“No, I think it’ll clear up quickly,” she replied.

“Then I’ll just take my time eating.”

“Go right ahead.”

Here I’ve gone and seen another mysterious thing from Olivia, thought Arthur as he pulled a book from the bookshelf. It was titled *An Intro to Herbology*.

The rain started to patter down, splattering from the roof to the ground. *What a soothing sound,* he thought, reading the book and enjoying his cherry tea. *I’ll have a nice stroll back home once the rain lets up.*

The tea had the gentlest flavor.

Chapter 8: Despite Helping the Injured

THE next morning at seven o'clock, Olivia stepped out of the restaurant and waited for Arthur. She had Rob with her, of course. He seemed excited for the trip, his tail whipped back and forth the whole time.

Olivia found her own excitement odd. *I'm not a child anymore*, she thought. She'd prepared the food for today the night before, so she didn't need to be back at the restaurant until near noon.

Soon after she stepped out to wait, Arthur appeared coming down the road from Marlowe. Rob raced off to meet him, darting around him and looking up at him with joy before falling in step beside him.

"G'morning, ma'am," Arthur greeted. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"Good morning, Arthur. I only just came outside myself. What sort of plants do you need to gather today?"

"This one and this one. Oh, and this one here, too."

He showed her his note with the list of medicinal herbs. Olivia knew where they all grew. "Just leave it to me," she said. "I know where to find all of them."

"All of them? Wow. I can't believe anyone could know that much about the forest. Actually, I can. If it's you."

"Don't be silly. I just use all of these regularly myself."

The two entered the forest and walked along an animal trail, likely the sort of pathway foxes and badgers would use. Olivia imagined their faces as they pattered along these winding paths every day.

They came to an area where the first plant grew about ten minutes after starting out.

"This one's good for digestion, isn't it?" said Arthur as he picked some. "Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and that's thirty. All right, this one's taken care of."

What do you use this for? I guess you probably don't use it for cooking."

Olivia's expression stiffened for a brief moment.

"Ah, sorry. I don't mean to pry or anything," he said. "I don't really like people asking me all sorts of questions about myself, either."

"Really?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah. There's a lot of stuff about being a mercenary I'd rather not talk about. Actually, there's basically nothing I'd want to talk about."

The conversation petered out after that as the two continued to walk through the forest.

Olivia was thinking, *If he presses me about the two times he saw me speaking with animals, I'll have to give him some sort of explanation*, but it was true that Arthur had no intention of prying. She could sense that wasn't a lie.

She'd only just met this man, and he'd seen her ability twice, the ability she'd hidden for years from everyone around her. Yet, he wasn't interrogating her about it. *It's a miracle*, she thought. *But I need to be careful. I can't forget I was abandoned because I told people about everything I could do. I can't lose my restaurant to rumors if it gets out.*

"Can I see the list of plants you need again? Oh, yes. The next one is this way," she said.

"Thanks. You're a huge help. I'll finish up in no time at this rate."

"Don't worry about it. It gives me a chance to pick some for myself as well."

They picked a plant that could be made into heart medicine, another used as a vulnerary, and another that reduced fevers. Arthur's work really was done in no time with the two of them gathering the three herbs.

"Do you mind if I grab some poison cherries while we're here?" asked Olivia.

"Nope. I'm guessing by the name they're poisonous. What're they used for?"

"Uh, do you remember that pickled side dish I served yesterday? That was pickled poison cherries."

"Uh..."

“Surprising, right? Everyone who lives around here already knows, but they’re good for preventing indigestion. Pork is so fatty that I always serve them alongside pork skin or cheek. But don’t worry, I always make sure to draw the poison out.”

“That’s a relief.”

“You should pick some, too. I’m sure Freddy will be happy to have them.”

“You think? Guess this is a chance to show how valuable an employee I can be, then,” he said with a smile.

Olivia looked at that gentle smile for a moment just thinking, *He has a nice smile.*

They came to a thicket of poison cherry bushes and the two selected the bright red, ripe fruit. When Olivia’s basket and Arthur’s canvas bag were filled and they started to move back towards the restaurant, Rob looked deeper into the forest and bayed.

A human voice responded to his barks. “Is someone there? Anyone? Please, help me!”

It wasn’t common to run into other people in the forest, and all the locals knew this area was part of that wolf pack’s territory.

Olivia immediately called back. “We’ll be right there!”

Arthur shot Olivia a look of shock, but she’d already responded before he could say anything. Instead, he joined her as she moved towards the voice, though he did quietly undo the fastener on the sheath of the large knife hanging from behind his right hip, so he could draw it quickly if need be.

They found a man who appeared to be the owner of the voice sitting on the ground. He looked to be in his early thirties and had black hair and chestnut eyes. His clothing looked rather opulent, though fatigue showed on his face and his hair was a mess.

“Oh, thank heavens! I was certain I’d be killed here by some beast! Thank you! Thank you!” he cried.

“Are you hurt? Can you stand?” asked Olivia.

“My leg hurts. No, I don’t think I can stand. I suffered quite a severe injury to my right knee. I fell and heard this awful snapping sound when I did.”

Olivia approached the man and tried to roll up his trouser leg, but just touching it caused him severe pain. In order to calm him down, she first had him drink some water from her flask and eat a sweet she had in her satchel.

Arthur watched, then looked around, selected a branch, and hacked at it with his large knife.

CHOP! CHOP!

Each whack chipped away until, in the end, he had a fairly hefty branch cut off.

“Grab onto my shoulder,” he said. “Yeah, like that. If we come to a place where we can’t walk side by side and you can’t lean on me, then you can put the fork of the branch under your arm and lean on that so you can walk.”

“Oh, thank you,” the man said. “All right, let’s give standing a go, shall we? Lend me your hand. Ack! Ohhh, that hurts. But, yes, I think I can manage to stand like this. Ahhh. You have my thanks. Oh, my name is William. I promise to repay you for this!”

Olivia smiled gently, deciding William must be making so much noise because he was so worked up. A smile always soothed the heart of someone in pain. “We help each other out when we’re in trouble,” she said. “You don’t have to repay us. It would normally take forty minutes to walk to my house from here. Do you think you can make it? If we went to get a horse or wagon, you would have to wait at least two hours, and you’d still have to walk out of the forest a little. Horses can’t come this far.”

William’s eyes opened wide when she mentioned waiting two hours. “Ah. And your house would be the closest to us?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, I hate to impose, but could you possibly take me there?”

“Yes, we’ll do that. Let’s go slowly. And try not to put your weight on your right leg.”

Sweat poured down William's face from the pain he was in. It must have been bad. William was a fairly well-built man, meaning Arthur couldn't carry him. They ended up inching along with Arthur half carrying him, rather than just lending his shoulder for William to lean on.

It took several times longer to get back to the restaurant than it did to walk out in the first place. Arthur was soaked with sweat by the time they did, and William was less talkative than at the start, his face pale.

"I'm sorry to ask more of you, but could you possibly contact my family?" he asked. "I didn't return last night. They must be worried sick."

"We can do that. Where do you live?" asked Olivia.

"In the villa town. Anyone there will know which house it is if you ask for the Hughes home."

They must be an influential family if just mentioning the name was enough for people to understand. Olivia and Arthur exchanged looks. Arthur simply said, "I'll go," without showing his thoughts on his face. Olivia quickly wrote down directions to the villa town and handed them to Arthur.

He stepped out from Soup Forest and muttered to himself, "Looks like the son of some rich family from the capital coming out here for leisure. This's likely to turn into some big thing. I should probably run."

And so, Arthur set off at a run, holding his bag of herbs down so they didn't bruise while he did. A six-mile run with basically no equipment or baggage was nothing for him.

Chapter 9: Chicken Wing Soup and Objectification

AFTER running six miles and a bit, Arthur came to the villa town on the southern edge of Marlowe. There was a massive gate at the entrance with a sign that said “Marlowe Villa District,” behind which stood rows of fancy mansions that made you forget you were in the rural region of Marlais.

Each villa boasted expansive gardens without tall stone walls around them. Instead, each exquisite garden was meticulously cared for, displaying the wealth of the home’s owner for all to see.

Arthur stopped for a moment before going in and wiped away the sweat soaking him. This sort of affluent people judged others by appearance. If he went in looking shabby, he would lose what little chance he already had of speaking with them.

After mopping up the sweat, and smoothing out his rumpled clothes and tousled hair, he tried speaking to an old woman wearing a wide-brimmed sunhat viewing the flowers in one garden. “Excuse me, ma’am. I apologize for bothering you, but would you know which building is the Hughes’ villa?”

“Hughes? It’ll be that one, over there,” she replied, pointing to a building down the white stone-paved road that dwarfed even the other villas in size.

Arthur politely thanked her and headed towards the villa.

As he approached, he heard an angry voice coming from inside.

It’s definitely a big fuss in there, he thought as he walked up to the door and knocked twice with the golden door knocker shaped like a lion’s head.

A well-dressed man immediately opened the door.

“I’m here on request of a Mister William Hughes,” said Arthur.

“Mister William! Where is he? No, no, first we must report to the master of the house. This way please.”

The servant invited Arthur in, but Arthur held up a hand and declined the

offer. “We found Mister William in the forest. His knee is injured, and he can’t walk. I’d like to ask for a carriage to go get him,” he said.

“He’s injured? Oh, my. Thank you for helping him. I’ll have the carriage brought around immediately. Would you be so kind as to accompany the carriage to give directions?”

“I’m sorry, I have to get back to work. This map shows where he is currently. It’s a restaurant on the road into town.”

As he said that, an old man came to the door. “I hate to press, but I would like to ask you to show the way,” he said. “We don’t know our way around this area at all. I’d hate to make a wrong turn and waste time. I’ll send someone to your workplace to explain the situation. Please, take me to my son.”

There were two things Arthur knew it was best not to anger: Rich people and cats. Experience taught him angering them just once caused all sorts of trouble down the line.

“All right,” said Arthur. “Could you also send these herbs to my workplace? It’s Freddy’s Pharmacy, in town.”

“Consider it done. Thank you. Now, to the carriage,” said the old man.

Despite being half forced into the carriage, Arthur wasn’t upset. He imagined it was normal for parents to become blind to everything else around them when it came to their beloved children.

There were a lot of mercenaries, including himself, who had either lost or been sold by their parents, which was how they ended up in the business. Arthur honestly didn’t know what was normal for parents.

The carriage traveled back along the same route Arthur had just run, and they came to Soup Forest. They could hear a cheerful voice coming from inside before they even opened the door.

“But seriously, I think I’ll eat nothing but pork cheek from now on if it’s always this delicious. What? Is that so? Oh, don’t be so modest. Really? I cannot believe how lucky I was.”

It was just William’s voice, they couldn’t hear Olivia at all. Arthur chuckled.

William really was loud.

His father pushed the door open and shouted, “William! Are you all right? I heard you’d been injured! I didn’t sleep a wink last night after your horse came back without you. I was convinced you’d fallen off and died. Are you trying to cut years off my life?!”

“I’m sorry, Father. I saw the most beautiful deer in the forest. It was so enchanting I got absorbed in chasing it, and I got lost. That’s when I fell and hurt myself.”

Is voice volume inherited? Arthur wondered as he glanced over at Olivia. Her eyebrows were drawn down, but her eyes smiled when she looked at him.

They looked into each other’s eyes, and Arthur imagined Olivia whispering in her mind, *Thank you for coming back*. The voice sounded so real, just like hers, that it threw him off kilter.

What the heck am I going off imagining? And I need to focus on work. I can’t have Freddy thinking I’m slacking on my first day, he thought. Out loud, he said, “I should be heading off.”

“Wait just a moment,” said the old man. “I’ll be taking my son back to the villa in the carriage. You can ride with us. You work in Marlowe, don’t you? You’ll be back faster by carriage, even with the detour.”

“You’ve already sent someone to speak with my employer. I can’t ask for more,” Arthur said.

“It’s not a bother at all! I’m happy to. Oh, and miss, I’ll be back to give you a proper thank you. You have my gratitude for saving my son.”

William and his father urged Arthur into the carriage so quickly he didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye to Olivia. Once again, he’d been turned into a carriage rider, this time heading to Marlowe. They dropped him off on the way and he walked quickly to Freddy’s Pharmacy.

Freddy broke into a grin when he saw Arthur. “I see you got the herbs, Arthur. And good work helping that person.”

“Ah. I’m sorry I’m late. I was planning on being back sooner.”

“It’s not a problem. Gathering herbs takes time. I’d still think you were back early if you’d only just arrived now without helping someone in the process. Besides, the person who came to tell me what happened bought loads of herbal tea and mouthwash. I bet his master told him to. It’s a big help for me. You’re doing a whole lot on just your first day.”

“Oh, all right. So, do you sell poison cherries here too?” Arthur asked.

“Of course I do! And I was shocked to see how good quality the ones you picked were. Where’d you find them? I’d love to know if you remember where it was.”

“Uh, well, it was my first time in the forest, I’m not sure I could remember exactly where...”

“I thought not. You were darn lucky to find poison cherries your first time in the forest.”

In truth, Arthur did remember where it was, but he wasn’t sure if he should tell. Those berries seemed valuable. How could Olivia be so quick to share their location with him?

She really does need to be more careful, he thought.



“**AH**, what a whirlwind,” said Olivia, thankful the mess from that morning was sorted out right before lunchtime started. She was afraid of what would’ve happened if it had gone on at full swing into lunchtime.

When William arrived at her restaurant, he wiped away some of the sweat and grime with a damp cloth then fell onto the food with zeal. He had two whole bowls of the leftover pork cheek soup, three slices of bread, and a bowl of chicken wing soup (today’s soup of the day), along with a plate of pickled cucumber, and two cups of cherry tea.

Today was the third time she’d met Arthur, and she was so relaxed around him she started believing she was getting significantly better at dealing with people, considering she was twenty-five now. William made her realize how wrong that assumption was.

He was loud, always talking, and didn't listen to anything she said. Just being near him drained her.

On top of that, his heart was basically flung open for her to see. Over and over while they were talking, he kept thinking *Wowie, she's a beauty*, which made Olivia very uncomfortable. It sent her skin crawling every time she saw him glancing at her body.

She didn't even know how many times she thought, *Stop objectifying me like I'm some sort of treasure on sale!*

The bell over the door jingled.

"Hello there, Bob," said Olivia.

"Could I get today's soup and two slices of bread?"

"It's on its way."

Her regulars started streaming in, and she put her thoughts on hold.

She had no problems with her customers. They just saw her as the person who runs the restaurant. Not many of them had a personal interest in her. Or, at the very least, her regulars didn't look at her like some piece of meat.

She was nearly to the point of concluding Arthur was just a particularly easy person for her to be around, but she focused on warming the chicken wing soup before that thought could take form.

The chicken wings for today's lunch were simmered in the stock until the meat nearly fell off the bone. It was delicious with the flavor of the nearly melting onions and garlic infusing it. The lentils concealed at the bottom of the bowl gave you something substantial to chew on while delivering a nutritious punch.

The bell jingled again.

"Hello, Joshua."

For just a moment, a thought crossed her mind, that she wished Arthur could have tried today's soup, but it disappeared as she went to deal with the customer that just walked in.

Chapter 10: The Golden Deer

THAT night, Olivia left the house and entered the forest. She had a feeling she knew who William meant when he said he saw a beautiful deer, and it worried her.

It was difficult finding the animal trails in the dark forest, lit only by moonlight, but Rob knew the way well. She felt comfortable knowing he was walking ahead, guiding her.

They walked for a while and came out on a rise. Olivia put her thumb and pointer finger between her lips and made a high-pitched whistle. Then she waited.

The deer would show himself if he wanted to. Or he wouldn't, if he didn't want to. Olivia just waited.

It must have been nearly an hour before he came, appearing without a sound. His coat lit by the weak moonlight was a gentle yellow. In the sun, it was a glittering gold.

The deer was naturally a pale color. This meant he was easily targeted, since he stood out so much, but he was also clever, and that meant he'd survived long enough to become a full-grown buck. Hunters would literally chase him until he was dead if they found out about him, and just for his pelt.

Saw human, he thought.

"It seems like it. That human wasn't a hunter, but he might tell other humans about you."

I leave here.

"I know... You won't come back, will you? You shouldn't come back. The humans will be after you."

You sad.

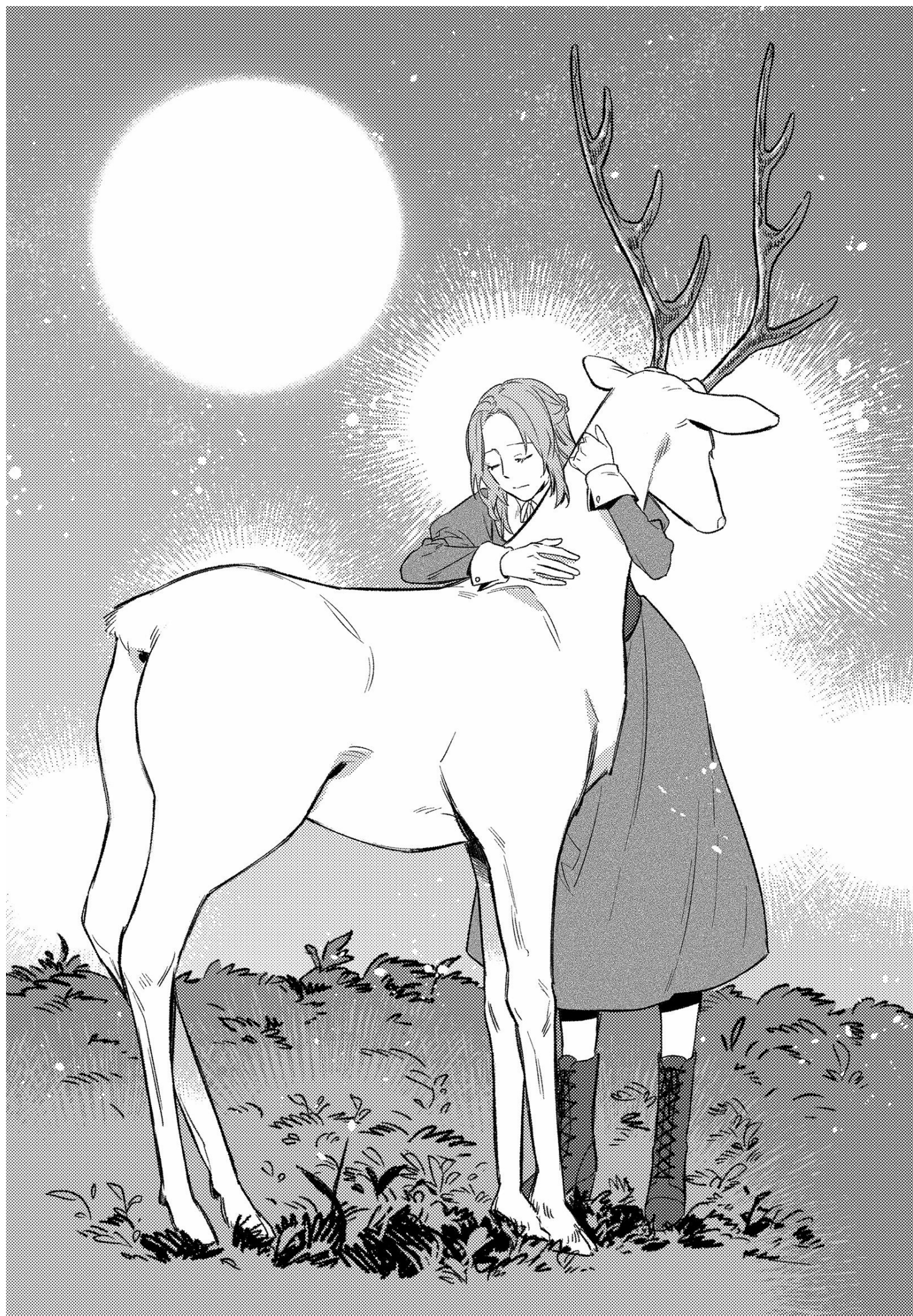
“You’re my friend. I’m sad you’re going.”

Human eat deer.

“Yes, humans eat deer.” Though, this deer wouldn’t be hunted as food. They would aim to take his life so his beautiful fur could become the pride of some rich person. “Can I pet you one last time?”

Pet fine.

Olivia commanded Rob to stay and slowly approached the deer to gently lay her hand on his back. His fur was soft, and she felt a great warmth from the muscle beneath.



Her heart ached to know she would never see the deer again.

“I enjoyed talking with you,” she said.

Fun. Lots fun.

“I’m not good with people. I wish I’d been born a deer, then I could’ve gone with you. I was always so happy when I was with you.”

You human.

“I know. I’m human, but I like being with you. You’re gentle, and beautiful, and strong.”

The large, golden deer was beautiful and elegant in the moonlight.

He stared into Olivia’s face, his large, red-tinted eyes crinkled with kindness. He nuzzled his face against her face and neck, two, then three times. He’d never done anything like that before. Another wave of sorrow hit Olivia because she knew this was his way of saying goodbye forever.

Then he walked away, without saying farewell in words. He looked back at Olivia, just once, then disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

Olivia crumpled to the ground and sobbed. She cried for a while, then stood and walked away, Rob looking up at her over and over with worry.

It started four years ago, when she had one customer who kept making advances on her. She was uncomfortable around him. He was very controlling, but she couldn’t run or hide because the restaurant was open. It wasn’t long after her grandparents passed away, too, and she couldn’t think of anyone to ask for help.

She kept turning the man down, but his affections—which he kept forcing on her—only turned to hatred in the end. Olivia had never been the target of such open animosity before, and it terrified her.

The man had approached without asking her opinion, and then he left without asking her opinion, too, without a single thought for Olivia’s situation or emotions.

Hurt by this man’s absurd behavior, she went for a walk in the forest alone

and met the deer.

“How beautiful...” she said without thinking. And then the deer’s thoughts came into hers.

Hurt?

Olivia had walked through the forest with her heart languishing in pain and sorrow, and the golden deer seemed to think that pain was from an injury or illness.

“My heart hurts,” she said.

The deer moved closer to her without saying anything but wouldn’t let her touch him. He seemed to dislike her human scent transferring onto him.

After that day, Olivia would find the golden deer appearing at her side when she went into the forest at night, and they would be together for a time.

They would play in the water of the river together, gaze at the blossoms of the apricot trees together, taste the strawberries together, and sit staring at the moon together, without saying a word.

That deer was a precious friend.

“I wish I’d been born a deer,” she thought over and over, but she was human. And, being human, there was a limit to how much she could avoid other humans. She couldn’t live if she didn’t earn money, and she couldn’t earn money if she didn’t interact with people. That restaurant outside town was a necessity. She didn’t want to lose it.

Olivia came back to the moment and Arthur’s face flitted through her mind. “He might tell people about my secret.”

She worried about that, but she also had a feeling he wasn’t like other people. Besides, if he told people exactly what he saw, no one would believe him. They’d likely just laugh it off as a ridiculous story.

That former mercenary’s heart was so wounded. The number and severity of those wounds pushed Olivia past simply feeling bad for him. It actually scared her. He was kind, though, despite being so wounded.

She couldn’t bring herself to just give up on him, because he hurt so much,

she felt like she was looking at a reflection of herself. But she was also afraid he would stop coming to her restaurant if she moved too close and accidentally brushed against those scars.

“I won’t get too close. Just be moderately friendly. If I do that, he should keep coming back to the restaurant. Hopefully.”

When she got back home, she went into the barn to change the goats’ water. She did that often, whenever the thought crossed her mind. The goats liked fresh water.

“Baa.”

“Baaa.”

The two were cuddling as they dozed in the straw, but still greeted Olivia when she came in.

“How about I get up early tomorrow to let you out so you can eat some grass?” she said.

Grass!

Grass, grass!

“I know, but tomorrow. It’s bedtime now.”

She went into the house, checked all the doors and windows were locked, then went up to the second floor and lay in her bed.

“I’m not made to deal with people. I wish I was born an animal.”

She’d thought so all her life. The only positive interaction she had with people was making soup for them to enjoy.

“I’ll make a nice soup for everyone tomorrow, too.”

She still remembered how good her grandmother’s soup was the day they found her in the forest. It was chicken and vegetable soup. Each spoonful washed away the pain of being abandoned and running away from her family, alleviating the fatigue in her body.

“I want to keep making soup that makes people better, both in body and soul. That’s one of the few things I can do, being born human by mistake.”

Eventually, she fell asleep. In her dream, she walked beside the golden deer.

Chapter 11: Fishing and an Encounter with Wolves

OLIVIA got out of bed early and let the young goat couple out of the barn. It was just after sunrise. The air was cool, and night lingered around her.

I wonder how far the deer went, she thought. The forest was large. He likely crossed the country border and kept going. I hope he finds a peaceful place to live.

There was nothing she could do for him, but she could at least pray.

The goats munched on the grass with delightful exclamations of *Yum!* Being livestock was both a blessing and a curse. They were protected and never had to go without food, but they weren't free. They'd never even known freedom, not once since they were born. Wild animals like wolves and deer were free, but the price they paid for that was the need to fight for survival each and every day.

Today was Olivia's one rest day of the week. She gathered her fishing equipment and headed towards the river. Rob loved playing in the water. They weren't even there and his cheerful inner cries of *Water! River!* were already bounding towards Olivia.

The river was a thirty-minute walk away. As she walked, Olivia thought about when she first met the mother wolf. It had been just after the young wolf had left her parents and den.

Olivia had been out picking medicinal herbs in the forest when she saw the wolf, limping as if her right forepaw was injured. She knew the wolf wouldn't be able to hunt if she left her. The wolf would starve and die.

There was a rule in the forest that the weak, injured, ill, or incautious died. They became food for other animals. Even if they weren't attacked by a meat-eating predator, they would die, and the birds and bugs would feed on them, in the end becoming nutrients for the plants.

She knew it wasn't good for her as a human to interfere because she felt sorry

for an animal, but she couldn't ignore the pained emotions of the young wolf either. She approached her. The wolf's hackles rose and it growled at her, threatening her.

"I won't kill you," said Olivia, forming those words in her mind as well. The growl cut off. Then the wolf's sad emotions flowed into her.

Hurt, hurt, hurt.

"Your right leg hurts, doesn't it? Can you show me where?"

The wolf flopped on her side. Olivia knelt right next to her, touched her right foreleg, and examined it. The wolf's jaws were right by Olivia's head. She was hungry, and Olivia would die if the wolf bit her now, but Olivia didn't feel hostility in the wolf, only fear and sorrow.

Olivia looked at the bottom of the wolf's paw and saw a solid thorn piercing her black paw pad, only a jagged tip poking out. The wolf must have tried to pull it out with her teeth but broke it instead.

"I'm going to pull it out. Hold still, it'll hurt."

The wolf stayed on her side, unmoving, her eyes wide and staring at Olivia.

Olivia pushed down the pad around the thorn, exposing it just a little more, then pinched it between her thumb and middle finger and slowly drew it out. She recognized that type of thorn. It was from some sort of citrus tree. There were many times she'd found herself hurting too when she went to pick their fruit.

The thorn was hard and long, sliding out of the wolf's paw as Olivia pulled it. Once she got it out, she saw it was over an inch long. It must have hurt so much. Blood leaked from the hole-like wound on the wolf's paw. Olivia suspected it would get infected if the wolf walked around with an open wound like that, getting dirt in it.

"Wait just a moment. I'm going to apply a disinfectant."

Olivia drew from her satchel the medicinal herbs she'd gathered while walking, leaves with disinfectant properties, and crushed them thoroughly in her hands. She always grabbed some when she saw them because they were

good for cuts and broken skin.

The leaves let out an astringent smell as she crushed them, then she squeezed them tight and applied the liquid that came out to the deep, narrow wound in the wolf's paw. Applying that would help keep the wound from festering. The wolf whined like a pup as Olivia applied the liquid. It must have stung, but the wolf didn't move.

After that day, the wolf would approach Olivia whenever she was in the forest in the early morning or afternoon. Olivia resisted the urge to name the animal and pet it, because it was dangerous for the wolf to become too used to humans.

A few months passed and the young wolf grew into an adult and found a mate. Olivia saw them together once. The female wolf stood with her mate in the distance and watched Olivia but didn't approach her.

The male wolf showed no aggression towards Olivia, but also showed no interest in approaching her. That was for the best. They might end up killed if they trusted humans too much and came too close.

Olivia didn't see the wolf anymore after she found a mate. But the wolf must have remembered her when her pup ate the poison cherries and she didn't know what else to do. That was plenty for Olivia. It had been years since they'd last met, and it was the first time the wolf had come to her home. How did the wolf know where she lived? Maybe she followed Olivia's scent back along the animal trails Olivia followed when out gathering herbs.

Olivia walked, lost in memories, until she came to the river.

She couldn't fish until she let Rob get his fill of playing in the water. He was already panting from sheer excitement. She told him he could go, and he darted straight for the water and leaped in. Olivia never knew dogs smiled until she started living with Rob. He was definitely smiling now.

He would swim, getting swept down by the current, then pull himself out on the bank and shake himself, sending water spraying everywhere. Why did he insist on going out of his way to do that next to her sometimes? Even if she tried seeing what was in his mind, all she heard was *Woooo!* or *Wahaha!* He wasn't thinking about anything.

He swam again, came out, shook himself, then threw himself in the river again. After about twenty or so repeats of that, he finally stopped, seemingly satisfied. He flopped in the shade of the trees, his tongue lolling out as he panted to catch his breath, a huge grin on his face.

“Is it time to start fishing then?” Olivia muttered.

The fish probably all swam upriver thanks to the ruckus Rob made. Olivia picked up her bucket, decked out in her fishing outfit of a wide-brimmed hat, trousers, and a shirt, and moved locations.

The river flowed fast, but there were some pools here and there of a deep emerald green. There were always trout in those slower-moving pools. One such pool was shaded by the branch of a pine leaning over from the bluff on the other side of the river.

Olivia had lots of worms in a lidded glass jar. She’d dug them out from her garden. Most city women would shriek at the sight of that jar, but Olivia plucked out a worm and stuck it on her hook, then cast her line towards the pool. She loved the moment when the long fishing line sailed in a clean arc through the air.

Her hook with its worm landed in the river just upstream of the pool, and the current took it inside. And then she waited, hoping the trout were hungry.

After some time, she felt a tug running through the fishing line. She waited until the trout had a firm grip on the worm, then pulled her pole up, hoisting the trout from the water. She couldn’t feel the emotions of things like fish, snakes, and insects, which meant she could manage to fish.

She set the bucket with the trout inside in the water of the river to keep it cool and fished up the next one. The river was always cold, even in the summer, thanks to the runoff from the snow that melted in the mountains.

Her grandfather had taught her how to fish.

“You are a gift from God,” he would say whenever he had a chance. “We’re nearing our end, and we never had kids of our own, but God still gave us the joy of raising a child.”

Neither of her grandparents ever felt anything negative towards Olivia.

“We don’t have much time left, so we need to teach you all sorts of things before we go,” they would say, their hearts filled with love. Olivia tried not to be selfish, but she did make all sorts of mistakes when she was young. Even so, her grandparents never once raised their voices at her.

The trout weren’t really biting when the sun rose to its peak.

“Think it’s about time to stop fishing. I should probably head home.”

Today, she managed to hook four trout of various sizes. It was an all-right haul.

“The milk delivery is tomorrow. I think I’ll make a trout and vegetable chowder.”

She grabbed the bucket and stood, and Rob woke from his nap and got up too. Olivia heard his thoughts, *Let’s go home*. It was sometimes surprising how much dogs thought and felt like humans.

“We’re getting milk tomorrow,” said Olivia.

Milk! Yummy milk! Woo-hoo!

Rob’s cute emotions made Olivia smile as they headed home.

Chapter 12: Trout and Vegetable Chowder

ARTHUR was a priceless addition to Freddy's Pharmacy.

When there weren't customers, like today, he made little adjustments to the leg of that old wobbly table, dusted all the high places, and oiled the hinges on the creaky door.

"Arthur, you're an amazing employee," said Freddy.

"Thank you. I like to keep myself moving."

"I can tell. I have to admit, I always imagined mercenaries were a bit more... haphazard. I didn't think they'd care about the little things so much."

"Some do, some don't."

"I suppose so. Oh, it's well past lunchtime. You go get something to eat. I've brought a packed lunch."

"Yes, sir. I'll be back soon."

"Feel free to take your time."

"Thank you."

Arthur stepped out of the pharmacy and went towards the busy streets.

"What should I have?" he pondered. In his mercenary days, he would've eaten anything from snakes to frogs and even bugs if he ran out of food. Being picky meant being weakened before you could defeat your opponent in battle.

"Hey, there, mister! Would you like a grilled meat skewer?" called a voice. "Tender pork skewers, only two big coppers each!"

"Sure, I'll take two," said Arthur.

"Thank'ye, sir!"

With that, Arthur was handed two skewers of sizzling pork, each one with

four cubes of juicy meat. He pulled off a chunk with his teeth while walking to find it heavily salted, probably because it was the sort of thing manual laborers ate.

“Making me thirsty,” he said and looked around. He went up to a stand selling fruit-infused water, and the girl at the counter welcomed him with a smile. “Can I have a cup of that fruit water?” he requested.

“Sure! That’ll be one big and five small coppers.”

He paid and then sat on one of the benches scattered about the area. They were all empty, probably because it was past lunchtime. He bit into his pork skewers and sipped his fruity water, the richness of the pork spreading through his mouth as he carefully nibbled the meat.

You know, that spicy pork cheek soup was really good, he thought, Olivia’s face appearing in his mind as he remembered the soup. That uncaring, animal-conversing, kindhearted Olivia.

As he sat there thinking, a mother and daughter duo passed in front of him and sat on a bench. They also had cups of the fruit water. *Villa people?* Arthur thought while eating his pork. They looked rather wealthy.

“Mother, I’d like to go back to that restaurant,” said the daughter.

“Again? We just got back.”

“I’ve never eaten anything as wonderful as that trout chowder. It wasn’t fishy at all. The trout was so lovely. It will be something different tomorrow if she serves a different soup every day.”

“I suppose. I was surprised, I’ve never seen you enjoy fish that much, Ellen.”

“I’d like to go to that restaurant and take notes on her soup. Surely that would be useful for when I’m married.”

“You’re not even seeing anyone at the moment.”

“Mother! One day. One day. I want to go back to that Soup Forest every single day!”

They’re talking about Olivia’s restaurant, thought Arthur. *Trout chowder? Ah, that sounds amazing. I wonder how she used the trout. And chowder means it’s*

got milk in it, right?

He longed to go back to Soup Forest. He kept thinking back to Olivia's soup as he ate his salty, greasy pork skewers.

What days does she close the restaurant? I'd hate to walk out there and find out it's closed. I'll ask next time I go. Actually, Freddy might know.

He shoved the rest of the pork in his mouth, chugged the last of his fruity water, and went back to the shop.

"You're back already? You didn't have to hurry," said Freddy.

"Freddy, do you know a restaurant called Soup Forest?" Arthur asked.

"You mean Olivia's place? Great food."

"Are there any days she closes the restaurant?"

"I know she closes for holidays. You've been there before?"

"Yeah. When I helped William Hughes, I brought him to that restaurant."

"Is that so? Olivia isn't much for getting involved with people, but she's a good girl. Hard working. And a great cook to boot. Oh, and she knows a lot about medicinal plants. She comes to buy from the shop sometimes. Sometimes she even sells to me, too."

"Actually, she did mention that. That she sometimes buys things from you if she can't find them," Arthur remarked.

That surprised Freddy. *Olivia isn't unfriendly, but she never tells people more than she has to. But she told him something like that?* Then he said, "You know, Olivia's been through some things. She apparently ran away from home when she was five."

"Ran away from home? When she was only five?"

"Yep. Jenkins found her in the forest. Guess she just kept crying, 'I don't want to go home, let me stay with you,' over and over. She had on an expensive dress but was banged up all over from running in the forest. Apparently, she spent a whole night out in the forest alone. It must have really been something. Jenkins cried when he told me about it. Oh, Jenkins is the previous owner of

that restaurant, he took Olivia in and raised her.”

This revelation about Olivia’s past shocked Arthur. She seemed like she was raised with such love and care. He also knew exactly how abnormal it was for a child to spend an entire night in a forest alone. Even adults were scared of a place like that, pitch black with animal calls of all sorts. New mercenaries who grew up in a city would jump at the sound of twigs snapping. You had no idea if a bear or a wolf was about to jump out at you. It was normal to be afraid, even when you were surrounded by your powerful mercenary allies.

“All alone, and only five...” said Arthur.

“Jenkins and his wife took good care of her, but the two of them went on to God’s garden a few years back, and Olivia was alone again. I guess a girl fated with few connections to her family is fated to have few connections wherever she goes.”

“And so she lives alone,” Arthur concluded.

“The pharmacy’s closed on midweek day. Maybe you should go if you’re feeling like it.”

“I think I might.”

Good idea, thought Arthur. I’ll go to the restaurant on my day off. Actually, I could go the evening before my day off too. Or, no. She might be uncomfortable with me showing up that much.

Later that night, once work was done for the day and he’d wiped himself clean, Arthur lay on his back in bed and thought. Freddy didn’t mention anything about Olivia talking to animals. If he had known about that, it would have been the first topic, not things like her adoption history and cooking skills.

“Which means people don’t know about her mysterious ability? If that’s the case, why’d she talk to that snake in front of me?”

The wolf pup incident was another story, since Arthur had followed her in secret, but Olivia could have done something to hide her skill during the snake incident.

“Does that mean she...trusts me? No, no. That’s dumb. That’s just wishful

thinking on my part.”

He remembered how he’d felt like he could hear Olivia’s voice in his head when he’d come back to get William. It was ridiculous, but he absolutely felt like he’d seen Olivia look at him and say, “Thank you for coming back.”

He sat bolt upright. *I know I’m not on battlefields anymore, but seriously, how swept away can I get? I’m going to have to make sure I don’t do anything to upset her if I want to keep eating at her restaurant.*



WHILE Arthur was chiding himself, William and his father were in their villa discussing how they wanted to repay Olivia and Arthur.

“Father, I was thinking I would like to give a reward to the woman of that restaurant and the man who came to get you,” said William.

“Oh? A few large gold coins should be plenty, don’t you think?”

“I have the money, and I should be able to go myself with a cane if I go by carriage.”

“You’ll deliver it yourself? Perfect timing, then. Take Karen with you. She seems bored of life in the villa.”

“Urgh. You want me to bring Karen along?”

“Don’t look so disappointed. Poor Karen is only just recovering from her divorce.”

“Poor Karen, indeed. I’m not certain I agree with that perspective, but, if you insist. I’ll see if she’d like to accompany me.”

Chapter 13: Chilled Asparagus Soup and the Siblings' Visit

ROB barked at nine in the morning. Olivia looked outside and saw Arthur standing there with two plucked and cleaned chickens hanging from twine.

"Good morning, Arthur! What are you doing here so early? And what's with the chickens?" she said.

"Uh, well, I just realized I didn't thank you for helping me gather plants the other day. I thought I should at least give you something. And, I'm off work today."

"You don't have to thank me for helping forage. But I do appreciate the chickens."

She invited him into the kitchen, and they cut the birds up together. Once each part was separated, Arthur sat in the corner of the kitchen and watched Olivia cook.

At ten, a carriage stopped in front of the restaurant. The first customers of the day, before the restaurant even opened, were William and his younger sister.

Arthur didn't really make an attempt to go see them, instead choosing to remain hidden in the kitchen.

"Welcome back, Mister William," Olivia greeted. "How are you doing?"

"Not bad. I can walk with a cane. I apparently tore a muscle. The doctor says the only thing to do is wait."

"Please do take care of yourself."

"I appreciate your concern. Anyway, I've brought my sister with me today," said William as he introduced the woman sitting next to him. "This is Karen. She is recently divorced. I told her the soup here would make her feel much better."

“William, you don’t have to tell people I only just met about my divorce,” said Karen. “I’m sorry. My brother is somewhat insensitive. That’s why he hasn’t ever been able to find a wife.”

Olivia gave a languid smile. William was a fairly unguarded person, and Karen’s heart was quite open as well. She looked just like any other wealthy lady, and it was a relief to know what she said matched exactly what was in her heart.

“Today I’m serving a chilled asparagus soup with roast pork and bread. How many slices of bread would you like?” Olivia asked.

“I’ll have three,” said William.

“Can I just have one, please?” said Karen.

“Coming right up.”

Spring was nearing its end, and asparagus was in season. Olivia bought a lot of it, since it was cheap and tasted nice. Today’s soup was made of boiled asparagus, which she then puréed and thinned with chicken stock and milk. Once nicely chilled, she filled a bowl to the brim with the soup and topped it with a few toasted croutons.

She chilled the soup, dishes, and pot with ice. The ice she brought from her secret ice store before day broke. A chilled, refreshing soup like that was perfect for this season.

“Sorry for the wait,” said Olivia as she brought their food.

“Thank you. Ah! Why is the soup and dish cold?” asked William.

“William, don’t be so rude. Oh! It really is cold. How do you get it this chilled?” asked Karen.

“I have an icehouse underground.”

“Really? Incredible. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a restaurant with its own icehouse, not even in the capital.”

It was common during the transition between spring and summer for people to lose their appetite because their bodies couldn’t keep up with how fast the temperatures changed. Olivia always served soups chilled with ice on days like

that. Her regulars knew that, always looking forward to the yearly chilled-soup days.

The brother and sister pair were as loud as four people. William was behaving well, not leering at Olivia's body or anything. Perhaps it was because his sister was with him.

"My, I never imagined I could eat such refined soup in a country restaurant like this," said William. "It was delicious. I'll be coming again, for sure. Here's the payment for the food, and a thank-you for the other day. I thought money would be the simplest, since it's the easiest to carry around. Oh, and here's that man's portion. Could you make sure he gets it?"

"Uh, well, neither of us helped you because we wanted a reward," Olivia said. "I don't need the money. I'm plenty grateful that you came all the way out here to my restaurant."

William had handed her enough coins for her and Arthur, ten large silver pieces in total. One large silver coin was enough to buy a high-quality dress for going out. Receiving ten of those left Olivia frozen in shock.

"Oh, don't worry," said Karen. "Don't be so hesitant to accept. If you don't, my father will come and force you to accept even more, and my father is far more annoying! We're nouveau riche, after all. We settle everything with money. Quite vulgar, don't you think? Hahaha! Would you please accept? It would put my brother and father at ease."

"Uh, well then, thank you for your generosity," Olivia acquiesced.

"No, thank you. Now I don't have to feel bad when I come back. I really loved that soup!"

"Thank you very much. See you next time."

The siblings left, the bell over the door clanging with their exit.

"Whew..."

"You must be tired. You did great with them," said Arthur with an awkward grin as he came out of the kitchen. "They're like two peas in a pod."

"William and his sister?" Olivia asked.

“Yeah. They’re both pushy.”

“I suppose. But Karen seems nice and refreshing to be around. I’ll be happy if she comes back.”

“Huh. Well, glad you feel that way.”

“Oh, that’s right. I was thinking I’d make chicken jerky with the breasts from those chickens. Would you like to help? Oh, and here’s your money. Five large silvers.”

“Wasn’t expecting to make this money. Thanks. And, sure, I’d love to learn how to make jerky.”

“It’s simple. Just watch.” Olivia heavily salted the thin strips of chicken breast, then covered them in finely diced rosemary and thyme from the garden.

“Rosemary and thyme?” said Arthur. “Those herbs grow basically everywhere. Then you dry it?”

“Not just yet. We’ll let it set overnight to let the flavors really soak in, then cook them at low temperature, and *then* we dry them.”

“Jerky sounds like it takes a long time.”

“It does, but it’s not hard to do and the results are delicious. I get so happy seeing my customers enjoying it.”

Olivia surprised herself with how at ease she felt with another person so close to her. *Why don’t I get nervous when I’m around Arthur?* It baffled her.

“Uh, sorry to eavesdrop on your conversation earlier, but you’ve got an icehouse?” he asked.

Olivia looked over her shoulder at him with a mischievously impish expression. She quickly laid out the seasoned chicken in a wicker basket, then set another one of the same size on top. She did this until she had four sets of baskets with chicken. She didn’t answer Arthur’s question.

“Arthur, would you help me put these to dry upstairs?” she requested.

“Sure.”

They went upstairs, and she flung all the windows in the hallway open, then

quickly looped cord from the four hooks in the ceiling and passed tree branches through each of the loops.

“Could you put the baskets on top of the two branches?” she asked.

“Like this? Won’t they fall?”

“Not as long as it’s not too windy. And once the customers leave this afternoon, I’ll show you my *very own* icehouse.”

Arthur held back his laughter as he looked at her and her intentionally odd way of saying it. But he also thought, *Hm. She seems a bit too bubbly today.*

She’d seemed calmer the past three times he’d met her, she was oddly peppy today. It almost seemed forced.

“I’m looking forward to seeing Soup Forest’s icehouse,” he said.

“All right. You just grab a book and wait. It’ll knock your socks off.”

Chapter 14: The Icehouse and a Chilled Dessert

ALL the lunch customers left, then Olivia and Arthur took Rob and walked into the forest.

“So, about this icehouse,” said Arthur. “It’s not under the restaurant?”

“I don’t have any underground spaces. The icehouse is in the forest.”

Arthur watched as Olivia smirked while talking and thought, *There’s definitely something different about her.* She seemed just a little too energetic. *People tend to go overboard acting the opposite of how they feel when they can’t talk about their real emotions.*

This instinct of his had saved him on several occasions. Once, when traveling with some men he happened to encounter, Arthur got the impression they were acting friendlier, more pleasant, than they had during their travels up until then, and that made him suspicious. He pretended to sleep that night, and the six men attacked him in the night. He was able to fight back right away. He beat them until they couldn’t get back up.

Apparently, they’d snuck a peek into his backpack and realized he had several gold coins on him, which they planned to take for themselves.

And that intuition was telling him today that something about Olivia was just a little off. *I wonder what it is. Maybe she’s trying to hide something.*

“Here it is,” she said at last. “Follow me. And watch your footing. It’s slippery.”

They were on an incline with a thicket of trees and mounds of black, angular rock. Olivia shifted several rocks the size of a human’s head to reveal a hole. She slipped in once it was just big enough for a person to enter. Rob and Arthur followed her in.

Arthur felt cold air and moisture envelop him when he entered. He was at risk of hitting his head at even the cave’s tallest points. The ceiling in the lowest

areas was as low as his chest.

"This is your icehouse?" he asked.

"It is. It's cool in here."

"Good job finding somewhere like this."

"Someone showed me this place."

"Your grandfather?"

"No."

She didn't say anything else.

They continued and came upon a chamber. The cave extended beyond that, but the passageway was so small a human couldn't go any deeper. There was a row of wooden crates in this chamber holding stacks of square chunks of ice.

"I cut the ice from the river when it freezes," said Olivia. "Then I stack it up on a sled to transport it over the snow."

"You do this? On your own?"

"Yep, just me."

"But it'd be dangerous to fall in when you're alone."

"You think? It's no biggie. I'm used to it."

There it is again. She sounds too cheery.

"You're probably cold by now," she said. "Let's head out."

"Sure."

Olivia carried out two blocks of ice about the size of an adult's head and wrapped them in several layers of cloth. Arthur quickly piled the rocks back over the cave entrance.

"I'll carry the ice," he offered.

"Thank you, if you don't mind."

Arthur debated on whether or not he should say something, and finally said, "Olivia, is there something you're upset about?"

“Huh? What makes you ask that?”

“You seem like you’re trying too hard today. Sometimes, if you’re hurting, it helps a little to talk... Oh, I uh...”

Olivia looked like a child who’d just fallen. She stared at the ground, her mouth twisted in a frown, tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I said something insensitive,” he said.

“No, you didn’t. Actually, a very good friend showed me this cave, and he left. He went very far away, and he’s probably never coming back.”

“Your...friend?”

“Yes. We used to bathe in the river together, look at the flowers and moon together, and talk about everything. He was important to me. I loved him. I thought I’d accepted it when we said goodbye, to an extent, but I’ve just been feeling sadder and sadder. How unbecoming is that? I’m not a child anymore.”

She seemed to give up on holding back her tears as she spoke. Huge drops spilled from her eyes as she walked onward. Arthur looked at her while she was still facing ahead and thought, *This friend... They must have been in a relationship.*

They *bathed* together, looked at flowers together, looked at the moon together, and talked. Arthur had never been in a romantic relationship, but everything about that sounded like romance to him.

They recently broke up, then?

“And that person told you about the cave?” asked Arthur.

“*Person?* Uh, yes. He did.”

Arthur again felt there was something odd about her tone as she returned his question at first, but Olivia didn’t say anything else as she walked and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. He went to ask but closed his mouth again.

The logical part of him was telling him not to pry any more than that, so they walked to the restaurant in silence. Freddy’s comment about a girl fated with few connections to family always having few connections wherever she went

echoed in his mind, and his heart ached.



WHEN they got back to Soup Forest, Olivia turned to look at him and said, “Arthur, do you like sweet things?”

“I do.”

“All right, you sit down and wait a bit. I’m going to make something cold, and sweet, and delicious.” She smiled. The rims of her eyes were completely red. She looked more childlike than usual.

I shouldn’t have spoken out of line, thought Arthur, regretting what he’d said, and also being frustrated with himself for not knowing what he could say to make her feel better. *What do you say in this sort of situation when you’re trying to be kind and console someone else?*

He knew plenty of ways for surviving combat, but he couldn’t think of a single word to say that would soothe her pained heart.

“It’s just like the cherry tea. There’s so much I don’t know,” he muttered aloud before he could stop himself.

Olivia called loudly from the kitchen, “What? I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that. What did you say?”

“I was just talking to myself!” And then, quieter, he mumbled, “Just a buffoon talking to himself.”

After some time, Olivia came out of the kitchen carrying something in a tin can.

“Right, go ahead and try this. My grandfather used to make it all the time in winter,” she said.

The can, the sort of lidded thing you’d keep tea leaves in, was cold to the touch. Arthur took off the lid and found another, smaller can inside, beads of ice clinging to it.

Arthur forced the lid of the inner can open with his fingers to reveal a white, cream-like substance inside. Olivia spooned it into mounds on a small dish for him.

He lifted his spoon, scooped up some of the treat, and popped it in his mouth where he was struck with delicate sweetness and the rich flavor of milk. “This is really good!”

“It is, isn’t it? I love it,” said Olivia.

“Is it milk?”

“Cream. You know how cream settles to the top of a milk bottle if you let it sit, right? Well, if you take just that cream, add sugar, chill it like this, and shake it up, you get this.”

“It’s delicious.”

“My grandfather taught me how to make it.”

Arthur didn’t normally eat sweet things, but he couldn’t stop shoveling the chilled cream into his mouth.



EVENTUALLY, it was time for Olivia to start getting ready for dinner.

“I should probably be heading out,” said Arthur.

“Oh. Arthur, I know I might have been a little odd today, but please do come again. If you’d like,” Olivia said, her eyes cast down.

Arthur just said, “I definitely will,” and left the restaurant, but then turned on his heel and headed right back into the restaurant.

Olivia stepped out, looking confused.

Arthur decided not to listen to his head, and instead listened to his heart and instincts, and said, “If you ever want to look at flowers or the moon, but you’d feel too lonely doing it on your own, then, instead of doing it with that friend you said goodbye to, you can ask me to come along. I’d be even happier if you asked me to come along, even if you’re not just feeling lonely.”

Olivia stood there, blinking, not saying anything.

I knew it, it was too sudden, thought Arthur, rethinking what he did. Then he said, “Just give it some thought,” and turned away without waiting for a response.

On his six-mile walk back home, he kept thinking, *Was that too fast? Was I being inconsiderate? They only just broke up, after all.*

It wasn't like him to ruminate like this.

"I can't believe I said that. And at a time like this."

He didn't really feel like going back to his room, so he wandered the town instead. He went into a pub and drank some of the cheap, strong liquor commoners often had, and then a young man started talking to him.

"Huh, mister, you're the guy always buying skewers from me, aren't you?"

"That's me. I take it you run the stall?"

"Yep. No way I'm going to forget my best customer. You buy skewers off me four times a week."

"Do I really eat them four times a week?"

"You do. Uh, you don't remember?"

"Not at all. And, actually, I might need to reconsider my choices."

"Oh, come on. You should be buying skewers from me every day."

That's when a woman's voice said, "I hope you don't mind. It's lonely drinking alone. Could I join in on the conversation?"

The woman jumping in on their conversation was Karen, William's sister. Arthur recognized her because he'd caught a look from the kitchen of Soup Forest, but Karen didn't recognize Arthur.

She looked at him with sultry eyes and said, "I never knew I could find such a fine specimen of a man out here in the country. What are you drinking? It's my treat."

The young man from the skewer stall looked happy when he heard she'd be paying for drinks. "Does that include me, miss?" he said.

"Sure, why not? My name's Karen."

"I'm Roy."

Arthur didn't say anything.

“And you? Won’t you tell me your name?” she asked.

“Maybe next time. I’m going to turn in for the night,” said Arthur and he turned away, while Karen pouted.

Chapter 15: Pea Soup and Karen

THE wind was strong that morning. Peep came by and kept repeating, *Rain! Lots rain! Rain!*

“Thank you for letting me know. Here’s a treat,” said Olivia, giving it some breadcrumbs.

Peep gobbled them all down, wiped its beak on the window frame like always, and flew away.

“Lots of rain, hm? I suppose I can’t expect too many customers today.”

She diced half the number of vegetables she normally did, planning to make less soup than usual.

As she did, she heard a carriage coming. She looked out the window to see the crest of the Hughes family. She remembered it because it was an abnormal crest, with two hammers crossed. She assumed William had come back, but it was actually his sister, Karen, who stepped out of the carriage.

“Hello,” Karen said. “I’ve fallen in love with your soup.”

“Welcome back. Thank you for visiting again.”

“Could I please have your soup of the day? With a slice of bread.”

“I’m serving it with a side of trout pan-fried in butter. Would you like some?”

“I’ll take that too.”

“Coming right up.”

Today was pea soup. Olivia simmered the vibrant green peas in a large pot. Smashing them up released the scent of early summer. She thinned it with chicken stock, pressed the mixture through a sieve to mash it even finer, and then tasted it.

“Mm. It’s nice already. I have to stick it out, though.” She added a healthy

dose of fresh milk and salt, then spooned another taste test into her mouth. “Ah, now that’s good. It tastes like summer is just around the corner.”

She took the food out and said, “I’m sorry for the wait. Here’s your pea soup, pan-fried trout, and bread.”

“Oh, it all looks delicious!” Karen spooned some of the bright green soup into her mouth and a look of euphoria came over her. “Oh, my. Maybe if I ate soup like this all the time, I’d have skin as fair as yours.”

“Skin...like me? But I’m tanned.”

“You are not! You’re plenty pale.”

Olivia looked like she didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t like she took special care of her skin in any way.

“Are you busy right now?” asked Karen.

“I’m free until other customers come.”

“Good. So, recently, I’ve found this man who is exactly my type. He’s muscular, and strong, not particularly sociable, but seems dependable. And he has zero interest in me.”

“He has no interest in you? And *that’s* your type?”

“Isn’t the idea of getting someone who has no interest in you to look at you and become enamored with you so incredibly exciting?”

Was it? Karen might be asking, but Olivia had never had a romantic relationship and the only thing she thought when a man didn’t have interest in her was, *Oh, thank God*. She’d never once considered trying to turn their attention towards her.

Karen devoured her food, but she wasn’t lacking in elegance despite talking to Olivia at the same time. Perhaps that was because of her affluent upbringing.

“You don’t think so, Olivia?” said Karen.

“I don’t. I like being alone.”

“Oh, what a shame. You’re so beautiful.”

The door opened with a clang. It was Arthur. He let out a huge, internal sigh

when he saw the corners of Olivia's mouth turn up for a brief moment when he came in.

"Welcome back, Arthur," she said.

"Can I get today's soup, bread, and the side?" he said.

"Of course you can. Wait just a moment."

Olivia went into the kitchen. Karen waited for Arthur to sit in a seat, not near her, then called to him. "Hello there. So, it's Arthur, is it?"

Arthur turned only his head to look at her, working hard to keep his annoyance from showing on his face as he greeted her with a neutral expression. "Hello. Yes, it is."

"Fancy meeting you in this restaurant. Did you walk?"

"Yes."

"It's six miles from town. I wonder if you really came for the food." Karen's eyes sparkled as she looked at him, but he was a bit fed up with her.

He'd come out here because he had to forage for plants today. He decided he might as well get something to eat before he went out foraging, but now he was thinking he'd made a mistake on the order of those two things. He knew from experience that women like this were a nuisance regardless of whether you were friendly to them or gave them the cold shoulder.

Olivia brought out his food on a tray. She saw Karen and Arthur talking and thought, *Oh, that man she was talking about...*, making the connection between Karen's description and him.

Chapter 16: Arthur is One of the Pack

“**SORRY** for the wait, Arthur. Are you going foraging today?” asked Olivia.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You should probably head out early then. It’s going to rain today, but it won’t start for a little while, I don’t think.”

“Really? I thought it might, with how the wind’s feeling. I’ll have to hurry.”

“Please do. Be careful out there.”

As she started to move away, Arthur stopped her with a quiet call. “Olivia?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about the other day.”

“If you’re talking about what I think you are—”

The bell above the door rang and several of her regular customers came in. Olivia called a greeting to them, excused herself, then went over to the newly arrived customers.

Arthur started eating his soup, feeling relieved. *Doesn’t seem like she hates me, at least.* The fresh-smelling pea soup slowly filled his stomach. Before he knew it, he was enchanted by the rich flavor and aroma of the soup.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Karen asked. She’d finished her own food and moved over to Arthur’s table, a cup of tea in hand.

Don’t think it matters if I mind, thought Arthur. *You’ve already moved.* He kept eating his soup, his expression blank, and took a bite of the pan-fried trout.

“Don’t look so disgusted. What are you doing after this?” Karen asked.

“Going into the forest for work.”

“Work?”

Arthur stopped eating and looked Karen straight in the eye. “Do you need

something from me?”

“Oh, my. Am I not allowed to speak with you unless I need something from you? Why don’t you ride in my carriage with me on the way back to town? I can go with you into the forest. Or, if you’d rather I didn’t, I can wait for you.”

“No thank you, ma’am. I’m heading to the forest for work, and I don’t like people waiting on me.”

“Hm. You know, you were all smiles when you were talking to Olivia. Do you like her?”

“...Cut it out.”



Karen was taken aback by his tone, completely different from normal. He seemed rather mild-mannered before, but that changed instantly. His eyes were cold, filled with a quietly burning anger that left her speechless.

Arthur shoveled down the rest of the food without enjoying it—which was a shame considering it wasn't everyday he ate food this good—then stood.

“See you next time,” he called to the kitchen, set some coins on the table, and left without looking at Karen, who was still frozen in surprise.

He opened the door and stepped outside. The wind was blowing. “Should probably hurry,” he said, then walked with long strides into the forest.

It was around then that Karen finally recovered from her shock. “For the love of God, just look at me. I'll captivate you,” she murmured.

Olivia saw that brief moment when Arthur's eyes turned steely as she brought the food out to the customers at another table. She'd looked in his direction out of reflex because his strong emotions had crashed into her. She heard what he hadn't said out loud: *Don't you dare lay a finger on Olivia. You won't get away with it if you do.*

Her heart pounded in her chest from shock and unease, but she acted like she knew nothing.

Eventually everyone left, both Karen and Olivia's regulars. Olivia let the goats free in the field and stared at them. Their minds were filled with, *Grass! Yum! This grass so yum!* Just like always.

Olivia had stubbornly maintained walls between herself and other people, and she didn't understand why she felt the desire to open up to Arthur, who she'd only met four times. She couldn't decide if doing so would be the right decision or not.

If there's anyone who wouldn't hate me after learning everything about my ability, it's him, she thought, but she was uncertain because of how sad she'd be if she did trust him and open up to him, only for it to end in failure.

“Oh, Pete, it's such a mess,” she said. “I suppose humans really do want to live in packs.”

“Baa!”

“Baa!”

Complex topics like that always went over the heads of animals, no matter what kind. Pete and Pepe were listening to her, in their own way, but their attention drifted. The only ones who ever listened all the way through Olivia’s complicated conversations and replied at the end were Rob and the golden deer.

The thing with Rob was that, no matter what she talked to him about, he always agreed wholeheartedly, which meant he wasn’t very good at giving advice.

Just then, she felt panicked emotions from outside. It felt like some small animals that were in a hurry and distressed.

She put the goats back in the barn—they’d probably eaten their fill by now—and went around to the front. There were six sparrows at the bird feeder gobbling down the wheat seeds and breadcrumbs there.

Oh no, oh no!

Hurry!

More eat!

Rain!

Rain come!

It seemed the rain was going to start sooner than Olivia expected. The sparrows were rushing to eat as much as they possibly could before it came.

“What should I do? How far did Arthur get?” Olivia wondered aloud.

She knew that Arthur wasn’t about to die if he got rained on, not with how hardy he was, but the forest was surprisingly dangerous in heavy rains. Your footing became muddy, and you couldn’t hear other sounds because of the rain hitting the leaves. Dangerous animals usually didn’t come out in extreme rains, but you never knew what would happen in the forest.

“I don’t have to worry about him, right? He used to be a mercenary. Actually,

I'll probably just get in his way if I go," she said as she scrubbed the tables in the restaurant, but she was half a mind to go and get him before the rain really started coming down.

The rulers of the forest, the wolf couple, wouldn't attack her, but who knew what would happen if Arthur strayed too close to their den. Hopefully they would think of him as belonging with Olivia, but would they really let him go, considering they were more aggressive while they were raising their young?

"And it's not just the wolves..."

A lot of animals were raising their young this time of year, as spring turned into summer. There were bears in the forest. Bears and wolves didn't fight. The wisdom of the wild dictated that you didn't do anything that would shorten your lifespan, not unless it was absolutely necessary. But, what if they were against a human?

"He's not going to be so unlucky that he runs into one of those bears. Right?"

She knew there was no getting out of a spiral of negative thoughts once she started and gave up on scrubbing the tables. She couldn't take it anymore. She grabbed her medicine-filled satchel, put in some sweets and a water flask, locked the door to the restaurant, and went into the forest. With Rob in tow, of course.

She remembered she'd explained to the wolf that Arthur was a member of her pack. Wolves never abandoned one of their packmates. If something happened, they helped each other out, following the pack leader.

"That's right, he's a member of my pack," she said. He'd gotten angry at Karen at the thought of her doing something to Olivia. He thought of Olivia like that. He told her he'd look at the flowers and the moon with her, though he did seem to be under the assumption that the golden deer was a human.

"I have to go."

At first, she only thought she should go, but now she thought she *had* to go. She picked up the pace.

The wind grew stronger. It was a cold, damp wind. Olivia was sure it was already raining in the distance.

She walked quickly through the forest. Despite normally avoiding using her ability, she now let it free, reaching as far as she could to feel the hearts of others, trying to find Arthur.

Chapter 17: Drive Them Away

THE feelings of countless animals flowed into Olivia as she walked with her mind completely open. *Rain come. Hungry. Yum. Go? No go? Rain come? Yummy.*

The hungry and frustrated one was likely a large carnivore. The one debating whether or not it should go out despite the rain was likely another large animal. She couldn't feel Arthur's thoughts.

She was jogging at this point. *I have to find him soon. I have to find him before the animals do.*

After arriving at one point, she felt a flurry of excitement hitting her.

Human smell. Human. Human there.

At least three creatures had caught scent of Arthur, and they were meat eaters. Since they were working together in a group, they were likely wolves.

"Rob, can you find Arthur's scent?"

He'd been trying hard to find Arthur's trail, but Arthur must have wandered around back and forth. Rob kept circling around the same area in search of him. They wouldn't find him at this rate.

Olivia called to the birds. "Have you seen a human? I'm looking for him! Please, please tell me where he is!"

The various small birds of the forest who had been watching Rob and Olivia from the shadows of the treetops clamored. *Human. That way. Big human.*

This way, said one robin as it moved from one branch to another in a direction.

"Thank you! I promise I'll give you a treat for this!"

It wasn't like the birds were trying to get a treat from Olivia, but they reacted when she conjured images of bread and fat scraps in her head.

This way, this way!

“Thank you!”

She had to find Arthur before the meat eaters did. He may be strong, but it was dangerous to take on three animals, likely wolves too. Wolves who were on the move, not staying in their territory, were normally acting like that because they were hungry.

They aren't the couple I know. This is a different pack I haven't met.

Hurry. She needed to find him as soon as possible, before the wolves.

“Arthur! Are you there? Arthur! Please say something!” she called.

“Heyo!” came his voice.

“There you are! Where are you? Call back again!”

“I'm over here! What's wrong?”

Olivia heard the rustle of someone running through the underbrush and Arthur came out of the forest.

“Olivia! What's going on?”

“We have to go back now. It's going to rain.”

“You came all this way for that?”

“That's not all. We're in danger. Something's coming!” she said, then she clamped her mouth shut.

Human.

Human come.

Hungry.

The three animals were happy Olivia had moved closer to them.

“I think it's wolves. Three of them,” she said.

Arthur pulled the large knife from his waist and quickly scanned the area. He seemed to spot the wolves. “Three? This could get ugly. Can you climb?” he asked.

“I can, but I want to try something else first.”

“And by something else, you mean...?”

Olivia sent the wolves mental images of hunters with dogs and said, “If you eat me or this man, many dogs will come. The dogs will all be in a frenzy, howling as they corner you. They’ll bring hunters. They’ll bring those hunting guns, the things that make the loud noise. They’ll kill you all.”

One of the wolves’ tails drooped, tucked between its legs. One more looked uncertain, peering at the pack leader to judge its expression. The leader remained calm. It wasn’t frightened by the images Olivia sent.

Human. Human.

Rob wasn’t barking yet. He let out a low growl and hovered right at her side to protect her.

“Lots of dogs will come after you,” said Olivia again. “They’ll chase you. The hunters will shoot you with guns.”

Stronger, stronger, she pushed the images out with all the force she had. She imagined hunters with rifles. She thought of a flurry of dogs, barking on and on. Dogs didn’t normally throw themselves at wolves, but she thought of the dogs leaping at the wolves anyway.

The pack leader cowered slightly. The three wolves split apart and circled around Arthur and Olivia. Arthur held his knife up and stood back-to-back with Olivia, glaring at a wolf so it wouldn’t charge her from behind.

“Go home,” said Olivia. “If you eat us, they will shoot you, and you will die. Go. Go on, now.”

The wolves slowly, ever so slowly, put distance between them and the humans. Once they were a certain distance away, they turned and disappeared into the forest.

That was when Olivia noticed two more wolves a little ways off. It was the two Olivia knew.

“Did you come to help?” said Olivia. “Thank you.”

Our pack. It seemed they considered Olivia part of their pack and so came to

help her.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you so much. But it’s dangerous to leave your pups on their own. We’re fine now. Go back to your den. Thank you so much.”

“Did those two come out to save us?” asked Arthur.

She looked at him and nodded. The two wolves were gone by the time she turned forward again.

“Olivia, what was that just now? I suddenly saw these images of dogs and hunters in my mind. That was because of you, wasn’t it?” Arthur asked.

“I’ll explain while we walk. Let’s go. It’s going to rain.”

They set off at a quick pace, and eventually Olivia explained.

“I can... I can feel animals’ emotions. You saw it before. When I helped the wolf pup.”

“I did, yeah. Not that I really understood what was happening.”

“And, well, humans are animals, too. I can hear them when their minds are unguarded.”

“Hear them...? Wait. Can you read my mind?”

“Only when you’re unguarded. I try to avoid listening to human emotions as much as I can. It’s...uncomfortable to have that done to you, right?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m uncomfortable, but it does make me worry about what I thought.”

The forest exploded in white light, and, quite some time later, thunder roared.

“I don’t understand humans like I do animals, since they hide their hearts behind all sorts of things,” said Olivia. “And I also don’t want to know, so I try not to hear them.”

“Should you really be telling me this? You’ve hidden this for a long time, right? Doesn’t seem like Freddy from the pharmacy knows, at least.”

“I do hide it. I imagine everyone would be uncomfortable knowing. It’s not something others should know about...”

There was another flash of light. The thunder followed sooner after this time.

“Let’s hurry,” said Olivia.

“Yeah.”

They walked for a while in silence. They could see gaps in the trees in the distance. They walked on towards the brighter scenery. Rain began pattering against the leaves, and they both broke into a run for Soup Forest at the same time.

Chapter 18: Mint Tea

THEY rushed into the restaurant, and the rain came pouring down right after.

At first it was just a smattering of drops, but it quickly escalated into a deluge. It was impossible to see out the foggy windows.

“Would you like a cup of cherry tea? Or normal tea? I also have mint tea,” said Olivia.

“I’ve never had mint tea,” said Arthur.

“I’ll make some mint tea then.”

And then they went back to saying nothing. Olivia boiled the kettle. Arthur watched her from behind as he sat at the small table in the kitchen. The only sound was the roar of the rain.

“You can ask me questions, if you want. I’ll answer them honestly. Generally,” said Olivia.

“Do you know what I’m thinking right now?” he asked.

“No. Your heart is too calm. I couldn’t tell in the forest either. I can’t feel anything from humans unless they’re unguarded. But...I did feel a little bit of what you were thinking when you were talking to Karen earlier.”

“Uh. And what was that?”

“Um. Are you sure you want me to say?” Olivia asked.

“I don’t really remember thinking anything rude.”

“Saying it is uncomfortable.”

“Please? I want to know.”

“It was, ‘Don’t you dare lay a finger on Olivia. You won’t get away with it if you do.’”

“Ah. Yep. Nope, I do remember thinking that. Urgh, that’s embarrassing.”

“Heehee.”

“Hahaha.”

They kept smiling after that. Rob lifted his head as he lay in bed and looked at the two of them thinking, *What? What going on?*

“What is he thinking now?” asked Arthur.

“He’s thinking, ‘What’s going on?’”

“Huh. Hahaha! That’s fun.”

“It is fun listening to animals’ minds,” Olivia said.

“I bet. But not humans’?”

“No, not humans’.”

Olivia heaped spoonfuls of the tea into the teapot, added plenty of fresh mint, then poured the water she boiled over it. She warmed the teacups with hot water, put everything on a tray, and carried it over to Arthur. She sat across from him and, while waiting for the tea to steep, asked about something that had caught her attention.

“You talked about me with Freddy?”

“Yeah. Sorry. We weren’t gossiping or anything. It’s just how the conversation went.”

“Freddy was close with my grandfather, even though they were far apart in age.”

“Seemed like it. He said Jenkins told him about you.”

“What did he say? I want to hear what my grandfather said about me.”

Arthur looked at Olivia’s hands as she poured the tea and said, “He said you spent a night alone in the forest when you were five, and that you kept just repeating, ‘I don’t want to go home. Let me stay here.’ Apparently, Jenkins cried when he told Freddy.”

“Aw. That makes me remember my grandfather’s face. It’s been a long time

since I thought about it. Oh, now I'm going to cry. He was such a good person. Both of them were. Real, good people, all the way to the bone. I'm so lucky a couple like them found me. All right. Here you go, mint tea."

"Mm, it smells nice. I'll have to try making this myself. That and I definitely need to try gathering cherries in the forest next year!"

Olivia watched Arthur as she sipped her tea. "When I was child, I thought everyone was like me," she said.

"Mm?"

"I went on and on about all the voices I heard. That's why my biological grandfather decided I was a risk to my siblings and cousins finding good matches. He said they should send me to a faraway convent. I learned it wasn't a nice place, though, on the carriage ride there."

"How? Did the person from the convent say something?"

"No. I heard the horse's thoughts. I saw images of children crying. That's why I ran. There are all sorts of animals in the forest at night. They'd love to eat a five-year-old child, don't you think? I kept thinking about disgusting things, to keep them from attacking me. Like greens and that kind of bitter medicine you're forced to take."

"Did it work?"

"I have no idea. Maybe there just weren't any hungry animals around."

The rain continued to pound the roof.

Olivia thought, *I wonder how the animals of the forest are making it through this rain. I hope those young, little lives aren't getting drenched, shivering with cold.* Out loud, she said, "I hope the birds, badger cubs, fox cubs, baby bunnies, and bear cubs are all warm and dry, safe in their dens."

"You're kind."

"It's incredibly painful to live somewhere you don't feel safe. When that was all I knew, I thought that was just what life felt like. Then I came here and learned life isn't all pain. It's just *that* place that was painful."

"And you were only five..."

“Only five.”

Olivia stood without warning and brought something from the kitchen.

“Here, take half of the chicken jerky you helped me with earlier,” she said.

“You sure? Aren’t you going to serve it?”

“I will, but I don’t think I’ll get any more customers today. It’s not completely dried so it won’t last too long. Go on. Help me eat it so the chicken’s life doesn’t go to waste.”

“Well, if you insist.” Arthur took the jerky, wrapped in greased paper, and carefully packed it in his backpack.

Rob let out a pathetic whine in his sleep. Olivia and Arthur looked at each other and chuckled silently at his adorable sleep talking.

“I hated rain when I was a mercenary,” said Arthur.

“Did you?”

“I like it now though, when I’m here in the restaurant.”

“I love watching the rain from a comfortable home,” Olivia agreed.

The mint tea smelled refreshing. Arthur drank it, thinking he really needed to learn more about medicinal herbs. He also thought of Olivia’s childhood, about how she learned to live in such a painful place at only five years old, and his heart ached.

Chapter 19: Good Human!

IN the midst of that heavy rain, two regulars came to Soup Forest. They were Bob and his son Sam, both merchants. This would normally be time for Olivia's break, but she greeted them with a smile.

"Thank the Lord. I was feeling bad for the horse in that rain," said Bob.

"I'll get you some hot cups of tea. Did you bring the horse under the eaves?" Olivia asked.

"Yep, we did. Thanks."

"Do you have a change of clothes? If you like, you can borrow something from my grandfather's old clothes," Olivia offered.

"You wouldn't mind? And you're supposed to be on break, aren't you? You don't have to serve us 'til it's time for you to open again, but I would like some of that soup you got written on the wall over there, the side, and some bread."

"Of course."

Olivia started by serving them hot tea, then she went up to the second floor to get the clothes. There was something niggling in her mind the whole time.

What was it again? There was something very odd I heard earlier, but what was it?

She pulled two sets of clothing from the dresser, still unable to find the answer to her question, and went back downstairs.

Bob and Sam changed in a corner of the restaurant, and Olivia started making the food in the kitchen while they did. Arthur spent the whole time at the kitchen table reading *An Intro to Herbology*.

As she stirred the soup, she realized the thing bugging her was something Arthur had said. She turned to look at him. He noticed and looked back, his eyes wide with questioning. That's when she remembered what it was that was bothering her. She hurried over to him and quietly said, "Arthur, earlier, did you

say you saw images of dogs and hunters in your mind?"

"Yeah. When you talked to the wolves, I saw all these worked up hunting dogs barking, and hunters with rifles. You sent those images, didn't you?"

"I did, but, it's just that, I can do that sort of communication with animals, but I've never been able to do it with humans."

Arthur looked up at Olivia with confusion. He didn't really seem to understand what she was getting at. She stared back into his eyes, but a voice called from the restaurant.

"Hey, Olivia, we're done changing. You're a lifesaver. Any way I could get another cup of tea?"

"Coming right up," she replied.

And her conversation with Arthur stopped there.

But she kept thinking about it. Arthur had heard her inner voice, without a doubt. What could that mean?

She then remembered a conversation she had with the golden deer a long time ago:

Human live with human.

"But I'm afraid of humans. I don't like them. I enjoy being with you more."

Human need human.

"You think? But I'm not a normal human. I'm no good. That's why my herd abandoned me."

You not no good. You find mate.

"Haha. Mate? I wonder if I could find my match like that. It seems impossible to find my partner among humans."

She was brought back to the present by Arthur's quiet voice. "Olivia, the water's boiling. Should it be?"

"Ah!" She jerked the kettle off the stove, poured the tea, and brought it out to Bob and Sam. Next, she finely diced the chicken jerky and let it marinate with diced vegetables in a sauce made of olive oil, vinegar, salt, and honey.

It isn't like he's my "mate" or anything. He's just someone who doesn't hate me even though he learned about my ability. That's all. I don't know why I'm getting so worked up over it.

After thinking that, she was struck with a dreadful realization and spun around to look at Arthur. *Did he hear what I thought just now?* Her heart pounded in her chest, but Arthur was absorbed in the book he was reading. It didn't seem like he'd heard anything.

Oh, thank God, she thought. Ah, so this is what it feels like to have someone reading your mind. No one would like to know someone else is hearing their inner voice. It's uncomfortable. Now I've experienced it for myself.

The clock rolled around to five in the evening, and Olivia served dinner to the father and son merchant duo.

The rain showed no signs of letting up for a long time. It wasn't until seven that it finally stopped, and stars peeked through gaps between the clouds. The two customers quickly got ready to go home.

"Think we've overstayed our welcome!" said Bob. "We'll bring back the clothes once we've washed them. That pea soup was incredible."

"Thank you. And no rush on the clothes. Be careful going home," said Olivia.

She put the "Closed" sign on the door, then went back into the restaurant and served Arthur dinner. "I'm sure it's boring to eat the same thing for dinner as you had for lunch, so I made this little cucumber and chicken jerky salad," she said.

"Thanks. Time to dig in. Mm, that's good. I used to eat the exact same rations every meal for ten days straight, but, after coming here regularly, I don't think I could ever go back to that lifestyle," he said.

"I'm glad you like it. Take your time eating," she said, then she thought, *I don't want you to go back to being a mercenary...*

She went back to the kitchen, not realizing her subconscious wish overflowed from her heart.

"Thank you for today, by the way," Arthur said. "I don't think I would've made

it out uninjured if I'd taken on three wolves. You saved my life. I won't forget that, I promise."

"I'm just glad you're safe. Oh, you didn't really get a chance to gather much, did you? You can take some of the herbs I have."

"No, I couldn't do that. You've already done so much for me."

"They grow nearby. I can easily step outside and pick some more. If it bothers you, you can return the favor by coming to the restaurant again. You're always good about paying me. Do you have a list of what you need?"

Arthur was hesitant, but he showed her his list.

"I have all of these. Wait just a moment," she said, then she hurried up the stairs. She had all sorts of plant cuttings hanging from the ceiling of her bedroom to dry. She used a long stick with a hook on the end to pull down bundles of the plants he needed. "This one, this one... Oh, this one too," she said, splitting them up.

She went right back down to the restaurant with them and said, "Here you go. They're dried, but everything you need is there."

When Arthur was about to leave, he said, "Thanks again. I'll make sure to stop by soon."

"It's my pleasure. Please do come again. And be careful on the road home."

While walking down the road, Arthur turned back twice. Each time he did, a huge grin appeared on his face and he waved, then he disappeared towards town.

She watched him go, her heart filled with emotion as she did. Rob stood beside her, watching Arthur go as well. His mouth lolled open, and he looked up at Olivia, thinking over and over, *Good human! That male good human!*

"Oh, Rob. You're right, though. He is a good human."

She locked the door and began cleaning up, feeling at peace, then took a bath and went to bed. The entire time, her heart felt gentle and warm.



AROUND that same time, Arthur arrived in town, desperately trying to keep the grin off his face. He did manage to keep a straight face, but he kept repeating Olivia's words in his mind: *I don't want you to go back to being a mercenary...*

He'd heard her voice directly in his own mind. Her tone was much more tender than the usual levelheaded impression he got from her.

"Maybe that's really what she's like, deep down. I really shouldn't tell her I heard, though. She'd be embarrassed if she found out."

A soft smile spread across his tanned, rugged features.

Chapter 20: The Wren

A few days of clear skies followed the heavy rain, and everyone was busy with their own work. Olivia, too, was busy every day as the farmers, villa people, and traveling merchants stopped by Soup Forest.

After the lunch period one day, she went to prepare her own lunch when the bell above the door rang. Wondering who it was, she popped her head out of the kitchen and saw one of the nearby farmer's wives standing in the doorway. She only held it open, she didn't step inside.

"Ella? What is it?" asked Olivia.

"Sophie has a cough that won't go away, and a bit of a fever. I was wondering if I could get some medicine for her."

"Oh. Well, there's all sorts of coughs. Would you mind if I went over to see her?"

"Please do. I came on the wagon. Do you want to ride over with me?"

"Yes. Let me grab my medicines real quick. Wait just a moment."

Olivia ran up to her room on the second floor and selected several types of herbs good for coughs from a cabinet with lots of tiny drawers. She put them each in little paper packets then went downstairs and put the paper packets in her satchel.

"All right, I'm all ready. Let's go," she said.

"Thank you, Olivia."

Ella got into the wagon and took the reins. Olivia sat next to her. This was the same wagon that brought her new straw for the goats, and hauled away the used straw.

Ella's family of farmers lived nearby, though nearby was still over a mile away. They couldn't even see each other's lamps at night. They were still the closest

house to Soup Forest, though, so you could argue they were neighbors.

There were no doctors in the area. While there were doctors in Marlowe, it took courage from the farmers to get a checkup considering how little they earned. And that was just the checkup. The actual treatment was even more expensive.

Olivia's grandmother had used her herbology knowledge to help people like this, and she taught Olivia everything she knew.

After some time, Ella's house came into view. The farm was surrounded with a fence of wooden slats containing the main house, the horse barn, the pigsty, and a storage shed for their farming equipment. There was a vegetable patch for the family in front of the main house.

Ella and Olivia jumped down from the wagon and hurried into the house.

"This way, Olivia," said Ella as she led her into the girl's room. Sophie was there, letting out a dry cough. Olivia ran through her memory and recalled Sophie was twelve.

"Hello, Sophie," said Olivia. "That sounds like an unpleasant cough."

"Hi, Olivia. It's hard to breathe," wheezed Sophie.

"I'm sure. That sort of cough can be painful. I'm going to start by checking your chest."

Olivia undid the buttons on Sophie's pajamas, then took out her grandmother's treasured stethoscope. It was a long slender shape made of wood, sort of the shape of a bud vase. There was a hole in the part that looked like the base of a vase, making it kind of like a vase with no bottom.

She gently pressed the part that would be the mouth of the vase to Sophie's chest and put her ear to the base. She didn't hear fluid, but Sophie's breathing was ragged and pained. She touched Sophie's forehead and felt a slight fever.

"Ella, when did Sophie's cough start?" asked Olivia.

"About ten days ago, I think."

"Sophie, before this cough started, did you catch a cold or something?"

“No. I went with Pa into the forest and caught a bird, and then just came back. I’ve been coughing ever since we got back.”

Olivia heard the flutter of wings behind her. She turned around and saw what looked like a coatrack in the corner holding a birdcage made of heavy wire. The wing beats she heard were from the small brown bird inside the cage.

Olivia refastened Sophie’s buttons and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. “Let’s make you a damp cloth with some cough medicine on it. By the way, Sophie, is that a wren over there?”

“Yeah. Pa caught it with a net. I said I wanted to have one as a pet.”

“Wrens eat bugs. What are you doing for its food?”

“Pa catches the bugs that crawl all over the garbage pile.”

“I see.” Olivia put away the stethoscope and took the herbs from her satchel she’d use to make the cough medicine. She looked at Ella, who was watching with concern, and told her what she needed. “Could you get me a bucket filled with hot water? Not so hot that you can’t put your hand in it, though. And a cup of warm water, for Sophie to drink some medicine. Oh, and a spoon, please.”

Ella immediately rushed off to get them.

Olivia went over to the wren and quietly spoke to it. “You used to be in the forest, right?”

Help! Help! Scary! Scary!

The wren’s emotions and memories flowed into Olivia: Being trapped in a net, unable to escape, filled with despair and terror. Then there was Sophie’s father using long sticks to pick up grubs and put them in the cage. Sophie’s father looked like a frightening giant to the wren.

It was hungry and scared. It ate some of the insects, it had no choice, but it was exhausted, at its limits. It wanted to escape, to fly away. It went wild in the cage, crashing into its walls.

Help! Help!

The wren’s little black eyes looked straight at Olivia. She turned away and moved over to Sophie. “Sophie, I think there’s a chance the wren is causing your

cough. Every time it beats its wings, little bits of feathers and dried bird droppings fly into the air. Some people get ill if they breathe that in.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. And I think it wants to go back to the forest. It looks so sad, doesn’t it?”

“You can tell she’s sad?”

“A little. She looks very weak. I don’t think she’ll live much longer if she stays in that cage.”

“Really?” Sophie’s eyes filled with tears.

“Why don’t you let her go back to the forest?” Olivia suggested. “If you don’t want to let her go, then you’ll at least have to move her out of this room. I don’t think your cough will go away unless you do.”

“She’s really going to die if she stays here?”

“I think so. She’ll eventually stop eating insects, and then stop moving. Little birdies like her don’t have much longer after that.”

“I don’t want her to die!”

“Wrens have short lives. They only live about two years out in the forest. Maybe three. That’s it. I’m sure she’d want to live her short life in the forest, flying free.”

“Two or three years? I had no idea wrens didn’t live that long.”

“Not many people do.”

“I want to set Chirpy free.”

“I think that’s a good decision. There’s a chance your cough isn’t because of her, but we need to start with the most obvious causes. I also think it’s better for both of you. You’ll both be happier.”

Ella brought the bucket of warm water, then right after that, poured freshly boiled water in a cup and brought that. Olivia wet a towel in the warm water then rung it out well before spreading cut up leaves on the towel. She then folded it and placed it directly on Sophie’s chest.

“That feels refreshing, even though it’s warm,” said Sophie. “And it smells good.”

“Take in slow breaths. That scent will help stop your cough,” said Olivia.

While Sophie took in several long, deep breaths, Olivia put minced herbs in the cup of hot water and smashed them with the spoon until the water was a deep green. She double checked the color and scent, then held the cup out to Sophie. “Sit up but hold the towel in place so it doesn’t fall off.”

“Mm-hm.” Sophie put both hands on the towel and sat up.

Olivia brought the cup to her lips and had her drink it little by little. It was an earthy, bitter medicinal tea, but Sophie drank it down without complaint. “Ella,” said Olivia, “You can reuse this towel three times. When it cools down, dunk it right back in hot water to warm it up, then put it back on her chest. Once you’ve done that three times, you’ll need to put in new leaves. I’ll leave lots for you, so make sure you use plenty each time. Just swing by if you run out.”

“All right. Thank you, Olivia,” said Ella.

“No, thank you for always helping me with the straw. Oh, also, I have a feeling I know what’s causing this cough. Sophie agreed we should let the bird go.”

“The bird caused this? Sophie, are you sure about that?”

“Yeah. Ma, Olivia says Chirpy’ll only live two or three years, and she’ll die really fast if I keep her locked up in a bird cage.”

“Oh.”

“I want to set Chirpy free.”

“All right. I’ll take her out.”

“No, I want to do it myself. I want to say goodbye to her. And I’m sorry.”

Sophie’s cough cleared up after breathing in the steam from the towel for twenty minutes. She seemed much more lively once it was gone and said she wanted to set Chirpy free now. Ella lifted the cage and her, Olivia, and Sophie went outside together.

Once outside, the wren went wild like it wanted to escape. Sophie crouched

down and spoke into the cage. “I’m sorry, Chirpy. I wanted to live with you because I love you, but... I’m sorry we caught you. I’m sorry I shut you in this cage. Can you forgive me?”

Then she opened the cage door, her mouth turned down and tears in her eyes.

The wren launched out from the cage, beat its wings, and darted up into the air before turning towards the forest. Sophie watched the sky until the wren had turned into a tiny black speck. The moment it disappeared completely, she spun around, clutched her mother, and burst into tears. Ella gently stroked her back.



“I should be heading home then,” said Olivia.

“I’ll take you to the restaurant in the wagon,” said Ella. “And here’s money for the medicine.”

“I’m not a doctor. It’s a crime for me to accept money for medical treatment. All I did was visit a neighborhood child who wasn’t feeling very well, and I just happened to make up that medicinal towel while I was here. I can’t take your money. But, Ella, make sure you wash Sophie’s room well. If the cough keeps coming back even after that, then we’ll try a different medicine. Let me know if it does.”

“Thank you. You’re a lifesaver.” Ella looked both grateful and apologetic as she bobbed her head several times.

As they were in the wagon on the way back to her restaurant, Olivia kept thinking of the moment the wren flew off. Its heart felt like it might nearly burst from joy.

Happy! Happy! Happy! it cried inside as it flew.

I’m glad. It seemed well, thought Olivia. She prayed the wren would be safe and that Sophie’s cough would go away. *Grandma, looks like what you taught me came in handy again.* She smiled as she thought of her grandmother’s face.

Chapter 21: Arthur's Resignation

"I'M sorry, miss, what did you just say?"

"I said, I want to hire Arthur as my bodyguard."

"May I ask why?"

"Mr. Freddy, do you know what he is?"

"I've heard he used to be a mercenary."

"Do you know what kind of mercenary?"

"What kind? Can't say I know."

Karen uncrossed her legs and crossed them the other way, a look of exasperation on her face. She stared at her immaculately cared for nails, then looked back at Freddy and said, "I was curious about him, so I did some investigating. He was apparently quite famous as a mercenary. On contract, he earned seven small gold pieces a month. Mercenaries generally work for cheap, but that's top class. Don't you think it's a waste to use such superb talent for picking plants and watching your shop? How much are you even paying him? I doubt it'd be any more than two small golds a month."

Freddy watched Karen as she talked. It was obvious she was trying to use her father's money to get her way. When she was done talking, though, he let out a bark of laughter. "The fact that you came all the way here to my humble pharmacy means Arthur already turned you down. Miss, there are some people in this world who won't lick your boots, no matter how much you pay them. And those people are free to make that decision. Arthur came to me looking for work, and he's an incredible employee. I'm not about to fire him."

"You'll find yourself out of customers if you go against me," said Karen.

"Oh? Is that a threat? Someone from the villas is threatening one of the townsfolk?"

"I can use my money to do whatever I want with the people of this tiny,

backwater town. Everyone loves money.”

The door burst open. Arthur was back from his errands. He took in everything between Freddy and Karen in one look and growled, “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, hello there,” said Karen. “I was just asking your employer if I could hire you off of him.”

“I already told you no,” said Arthur. “Stop causing trouble for Freddy.”

“Just think about it. You can make five times what you do here as my bodyguard. Even a child can see that would be better. Why are you refusing?”

“Because that five-times-as-much pay includes the hassle of dealing with you. Looks like you don’t actually know anything about me.” He strode over to Karen’s chair and looked down at her, emanating hostility from every fiber of his being.

Karen was overwhelmed by this but kept a straight face as she looked up at him.

“You all think the same,” he said. “You’re planning on bullying Freddy’s shop as long as I’m still working here, aren’t you? You’ll just wait until I feel so bad about what’s happening to him that I’ll listen to whatever you say. You don’t care if what’s pocket change to you ends up making him suffer. Well, too bad, ’cause as of right now, I quit.”

“Arthur, you don’t have to do that,” said Freddy.

“No, Freddy. I’ve had enough people try and recruit me to know,” Arthur said in a dark voice. “People like this, their measly little pride gets injured whenever they deal with someone who doesn’t dance for their money. And they’re as spiteful as snakes. So, I quit. Thank you for everything, Freddy.”

“Arthur, wait!”

Arthur marched up to his room on the second floor, grabbed just his backpack, went back down, and bobbed his head to Freddy. “I hate to quit after such a short time, and I’m sorry you’ll have to look for more help in the store because of me.”

“Arthur, just wait a moment,” said Freddy.

“I’ll be going now,” said Arthur and he left the shop, completely ignoring Karen.

“Agh! For the love of God!” she cried, her brow furrowed in anger.

“Hmph. It looks like you did cause me pain, and very quickly,” said Freddy. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be getting back to work.” Then he went about cleaning the already spotless shop.

Karen stood without saying anything, jerked the door open, and left.

Freddy watched her go and muttered, “Miss, you’ll find yourself hurting if you take the people of this old, little town lightly.”

He put the card on the door that said “Back Soon” and left.



WHILE that happened, Arthur was walking towards Soup Forest. He was planning to leave Marlowe once he’d said goodbye.

Karen probably noticed I like that restaurant, and Olivia. It doesn’t matter where I end up working, this sort of thing will keep happening as long as I’m in Marlowe. I can easily see Karen doing something to Soup Forest.

Arthur knew there were many people in the world limited by their lack of money. He used to be one of them. He also knew there were people who could easily make those types of people dance with their money. *Those* sorts of people had all kinds of tricks for making people without money do what they want.

He thought back to his childhood while he walked the six miles to the restaurant. They had so little money, his parents worked every moment they weren’t sleeping. They were always tired. He didn’t remember them ever being there for him or his little sister. Despite how much they worked, they still only managed to scrape together enough food for the four of them to ration between them.

One winter there was a horrible cold going around that gave you the worst cough. It took the lives of Arthur’s whole family. Arthur had been doing odd

jobs as a day laborer, but that work dried up from the drawn-out epidemic.

He became a mercenary at fourteen, just to survive.



AT Soup Forest, Olivia was dicing leftover vegetables and fat scraps from the meat. The goats would enjoy the vegetable scraps, and wild birds would feast on the fat once she'd heated it. The medium-sized birds would just steal all the fat scraps if she put it out as is, so she coated tree nuts and grass seeds with the fats before putting them out. There was plenty of food in the wild during this season, but she didn't want to waste all those fat scraps.

A hedgehog bustled into the garden. It was just the one mother hedgehog this time. It looked like her children had already gone off on their own. Olivia turned to look at the forest because she felt excitement coming from all over. The young hedgehogs must have been nearby, waiting for the mother hedgehog to finish her meal first.

Hedgehogs were solitary creatures outside of childrearing periods. Children who'd left their mother would keep their distance, not entering her territory. Relationships built on power created a top and a bottom. The mother wasn't going to provide food for the children anymore. She was prioritizing surviving herself and having more children.

"Simple and easy to understand," said Olivia.

As she talked to herself and watched the hedgehog, she felt oppressive emotions approaching. *Where is that coming from?* she wondered and looked around until she saw Arthur walking down the road.

Chapter 22: Get a Good Look

“HI, Olivia.”

“Hello, Arthur. Come on in. I have a new tea today.”

Olivia went outside to greet him in the front garden with a carefree smile, and Arthur went inside.

On the way there, he debated whether or not he should tell her he’s leaving. And should he tell her right away? Or should he tell her right before he left? He was still trying to decide when it would be best to bring it up.

“I tried finely dicing the peel of a green citrus fruit and mixing that with tea leaves,” said Olivia. “I’ve never served it before. You’ll be the first to try it, Arthur.”

“Sounds good,” he said, then realized something. *Huh. She seems like she’s forcing her cheer again.*

She could feel the emotions of animals and humans. She had said it wasn’t as easy for her to listen to humans, but he was sure she’d also said there were some instances where she could.

My head’s full of thoughts about leaving town right now. That seems like the sort of situation where she’d be able to tell, doesn’t it?

He shot a glance at her. She had her back to him as she made tea. “Hey, Olivia...” he began.

“You’re leaving town? Right after this?” she said, her back still to him and her voice cheerful.

She sounds too bubbly again. She only just broke up with someone and then I told her I’d look at the moon with her instead. Barely any time since those words left my mouth and I’m already leaving. She probably feels let down.

Olivia quietly set two teacups on the table. It wobbled a tiny bit, and Arthur

thought about how he wanted to fix it, even though he knew this wasn't the time for something like that.

She slowly sat down and looked straight into his eyes. "I can tell you're planning on leaving town. I felt it even when you were still far away. Can I ask why? I won't ask if you don't want to talk about it, though. And my ability doesn't let me sense anything that detailed, so you don't have to worry about that. I can't help it when powerful emotions come flowing into me, but I won't do anything rude like try to peek into your mind. I can't, anyway."

It all came out in one go, though her expression was the exact same as always. Actually, it was more like when he'd first met her. The face of someone kind enough to reach out a hand to help someone in need, but still keep them at arm's length. It was the sort of expression that said, "I won't come too close. And, in return, please don't come near me either."

Explaining everything now would probably hurt her the least. I think. Probably, he thought.

"For a while now, Karen's been approaching me in town," he said. "She wants me to be a guard for her family. I turned her down, but then she went to Freddy's shop to put pressure on him. People like her don't accept resistance from people they think are below them. I'm sure she would've kept hassling Freddy and his shop as long as I was there."

"She did that?"

"I think she'll keep doing it as long as I'm in Marlowe. People like her keep at it until I react. And she got hung up on you. I think she realized I care about you and your restaurant."

Olivia didn't say anything. *You care about...me?*

She kept running his words through her mind as she sipped her tea.

"I wish I could've told you how I feel in better circumstances," he said. "But I know you care about this place, and I care about it too. I can't even handle the thought of it being subject to Karen's whims. But I also can't be here all the time protecting you and the restaurant. That's why I decided I have to leave."

"What did Freddy say?"

“Freddy? Uh, it sounded like he refused to cave to Karen, but I quit on the spot and left. We didn’t really talk about it much.”

Olivia gestured towards his teacup, urging him to drink.

He took a sip. “It smells nice. Really refreshing.”

“Arthur, Marlowe’s an old town. It’s had the same people living here for a very long time. The villa town has grown in the past seven or eight years, but those people only stay here for a short time. It’s not like they’re always here.”

“But Karen doesn’t work. She could stay forever.”

Olivia looked at him with the smile of a kind mother. He felt like a child, like she was saying, *Oh, poor dear. You must feel so frustrated.* How could she be so calm about this? They should be preparing for the worst possible scenario.

“Those people with villas, they don’t own the land, they’re just borrowing it,” said Olivia. “That area used to be a huge pasture. The landowners decided to lend the land out for the villas. The townsfolk were quite worried when the idea first came up. They were concerned these rich people would come in and have their way with the town.”

Arthur was on the receiving end of exactly that right now. He waited in silence to hear the rest of what she had to say.

“Would you be willing to wait and see what happened? Without doing anything rash? You can stay as long as you like in the loft in the goat barn, if you’re fine sharing with them again. Then you can get a good look at how Marlowe does things.”

“If you think it’s best...”

“And, Arthur, I think you’re under a misconception. I’d like to correct it. My good friend, the one who had to leave... He’s a deer. William caught sight of him, and he had to go somewhere else.”

“A deer?”

“A deer. The biggest, most beautiful buck you’ve ever seen.”

Arthur maintained his composure, but his ears turned bright red. “But I thought...”

“I shouldn’t have talked about him like I did. It’s just that he was the only creature I could be open with after my grandparents passed away. I accidentally started talking about him like he was a human. I’m sorry for misleading you.”

“Uh, well. I guess I was an utter fool, then.”

“No, not at all. It made me happy. Let’s go look at the next full moon together. And the summer wildflowers.”

“I’d love to,” he said before thinking, but he still had questions. “Are you absolutely certain we shouldn’t do anything? If I’m in the area, she might even hire thugs to attack the restaurant. I can fight them off if it happens while I’m here, but, if I’m not here...”

“Even if there were thugs here, they wouldn’t touch me or Freddy on orders of someone from the villas. If they did, Karen’s whole family would be chased out of town. Then the thugs would lose their employer and then their homes in the process.”

“Chased out of town? By who?”

“The landowners. Well, no. I imagine it would be others who’d do the actual chasing.”

Arthur was fairly certain Marlowe didn’t have a town guard. Did the townspeople run their own sort of guard? Unlikely. He’d never seen anything like that. He just sat looking at Olivia with an expression of bewilderment.

Chapter 23: Louise Arche

FREDDY, the owner of the pharmacy, made a visit to a large manor outside the town of Marlowe. There was something he absolutely had to tell the owner of the manor.

“Freddy, what’s the matter?”

“Your Grace, I need to speak with you about someone in the villas.”

“Let’s hear it, then.”

She had abundant white hair pulled back in a bun, flawless white skin, and vitality-filled blue eyes that spoke of a lively intellect.

Louise Arche was seventy-five years old and the younger sister of the previous king. She married the third son of the neighboring kingdom of Arche, where she was given the title of duchess. Her husband, nine years her senior, grew old and passed of illness, at which point she left the duchy to her son, cast aside all ties of obligation, and moved to Marlowe for a “temporary return to her homeland.” She’d lived here for quite some time now.

After returning, she built a manor in Marlais and has lived here since. Seventy percent of the land the villas were built on belonged to Louise, and, before her, the land belonged to the royal family. There was a contract that stated the land would be returned to the royal family upon her death.

She looked at Freddy, who was fifty-five, and said, “Freddy, you’re looking a little worn out, despite running a pharmacy. You haven’t been drinking too much, have you?”

“I hardly drink that much, Your Grace. I’m too old for that, not nearly as youthful as you.”

“What’s this about the people in the villas, then?”

Freddy told the story of how Olivia and Arthur helped William in the forest,

about how William's sister had taken a liking to Arthur, how she tried to steal Arthur away as a guard, but he refused, and then how she insinuated she would attack the pharmacy, as well as the fact that Arthur resigned to protect the shop.

"My," said Louise. "And I pressed the importance of behaving properly so much with the people borrowing the land for villas. Does Lord Marlais know about this yet? We'll have to inform him."

"There's something else. It may just be my imagination acting up, but I believe Olivia is opening up to Arthur. He might be the first person she's opened up to besides Jenkins and Marguerite."



A pained expression flitted across Louise's face then disappeared.

"Olivia? I owe Jenkins and Marguerite a debt that could never be repaid with mere words. They loved Olivia with their whole hearts, and I've wanted to protect her, even if just from the shadows. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Freddy. Now, what was the name of that family again? My old brain forgets things so easily."

"The Hughes family, Your Grace."

"Hughes. All right. Now then, I'll have to send notice to Lord Marlais that I'll be visiting. Oh, yes, where is this Arthur now?"

"I imagine he's at Olivia's restaurant. I think that's very likely. Thank you for looking into this, Your Grace."

Once Freddy left, she immediately called in her steward and told him to tell Lord Harry Marlais, the local lord, to make time for a visit with her.



THE current lord of the region of Marlais was Lord Harry Marlais. He had been on edge ever since receiving word Duchess Louise Arche would be visiting. He imagined it was in relation to the villas and kept worrying what the people who came to the villas had done now.

Louise arrived precisely at the time she said she would.

"Your Grace, it has been far too long," said Harry. "You are as beautiful and lively as ever."

"Dispense with the flattery, if you please," said Louise. "I do have mirrors at home. I can see I'm a wrinkly old hag. More importantly, Harry, how aware are you of the goings on of the Hughes family? They own one of the villas."

"The Hughes family? I know Hughes earned his fortune in the trade of general goods and furniture and the family owns the largest villa at the end of the road in the villa town. Has something happened, Your Grace?"

"Oh, the largest, and at the end? Hm," said Louise before accurately conveying to him what Karen, Hughes's daughter, had done to Freddy's Pharmacy. "And despite saving her immobile brother trapped on the

mountain,” she said once done. “She decided to put pressure on Arthur’s place of work because he didn’t respond favorably to her attempts to hire and seduce him. There is a limit to how ungrateful someone can be. Freddy’s Pharmacy is an indispensable resource for those unable to avail of doctors’ services. To try and interfere with his business with the force of money!”

“Yes, of course, you are absolutely right, Your Grace.”

“You did press the importance of avoiding placing a burden on the local residents when you lent them the land, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes. It’s clearly stated in the contract, as well.”

“It’s taken care of, then. It’s a breach of contract.”

“Though, it may be a slight gray area, as she only implied she would do such things. She has yet to actually carry them out, correct?”

One of Louise’s elegant eyebrows rose. “Are you saying you won’t take action until the damage has already been done?”

“No, not at all...”

“It is, though. Well, I do understand how difficult it is for someone of your station to act before there has been actual damage done. Especially considering the money the people in the villas bring to the region.”

“I appreciate your understanding, Your Grace.”

“However, I cannot have you turning a blind eye to this sort of thing.”

“Of course not. I will bear this in mind and inform the people of the villas. And, might I ask, what are your thoughts on this situation?”

“Hm. What should be done? It is the family’s first breach of conduct. It may be acceptable to overlook this one instance, depending on how they choose to act. May I see the contract you have with the Hughes family?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Just one moment. The contract... Ah, yes. Here it is. I apologize for the wait.”

“Thank you. I’ll be taking this for a few days,” said Louise, and then she quickly stood and left the Marlais manor for Soup Forest.



“YOUR Grace! It’s been a long time. You look well.”

“When was the last time I visited, Olivia? It must have been two months ago. I’m sorry I don’t come around more often. An old lady like me needs to work up courage to travel out here. There are too many good memories in this place.”

“Ah, I’m just happy to hear you talk about the place like that. My grandparents would be happy to hear it too.”

The two hugged each other and gave light kisses on each cheek. Olivia felt gentle emotions coming from Louise, affection, nostalgia, and caring.

“I heard what happened from Freddy,” said Louise. “The man Karen tried to hire, do you know where he is now?”

“He’s in the kitchen. Let me get him. Arthur! Could you come here please?”

Louise watched Arthur shuffle out of the kitchen and thought, *He’s like a big, well-trained dog*. Out loud, she said, “I heard from Freddy you used to be a mercenary. How much did you earn a month?”

“Seven small golds, ma’am.”

“Ah... So, the large dog was quite the skilled mercenary.”

“Large dog, ma’am?”

“Oh, pay me no mind. Just something personal. Anyway, there’s something I’d like to ask you. Were you prepared to cut off all ties with Olivia and leave Marlowe?”

“No.” He didn’t say anything else, but he did look uncomfortable.

“So, you didn’t intend to cut ties with Olivia?”

“No, ma’am. Someone like Karen is likely to forget about me once she finds a new toy. I was only planning to stay away until that happened.”

“I see. But that thought process comes from a lack of experience. Did you never consider the possibility that someone might snatch Olivia up while you’re waiting for the situation to settle? And couldn’t you simply use your great skills to cut down the person standing in your way?”

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. Olivia's mind was whirling as they talked about her like she wasn't there.

Louise stayed perfectly still. Arthur guessed she was waiting for his response, so he said, "I've taken countless lives while working as a mercenary. One morning, I realized I couldn't do anymore. I have no intentions of killing someone else, no matter how ungrateful they are or how much they try to push me around. People might think I'm a coward, but I don't want to take any more lives. I can't."

"Hmph. And?"

"Olivia needs this restaurant. I decided I couldn't take her with me. I was planning on telling Olivia that I was going to leave Marlowe until Karen's attention went elsewhere. And I was going to ask her to wait for me."

Olivia felt despair in Arthur's heart. It was likely the same he felt that morning when he woke and decided he couldn't do it anymore. She didn't really know what caused those emotions in him, but she did think he was probably too kind a person to continue being a mercenary.

Louise clapped her hands together once with a loud smack. "I see how it is, now. Let me add something. Olivia, I owe Marguerite a debt I can never repay, not even if I spent my whole life trying. It was thanks to her that I was able to marry and give birth. I came to live here because she loved this town. Now that she's no longer with us, it's my turn to step up."

"Your Grace?"

"Olivia, I'm going to help you, so don't you worry. I will make sure nothing happens that could hurt you. And, Arthur?"

"Ma'am?"

"You stay here. Wait until I return."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. I'll be going, then."

With that, Louise left the restaurant, her back straight with beautiful posture as she stepped into her carriage.

Chapter 24: Louise and Byron

“**YOU** honor me with your presence, Your Grace. I am Byron Hughes, the master of this house.”

“Thank you for welcoming me,” said Louise.

The two sat facing each other in the opulent drawing room of the Hughes villa.

“I apologize for coming without advance notice,” said Louise. “There was just something I wished to confirm with you with utmost urgency.”

“There’s no need to send advance notice, Your Grace. What is it you would like to ask about?”

“Your daughter, Karen.”

Byron felt his insides tighten at the mention of Karen’s name. He doted on her as a girl, which resulted in a woman who thought the world revolved around her. This was the same daughter that made a huge fuss about being allowed to marry the man she loved, only to marry someone for his looks and later divorce him once she tired of him. She was foolish, but Byron did love her.

His palms were slick with sweat as he wondered what she got herself into this time.

“It seems she tried to hire Arthur, the man who saved your son in the forest, as her guard,” said Louise. “He refused. Karen didn’t back down, however. She went to Arthur’s place of employment and said something to the effect of, ‘If you don’t do what I say, customers will stop coming to your store.’”

“Oh, m-my...” said Byron as he thought, *That does sound like the sort of thing Karen would say. This is my fault. I didn’t thoroughly explain the rules here to her. But whatever should I do now? Would complying with this lady not result in great damage to my family?*

Louise casually laid the land contract on the table, open to the relevant page. She watched Byron, who was shaken at this point, and considered her next move. Louise had grown up in an environment of constant psychological battles. She could read Byron like a book, since he was the sort who gained his wealth through hard work in commerce.

“It is a clear breach of contract,” she said. “Whether or not someone has suffered actual damages is irrelevant. I’m sure Lord Marlais impressed upon you several times that this clause is not mere decoration. Oh, but please don’t worry. I have no intention of being so barbarous that I would tell you to pack your bags and leave immediately because you disregarded the contract.”

“That’s very kind of you, Your Grace.”

“However, I also can’t ignore this. This land is currently under my name, but it originally belonged to the royal family, and it is to be returned to the royal family once our Lord calls me to his garden. I cannot allow the public to turn their dissatisfaction on the royal family because they were opposed to the villas being built for this exact reason while the land was in my name.”

Louise very clearly articulated the words “royal family.” That term had a profound effect on those who earned their money through trade. History and royalty were two of the greatest things that couldn’t be bought with money.

And people like Byron, people who hungered to increase their status and knew how the world worked, would never dare anger the royal family. They knew full well what happened to those in this country who drew the ire of the royal family.

So, as expected, beads of sweat began running down Byron’s brow.

“Please forgive my daughter’s indiscretion. If you ask that Karen not be allowed to come and go, I will send her back to the capital this very day and very firmly inform her that she is not to step foot in Marlais again. Please, if you could...”

“Mister Hughes. My life has taught me exactly how short-lived verbal agreements made on the spot are. I cannot simply agree to what you say and leave.”

Louise was smiling like they were having a pleasant conversation, and Byron understood immediately. She may look like nothing more than an elegant old woman, but that smile said, “Put it in writing. How much are you willing to pay if your daughter ever causes trouble to the citizens here again?”

“Your Grace, I will draw up a contract,” said Byron. “If Karen causes any more trouble, I will give up this villa. Please accept that in return for excusing her behavior.”

“This villa?” said Louise as she looked around with disinterest.

The average commoner might be overwhelmed by the opulence of the room, but Louise found it constricting, a room filled with far too many expensive items as a result of the owner’s excess wealth.

Byron quickly did some calculations. He could minimize the damage if he immediately sold the villa. If he still wanted a vacation home, he could use the money he got from selling this villa to build something somewhere else.

“It would put me in a difficult position if Karen were to return after you sold your villa, Mister Hughes,” said Louise.

“Urk.”

“Are you aware that the nobility are experts at the strategy your daughter attempted? We’ve been using it for centuries to drive our opponents to the brink. I imagine things would be difficult if that same strategy was turned against your family’s trade business where your base is located?”

“Please, Your Grace...”

“I really don’t want to be bothered with something like that, however, so how about this: If Karen returns to Marlais and causes trouble for the residents, I will, depending on the circumstances, report the issue to the royal family. That’s all. How does that sound? No one gets hurt. So long as Karen behaves.”

“Understood, Your Grace!”

Satisfied, Louise boarded her carriage a little while later and headed back towards Soup Forest. She was in good spirits as she looked over the contract she had just received. She felt fulfilled knowing she’d been able to help Olivia

for the first time in twenty years.

“Perhaps I’ll have some of Olivia’s homemade soup, since I’ll be there to update them anyway. I would love to experience the flavors passed directly down from Marguerite.”



ARTHUR and Olivia walked side by side, him dejected and her the same as usual.

“You must be disappointed in me, a coward who was just going to run,” he said.

“No. Why would I be disappointed? It’s only when there’s no other options that you should bare your teeth and fight. I think you made a very wise decision.”

They were using the restaurant’s afternoon break for a stroll through the forest. Olivia kept her eyes peeled for medicinal herbs as they walked, which she picked and put in her basket. There were already several varieties inside.

“I think you’re a very prudent person,” she continued.

“You do?”

Ever since Louise let slip that thing about a big dog, Olivia couldn’t help seeing him as a large, good-natured dog. She smiled as she imagined his tail. First drooping, but then wagging back and forth as his mood improved.

“Right, I have a feeling Louise will be coming. Let’s go back to the restaurant. The three of us can have dinner together tonight,” said Olivia.

“Olivia, who is Louise?”

“She’s the younger sister of the previous king. She married the third son of Arche. Now she’s left her duchy to her son and is taking it easy here.”

“The younger sister of the king? You mean, she’s a princess? How do you know someone that incredible?”

“My grandmother looked after Louise’s health, because she was as good as it gets at herbology and diagnosing illness. Apparently, her parents were also

herbologists serving the royal family.”

Arthur said nothing for a while, then let out an exasperated laugh. “Olivia, you are way too full of mysterious skills.”

“There’s only the two, really. I can talk to animals and I know a lot about plants. That’s it.”

“And you’re great at making soup,” said Arthur, and then he realized he could feel Olivia’s emotions. He saw himself and, for some reason, he had two triangular ears and a wagging tail. *A wolf? No, that’s a dog. Why is Olivia thinking of me like a dog?*

He glanced sideways at her. She seemed amused, so he swallowed back his question, deciding it was fine.

Just as Olivia predicted, Louise returned and the three had dinner together. Arthur tried to excuse himself from eating at the same table as royalty, but Louise just said, “Oh, it’s fine. Just take a seat,” and he obliged.

“Your Grace, here is tonight’s food: Carrot soup, a greens and walnut salad, and a selection of hams and cheeses,” said Olivia as she served the food.

“Oh, this takes me back. This was one of Marguerite’s best soups.”

“Thank you.”

Louise began eating with zeal, then started conversing while they were partway through the meal. “I imagine the Hughes family will quickly sell off their villa and leave Marlais,” she said.

“Sell the villa? You think they’ll go that far?” said Olivia.

“I do. That’s the only option the father has, so long as he doesn’t trust his daughter to be on good behavior. He’s the sort who doesn’t like to take a financial loss. He’d rather risk his life.”

“Really? Well, I knew you would come through for us.”

Louise left promptly once dinner was done, though she raved about the food and insisted she would be back.

Now it was just Olivia and Arthur left to drink a cup of after-dinner tea.

Silence filled the room, but both their hearts were calm and tranquil.

Chapter 25: The Harvest-time Visitors

“**THERE** weren’t many customers today. I think I’ll close early,” said Olivia and just then, five men entered. They looked like traveling merchants. The group of tanned men ate a lot, talked loudly, then paid and left.

As Olivia went to clean up their dishes, Arthur said, “Food was great today, as always. The carrot soup was rich and sweet, but I felt like I could smell something other than carrot in the soup.”

“I used cumin. It pairs well with carrots’ particular aroma. My grandmother taught me that.”

“You’re a cooking genius, ma’am.”

“Um, Arthur... Why do you call me ma’am?”

“Well, I figure I should be polite when I talk to women. I mean, look at me. I’m a big guy. I tend to scare people if I’m not careful. If it bothers you, though, maybe I could be more casual with you?”

“I’d like that. I just think it puts a little distance between us, which is a bit of a shame. All my regular customers are casual with me, after all.”

Arthur’s heart soared when she said it was a shame there was distance between them, but then it dropped back to earth when she clarified she just wanted him to interact with her like all her other customers.

He smiled wryly and told himself, *Calm down*.

Olivia sat in a chair in the kitchen, putting off washing the dishes, and picked up her cup of tea.

“Can I ask a question, too?” Arthur began.

“Sure.”

“Do I...look like a dog?”

“Urgh!”

Olivia’s tea made an unpleasant sound as she accidentally inhaled it down the wrong pipe.

Arthur was surprised as Olivia let out a stream of coughs and hacks as she choked down the tea. He went over and rubbed her back. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t’ve said such a weird thing without checking the timing.”

“Grandma always, *cough*, said when someone’s choking, *cough, cough*, have them take deep breaths and rub their back, but you can’t do that for yourself when you’re alone. Thank you, Arthur. I think it’s passed. Aaaaah.”

Arthur stepped away and sat back down while Olivia, her face bright red, calmed her breathing.

“Did you see what I was imagining again?” she asked.

“Yeah. I saw me with dog ears and a tail. Twice. First was when we were walking in the forest, and second was when Louise told me to sit.”

“I’m sorry. The moment I heard her mention a big dog, I just sort of started seeing you like that. It was really rude of me!”

Arthur gave a boyish grin. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not actually unpleasant. Can I ask you about your grandma? I’ve never met anyone who’s worked with royalty before. And a family who’s been in important positions for three generations... It’s incredible.”

“Sure. Um, Arthur, what are you planning to do tonight? Will you stay the night here?”

“I think so. Freddy’s already left the pharmacy by now. I’d appreciate it if I could stay here tonight. Tomorrow I’m planning to go back to the pharmacy and ask if I can have my job back.”

Olivia said, “Please do stay,” then stood and made some mint tea.

“You didn’t have too many customers today,” said Arthur. “That’s pretty rare, isn’t it?”

“It happens every year. It’s time to harvest the wheat. Everyone’s celebrating at home.”

“Oh, wheat... What sort of celebrations do they have?”

“They’ll usually roast a goose or a young hog and have that with wheat porridge and grilled vegetables, that sort of thing. Not many eat out since they make a feast at home.”

“Huh. Is that a Marlais custom?”

“Yes. Apparently, the lord of Marlais generations ago decided the people should care for themselves at least once when the wheat they raised so carefully since fall was ready to harvest.” Olivia glanced out the window several times while speaking.

Arthur noticed her fidgety manner. “Olivia? What’s wrong? You seem on edge.”

“Um. Can you promise to stay calm if I tell you? Those traveling merchants from earlier, they kept thinking things like, ‘What, there’s a man here?’, ‘He’ll leave once the restaurant closes,’ and ‘No one’s going to hear a woman screaming out here.’ I heard it because they didn’t feel any guilt about it. Their emotions were wide open.”

Arthur’s chair clattered as he stood, and Olivia’s eyes opened wide. The gentle dog-like manner from earlier was gone, replaced by flickering black flames of rage and hostility. This was the second time Olivia had seen something like this. The first was when she watched two male bears fight to the death over a female.

“Are they nearby right now?” asked Arthur.

“No. I’ve been trying to find them, but they seem to have moved away for now. I imagine they’re planning to attack once I put out the lamps in the restaurant. I was thinking I would run into the forest.”

“I’m surprised how calm you are. Has this sort of thing happened before?”

“It’s probably the third time since I’ve been here, but the first since I’ve been living alone. My grandfather fought with swords when he was younger. He used to be a knight.”

“All right. Well, I’m going to handle it this time.”

“But there are five of them...”

“I got a bit of a look at them when they came in. Based on how they carried themselves, I know I can win. It’ll be fine as long as you hide so you don’t end up their hostage.”

“All right. I’ll take Rob and go into the forest.”

“They’re not hiding out there, are they?”

“I think they went towards town.”

“All right.”

After they made their plan, Olivia took Rob and went into the forest. Arthur snuffed the lamps in the restaurant and lit a lamp in the room Olivia’s grandparents used to live in. He went back into the restaurant, hid in the shadows behind the tables, and waited nearly two hours.

As he strained his ears, he just about picked up the sound of footfalls.

“Come on, already. All five of you, come at once.”

He was confident he could defeat them without killing them. He tied his sword into its sheath but did it so he could easily draw his sword if he pulled the cord. He planned to smash them with the sheathed weapon but would draw his sword if need be.

He was surprised by his change of heart.

“If it meant protecting Olivia, I would use my sword again.”

And that didn’t bother him.

Chapter 26: Grandparents' Concerns

BANG!

CRASH!

They kicked the door in. The glass in the door's window shattered and went flying.

Arthur stood still, making himself unnoticeable, and waited for the five to enter the restaurant.

"She's not coming down."

"Probably so scared she can't even move."

"She got money?"

"Let's go up to her room first."

With those greedy statements, the five of them swarmed towards the stairs. Four were going up and the last was about to go up the first step when Arthur attacked.

BAM!

He smashed the base of the man's neck from behind, who let out a short "Gagh," and collapsed where he stood.

"Who's there?!"

The man closest to Arthur pulled a large knife and lunged at him. Arthur cracked the man's wrist with his sheathed sword, knocking the knife away, then struck the side of his head before he could even retreat.

The scent of blood filled the dark room.

The three men on the stairs rushed at Arthur, but he remained calm and defeated them with strikes to their gut, head, or neck. He was used to fighting in the dark.

Some of them groaned, some of them were unconscious. Arthur tied all five up with the washing line Olivia gave him, then lit the lamps in the room. This was the signal to let Olivia know it was over.



WHILE that was happening, Olivia was waiting in anguish.

When she realized the five men were after her and the restaurant, she debated whether she should tell Arthur or whether she should avoid dragging him into it. Right after she heard the men's minds, she was thinking of sending Arthur on his way and taking Rob and the goats deep into the forest. There was the risk they'd run into bears or wolves, but she decided an animal that *might* attack her was far better than humans who actively planned to attack her.

But, as she considered this option, she thought, *Isn't this one of my flaws?*

Her grandmother's words came back to her: "*Olivia, humans do foolish things, but they also do the right things. I hope someday you'll be able to trust them.*"

Marguerite, her grandmother, had long before realized Olivia didn't trust humans. She was also worried for Olivia, that she would have to live her whole life untrusting towards people without her or Jenkins there because they would pass away long before her.

Olivia didn't want to tell her grandparents that her real parents abandoned her, and she was the daughter of a noble. She was afraid they would find her disconcerting if they learned of her ability. At the time, Marguerite and Jenkins were her only hope for survival.

"I do trust people. It's fine," said Olivia at the time with a smile, but her grandmother's expression of concern remained.

Grandma, I decided to trust Arthur and rely on him, even though I knew he'd get dragged into this mess. Was that really the right thing to do? I feel so guilty and scared for trusting and relying on him. Does everyone go on relying on others, living their whole lives with such painful feelings?

Her conscience gnawed at her. Her vision seemed to darken around her as she thought, *What do I do if he ends up hurt or killed because of me?* She was terrified of the rest of her life if she lost him and had to carry that regret until

the day she died. She couldn't bear that life. Those dark thoughts swirled in her mind as she waited in the forest.

She clenched her hands together and stared in the direction of the restaurant, praying.

Rob gave a concerned whine.

"Rob, I'm sorry. You're scared. I'm really scared, too. I shouldn't have involved Arthur," she said quietly, her eyes still watching the restaurant.

Eventually, the windows filled with a warm light.

"He's alive! Thank God! Arthur's alive! Rob, let's go. Let's go home!"

Olivia ran though she could barely see the ground in the forest, the words, *Please, Arthur, please don't be hurt*, kept circling her mind as she ran. Tree roots caught her feet, sending her sprawling, branches scratched her face, but she didn't care. She wanted to see Arthur's face now, to see he was all right.

"Arthur! Are you all right?" she said as she came rushing in through the doorless entrance. Arthur was there looking at the collapsed men, and she looked him up and down. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he said. "They didn't touch me."

"Oh, thank God! That's so good to hear! And there were five of them... I'm going to send Rob with a message right now."

She quickly scrawled a note and used a handkerchief to tie it to Rob's collar, then pressed her forehead to his and said, "Can you do it? Billy's house. You've been there plenty of times. You know where it is, right? Where Ella and Sophie live. If you're a good boy and deliver the message, I'll give you a nice meaty treat."

Rob's nostrils flared the moment she mentioned meat, and he bolted out the door.

The note said: "Captured five burglars. Bring help. Olivia."

Billy's house was just over a mile away, but Rob could cover that distance quickly. Billy would probably read the note, notify the neighboring farmers, then come running over to help himself. The people he told would probably

send word to Lord Harry Marlais.

Olivia's expression was serious as she circled Arthur, looking all over him.

"Uh, what's this about?" he asked.

"I'm checking to make sure you really aren't injured."

"I'm not. They barely knew how to fight. I had no problems taking care of them."

"You really are strong."

The bound men looked up at the two talking with hateful glares. Both Arthur and Olivia watched them from the corners of their eyes, but they pretended not to notice the looks.

After some time, they heard the clatter of a wagon approaching and Billy rushed in, stepping on the broken door as he did, a sharp pitchfork in hand.

"Olivia! Are you all right?" he said.

"Billy! Arthur and I are both fine. Thank you for coming!"

"Thank the Lord. Both Ella and Sophie are worried sick. Soldiers from the lord's manor should be on their way. This them? The bastards!" Billy looked at the men with blatant rage, but then pulled Olivia into a hug. "I'm just glad you're safe. You have no idea how many times Marguerite and Jenkins asked me to look after you. They were really worried about you. Oh, Lord, I'm so glad you're all right."

By the end of that, he was sniffing, tears choking his voice. The last thread of tension holding Olivia snapped and she broke into sobs as well. She felt bad for her grandparents who clearly worried about her and her distrust of people far more than she imagined.

Billy turned to look at Arthur. "You the one who took care of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. We all worried this day might come. But Olivia's family kept telling us not to say anything, to let her live her life how she wanted and just keep watch over her. We were so worried, but didn't want to butt in."

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. Thank you for saving Olivia.” Billy bobbed his head several times.

Arthur’s eyes crinkled like he was looking into the bright sun, and he smiled. Olivia watched him and Billy through her tear-stained vision and thought that smile looked like the smile of a big, happy dog.

In the end, lots of people were worried, and the guards from the lord’s manor came hurrying to the restaurant.

Chapter 27: Ham and Collard Greens Soup

THE lord's guards gathered up the five merchants and hauled them away in a matter of minutes.

The man who seemed to be the commanding officer of the guard asked Olivia and Arthur what happened, and Olivia answered something along the lines of, "Those five men came in for dinner and they kept whispering while glancing at me. I had a bad feeling, so I talked to Arthur about it, and he told me to hide in the forest."

To which Arthur said, "Yep, I told her to. They just seemed suspicious, so I put out all the lamps and waited for them."

"I see. Well done, capturing them all on your own. You have my thanks for helping to protect the peace of Marlais," the guard said with a smile then left.

Billy then said, "Look after Olivia, will you?" to Arthur and left as well.

After a while, Rob came back in high spirits. Even Arthur immediately knew what he was thinking despite not being able to read minds.

His proud expression said, "How I do? I do good messenger?"

As promised, Olivia gave him a treat of boiled chicken, which he scarfed down. The two watched with smiles as he licked his chops.

While still watching Rob, Arthur said, "Did I say the right thing to that guard?"

"Yes, you did. It was perfect."

"You always have to deal with that, don't you?"

"This tiny bit of sorting our story out is nothing compared to how scared I was when I was waiting in the forest."

"Scared? You were worried they'd kill me?"

"Well, it's not like I know how good a seven-small-gold-pieces mercenary is! I'd regret it for the rest of my life if something happened to you. I don't know if

I could've gone on living."

Arthur examined her face for a while, but he eventually decided to just say exactly what he was thinking. "Olivia. You seemed on edge before you talked to me about this. Were you initially thinking of handling this by yourself without bringing it up with me?"

Olivia didn't answer.

"I knew it. Did you even think about how much I would've suffered if something happened to you?"

"I..."

"You didn't, did you? What do you think I'd feel if I saw those guys and just went home without having a clue? If I heard something happened to you, after it happened, it'd kill me. I'd live with that pain forever. And you've helped me. You let me stay here out of the rain, then you let me stay the night here, and you saved me from wolves. So, why won't you let me help you?"

"I just..."

Then, Arthur said, "Huh?" and leaned in close like he was examining her face. "Agh, I only just noticed. You've got scratches all over your face! You've got medicine, right? You should treat those right away."

"Huh? My face? Oh, I was running as fast as I could through the dark forest. I tripped and got scratched by branches, but I'm fine."

"You ran as fast as you could through a dark forest? You could've died if one of those sticks took out an eye."

"The first day we met I thought you worried too much, Arthur, and I still do."

"I've lived this long by imagining the worst-possible scenario. And I'm sure you're sick of hearing it, but you should be more careful."

"But I..." started Olivia, then she trailed off.

Arthur gave her a look that said, "And?" urging her to continue.

"But I do worry too. I worried so much. I worried, what if you got hurt? I worried, and worried, and worried so much there was no way I could have just

walked back.”

A mix of emotions crossed Arthur’s face, and he broke eye contact with her. She didn’t notice his ears turning red. “Well, let’s give it a rest for today,” he said. “Got to do something about the door.”

“It’s late. I’m just going to push a table against the door from the inside.”

“And you’re planning to sleep like that?”

“I can’t handle anything else. I’m dead tired.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“Tomorrow! Let’s do it tomorrow. Two bands of burglars aren’t going to attack on the same night. I promise.”

“Fine. But I’m sleeping in the restaurant. I’ll be too worried to sleep if I don’t. I promise I won’t go up to your room or anything, though.”

“I never suspected you would. All right, sleep in my grandparents’ room then. I won’t be able to sleep if you sleep on this floor.”



THE morning after that exchange, Arthur woke in Olivia’s grandparents’ room to its well-maintained lamps and stove, polished wood floors, and quilt that seemed to be handknit by her grandmother. The walls were painted a classy color and displayed drawings of a girl. It was immediately apparent they were Olivia when she was younger.

It started with Olivia when she looked about five, all the smallish frames showing her growth. Olivia was smiling in each one, and she always had an animal with her, a dog, a cat, hedgehogs, sparrows, robins, a goat, a fox.

“Wait... Did her grandparents actually know?” he murmured as he looked at the pictures, then a voice called up the stairs to him.

“Arthur, breakfast is ready! Please come downstairs!”

“Coming!”

Just that little exchange was enough to make him blush. He slapped his cheeks to wipe away the grin he felt growing there, then went downstairs with

a straight face.

On the table was boiled eggs, buttered toast, and a ham and collard greens soup with a clear broth.

"Looks good. You got up early, Olivia," he said.

"I always get up when the sun rises."

"You're probably tired by night, then."

"Yeah. I was exhausted last night. I'm sure you were more tired though, having fought five men."

"Not at all. Not after an easy fight like that."

He honestly hadn't been. The men were weak. They likely thought they were big and bad because there were five of them against one woman.

"Oh, Peep, hello," said Olivia as a sparrow came through the open kitchen window and landed on the windowsill. It looked at Arthur warily, seemingly about to fly away at a moment's notice.

"Don't worry. He won't do anything to you," said Olivia. "Do you want some bread? Hm? Oh, it's going to rain a little? Thank you. Go on, eat up."

To Arthur, it just sounded like the sparrow was saying, "Peep peep!" but Olivia seemed to understand. *Yeah, if someone who had no idea what was going on saw that, they'd think she was off in the head*, he thought as he ate some bread. Olivia had fried it in a pan with butter. The outside was crispy while the inside was still soft and fluffy.

"My rain predictions come from that bird," said Olivia. "I act like it's just something I can do when I tell my customers, haha!"

"Seems like fun, talking to a sparrow."

"It's not really talking. I named it Peep, but it only really comes to tell me when it's going to rain. Then it eats the thank-you present I give it, and leaves. I don't think it really understands what I say. Even so, it's a precious friend."

"I'd like to be added to your friend list. After Peep."

"After Peep? Are you sure that position is good enough?"

"It'll go: Rob, the golden deer, the goats, the sparrow, then me, the big dog."

Olivia laughed and spilled the soup from her spoon she'd been about to put in her mouth. "You paid more attention to the timing, didn't you?"

"Yep."

It was a pleasant breakfast filled with their smiles.

When's the last time a meal was this much fun? thought Arthur. It was probably that one time he and his sister gathered chestnuts and, when they got back, their mother boiled them and served them for dinner. *We were so happy then, just to have so many chestnuts.*

He ate his soup as he thought about such things. It had a gentle flavor that soothed his wounded heart and gave him the courage to say what he needed to.

"Hey, Olivia. I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep well at night from worrying something like last night'll happen again," he said.

"Mm..."

"So, I want to move into the loft in the goat barn. I'm going to go back to the pharmacy today after I fix the front door. And don't try to stop me from fixing it, I'm doing it."

"A-All right. Thank you. But it's a six-mile walk each way you'd have to make?"

"I actually have a bit of money saved up. I'll buy a horse. Should be fine, right?"

"Are you sure you're all right living in the barn?"

"Yep. The barn's fine."

"Uh... Well, all right, then. I'm happy to have you. Knowing you're there will make me feel more comfortable. Please, do stay. And don't worry about my friend list. You're already on it."

"Yeah, number five. Right after the sparrow."

"No, you're number one."

"That's a huge step up."

Once he finished breakfast, Arthur reattached the hinges to the broken door, trying very hard to control his expression as a smile kept trying to sneak onto his face.

Chapter 28: Moving Day and Dinner

FREDDY smiled when Arthur came back to the pharmacy to ask for his job back.

“Of course I want you back, Arthur. I want you to work here just like you have been.”

“Even though I just went and quit like that? Thank you, Freddy.”

“Ah, I’m just glad. That Hughes family was in a rush to move out of here. Everything’s taken care of now.”

“They moved already?”

“Yep. Thanks to Duchess Arche. Did you meet her? Louise?”

“I did. I was nervous when I heard she’s a former princess and duchess of our neighboring country.”

The day after Louise went to the Hughes’s villa, Byron contacted the merchant company he oversaw to discuss the sale of the villa. Once the sale was agreed upon, the family moved out, leaving all the house’s furnishings behind.

Arthur went straight to cleaning the shop, and Freddy began making medicines.

“Her Grace apparently told them she’ll decide how to deal with them depending on how Karen acts from here on out. Which means, basically, the father doesn’t trust his daughter all that much,” said Freddy.

“They brought it on themselves.”

“He might be good at commerce, but it seems the man didn’t do a very good job raising his daughter. Oh, by the way, I heard talk this morning that some burglars broke into one of the houses out in the farming area. Sounds terrible.”

“It was Olivia’s place. They were all captured just because I happened to be

there. Olivia's all right."

Freddy didn't say anything in response. Arthur stopped polishing the window and turned to look at him. Freddy was frozen in place, having just put some dried herbs on a scale.

"Freddy?"

"Oh, sorry. Is that what happened? It was Soup Forest the burglars broke into?"

"I guess they were after the restaurant's money, and, uh, Olivia."

"My Lord... All her customers feared that day might come. But you were there. Thank you, Arthur. Please, let me thank you in Jenkins's place."

"Actually, I don't think I can let her live alone like that. Today I'm going to be moving into the annex behind the restaurant."

"Really? Really! That's good. Please, yes, do that. All the regulars from the restaurant will be happy to hear it. Thank you. Oh, and Arthur..."

"Hm?"

Freddy waved him over and had him sit down, before explaining in a quiet voice. "If you're going to live there, you should know the full story. It'd be best. It's something Jenkins made sure someone knew, for after he passed."

"Sure, what is it?"

"Marguerite took over caring for Duchess Arche when her mother retired as her herbologist. Jenkins was a knight assigned as the then princess's guard."

"Okay."

"When Louise married the prince of Arche, the king ordered Marguerite to accompany her to Arche, but Jenkins couldn't go with them. Marguerite and Jenkins were in love, but knights can't work in the castles of other countries. Marguerite was only twenty at the time and continued to work for the duchess until all three of the duchess's children had grown up. It wasn't until then she came back here."

How long are we talking exactly? Arthur wondered but didn't say anything

because it might lead to criticisms of the royal family.

“Marguerite finally resigned when she was forty-four, that’s when she came back. That whole time, Jenkins tried to give up his knighthood and move to Arche, but they wouldn’t accept his resignation. His Majesty was concerned for the duchess, who was always prone to illness. He probably wanted Marguerite to focus on her job, not her love. Not that I really know any of the surrounding circumstances myself.”

“Forty-four...?”

“Margaret worked until she was so old she couldn’t hope for children of her own, but she married Jenkins when she came back. It was a few years after that that they took Olivia in.”

They didn’t see each other for twenty-four years? Wonder how Olivia’s granddad must’ve felt.

Knights of this kingdom swore an oath to serve their master until they die. Jenkins would have had no option but to wait. Arthur’s heart ached for Jenkins and Marguerite.

“The two of them loved Olivia more than anything,” said Freddy. “And they worried about her. All the regulars of Soup Forest are people Marguerite and Jenkins helped. They know Olivia’s a bit different and keeps others at arm’s length.”

“They do?”

“You might’ve noticed by now, but the only time Olivia seems at peace and smiles is in front of animals. I don’t know why that is, but we all think that’s just how horrible things were for her at her original home.” Freddy looked at Arthur with kind eyes. “But I get the impression she’s opened up to you. I heard one day when it was raining, she let you wear Jenkins’s clothes and sit in his seat. Some of the regulars who saw that told me. Olivia’s never let anyone sit in that seat. That’s why I was really disappointed when I heard you say you were leaving Marlowe.”

Arthur thought back to the first time he visited Soup Forest. Wasn’t it Olivia herself who suggested he sit there? *She doesn’t let anyone sit there? Then*

why'd she suggest I sit there?

"I'm really sorry for quitting out of the blue like that," said Arthur. "But, you know, I'm pretty sure Olivia was the one who told me to sit in that seat."

"There's got to be something about you that makes her open up. Everything's going in a good direction. I'm glad. It's a big relief."

After that, Freddy just repeated, "Ah, I'm so glad. What a relief."

A lot of people care about Olivia, thought Arthur. He'd thought she was on her own. He was filled with joy to learn that wasn't actually the case. She might not even be aware herself.

After finishing work that evening, Arthur cleared out the room he had used in the pharmacy, bought a horse and glass, then went back to Soup Forest. Every single window in the building was brightly lit. He could see it even in the distance in the dark.

"Olivia, I'm back," he called as he got there.

"Welcome back, Arthur."

"I bought a horse. Her name's Annie, and I guess she's four years old."

"I want to see!"

Olivia ran out, Arthur following more slowly behind. Annie was tied up under the shelter of a roofed area with no walls, and Olivia went to her and said, "Oh, you do like Arthur, don't you? He is a good person. And very strong. I'm friends with him, too. There's a dog that lives here. Oh, there he is. This is Rob. He's a good boy. Nice to meet you, Annie."

She turned back to Arthur as he approached and smiled. It was a wonderful smile.

"I made something a bit fancier for dinner to celebrate you moving in," she said.

"Oooh, I'm looking forward to it. I bought new glass. I'll put it in now."

"Thank you. All the insects would have gotten in if we left it without glass."

While Olivia warmed the food and set the table, Arthur put the new glass into

the window in the door.

The table was filled with herb-roasted trout, deboned pork rib meat roasted with mushrooms and greens, in addition to the collard greens and ham soup they ate that morning with added diced carrot, served alongside whole wheat rolls.

“Did you go fishing?” asked Arthur.

“With Rob. I foraged the mushrooms then, too.”

“I love fishing. Want to go together tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’d love to! Are you fine with getting up early?”

“No problem. The food’s all great, by the way.”

“I’m glad.”

“Oh, can we set a rate for my rent?”

“I can’t accept rent when I’m receiving protection from one of the best. Rent, breakfast, dinner, laundry, and cleaning services wouldn’t come anywhere close to seven small gold pieces.”

They argued back and forth for a while, but Arthur caved in the end.

Once they finished eating, they washed the dishes together, then Arthur went into the loft of the goat barn. Olivia had swept and cleaned the room as well as polished the floorboards with beeswax. The sheets and pillowcase smelled nice and freshly washed.

“Tomorrow we’ll go fishing, then maybe I’ll add walls to the shelter to make a horse barn. Walls’ll be in the evening, though.”

He fell asleep quickly and had a dream.

He was back home and there was delicious-looking soup, roast fish, buttered bread, and boiled chestnuts filling the table. His mother, father, sister, and he, too, all smiled as they ate.

Chapter 29: What the Badger Saw

ONCE Arthur moved into the so-called goat barn that was really a detached annex, Olivia and Arthur began going fishing together about once a week. This meant river fish started making a bigger appearance on Soup Forest's menu. Olivia's day to day was serene, peaceful, and safe.

Soon, it was the start of the seventh month. Olivia woke at four during a still cool morning and did the laundry. Adding Arthur's laundry to hers was no big deal, since she used to do the laundry for three people anyway.

"G'morning, Olivia. You're up early, like always."

"Good morning, Arthur. The sound of water woke me."

"Why do you still sound like you're talking to a customer when you talk to me? Come on, I don't call you ma'am, anymore. We should be treating each other equally."

"Sorry, it's a habit. All righty, no more missus restaurant owner."

"Good. Want to go fishing?"

"Yes! In just a bit, once I finish the laundry."

It was one small moment of happiness to go fishing before breakfast, and Olivia was grateful for the opportunity to gather medicinal herbs and mushrooms on the way there and back. Olivia walked in front, Arthur following, with Rob racing ahead then falling behind in turn.

"How many fish do you think we can land this morning?" asked Olivia. "I think I've thinned out the number of trout that gather in that pool, so it's gotten a lot harder to fish lately."

"Want to have a competition to see who can get more?"

"You're on."

Rob disappeared upstream to play.

After about thirty minutes of fishing, Olivia saw a family of badgers moving closer to the river along the ridge on the other side.

Human! Human there!

Stay away!

Fish! Catching fish!

Dead human, live human.

It was nearly the season for badger cubs to leave their mother, though this mother was still leading her children along. Their memories caught Olivia's attention.

She saw an image of a human fallen over the river's bank. The badgers were cautious and didn't approach, but it was possible it was a drowned person, already dead.

"Arthur, there's something upstream I want to check on," she said.

"Did the badgers say something?"

"They did, and I saw a little of their memories. Someone fell over the cliff on the riverbank. I think they might be dead."

"Let's go."

"There might be a drowned corpse though. Are you all right seeing that?" she asked.

"Who do you think I am?"

"Oh, yeah. Right."

Olivia called Rob back and the three of them followed the bank upstream. They came to a place with large boulders standing out from the bank where the river was narrow and fast.

She found the man in his fancy-looking fishing gear when she went around one of the boulders. He was lying face down on the bank, his legs in the water from the knees down.

"You stay here, I'll check it out," said Arthur.

“I’m going too.”

“He might not have eyes anymore.”

“Urk.”

“See? Wait here.”

Arthur quickly strode over to the man, placed his fingers against his neck, then turned him over and slapped his cheeks. Oliva called over, “Is he alive?”

“Somehow! He’s freezing cold though.”

“All right!”

Unconscious people are heavy. Olivia decided it would be impossible for the two of them to carry him the three miles back to the restaurant and instead built a campfire with driftwood. Once the flames were roaring, they dragged the man over and undressed him. Arthur took off his own shirt and put it on the man.

“I’d like to send a message via Rob, but I have nothing to write with and no idea how to explain where exactly we are...” she said.

“From my experience, a young man like this should come to pretty quickly,” Arthur said.

The man was rather young, only eighteen or nineteen. He looked like the son of a wealthy family.

“It looks like we’ve saved someone from the villas again,” said Olivia.

“This time you can be the one they fall for.”

“Oh, please don’t say that. You’ll tempt fate.”

They warmed him by the fire, rubbing his arms and legs and, after some time, the young man came to just like Arthur said.

“Where...am I?” he asked, his voice weak.

“You’re about six miles from Marlowe,” said Arthur. “Looks like you fell off the riverbank.”

“Huh? This isn’t my shirt...”

“You were freezing,” said Olivia. “We took off your wet clothes. That shirt is his.”

“Uh-huh...”

“No, not just ‘uh-huh’,” said Arthur. “She found you and saved you. Isn’t there something you should say?”

“Oh, right. Thank you for saving me. My name is Lionel. I was looking for a good fishing spot when I fell into the river and got washed away. The last thing I remember is nearly drowning. You saved my life.”

“You’re welcome,” said Olivia. “Do you think you can walk? It’s a three-mile walk to my house. If you can make the effort to get there, I’ll treat you to some dry clothes and nice food.”

“Yes, I think I can walk.”

Lionel stood. Olivia saw how unsteady he was, so she gave him some candies. He crunched all five of them between his teeth, swallowing them down in seconds. He seemed to gain some energy from that.

They walked back, Arthur without a shirt. Olivia looked at his back while walking behind him. There were large scars across his back and arms. She imagined there were more on his chest and legs, too. There were scars she guessed were from swords, others left by burns, and even some from deeper stab wounds.

He started as a mercenary when he was only fourteen. I can’t imagine how horrible the conditions he lived through must have been.

She thought her own childhood was bad, but now she was starting to think she’d actually been blessed.

When I ran away, I was immediately taken in by a kind old couple. They raised me with love. My suffering is nothing compared to what someone like Arthur has been through, someone who survived on their own strength alone.

As she was rethinking her own mindset, she heard Lionel say, “Wow, Arthur, just look at you! You’ve got some serious muscle there, and those scars! What did you do to get scars like that?”

“Lionel, it’s not polite to ask like that,” said Olivia.

“I didn’t mean it like that, I just—”

“It’s fine,” said Arthur. “I don’t mind. I was a mercenary for fourteen years, but I retired. A lot of the scars are from back when I wasn’t really good. I survived thanks to all the more experienced mercenaries who helped me out.”

“Wow. Are those people still mercenaries?”

“No. They’re all dead.”

“Uh...”

“Mercenaries are always sent to fight on the front lines.”

Arthur’s tone and expression were calm, but a torrent of sorrow was rushing from him into Olivia’s heart.

She saw Arthur cradling a comrade, calling his name over and over as he breathed his last breath. Or Arthur caring for another mercenary whose wound had become infected and had developed a high fever. Arthur coated in mud, along with his fellows.

After the torrent of sorrow came a wave of deep despair.

The next memories were of Arthur digging graves for the corpses of what looked like his parents and a small-framed girl that could have been his sister. They were all shockingly thin, even Arthur.

“Olivia, what’s wrong?!” came Arthur’s voice.

“Huh?”

He and Lionel were standing in front of her looking shocked. Silent tears had been streaming down her face, and she panicked knowing they’d seen. “Oh, don’t worry about me. I was just thinking how hard it must be to work as a mercenary and I started crying.”

“Let’s take a break,” said Arthur. He pulled Olivia away from Lionel and quietly apologized. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help thinking about the past. You saw, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry for looking.”

“No, it’s my fault.”

“Don’t apologize. I should have been able to keep a straight face. It won’t happen again, I promise.” She wiped her tears and smiled, but then she thought about her own parting with her parents, and Arthur touched her cheek. He looked like he was seeing something painful.

“Everything’s fine. I’m fine,” said Olivia. “All right, let’s head back. We’ll all feel better after some nice soup. Just leave it to me!”

The three set off again, with Rob in tow.

Arthur had seen something too: Olivia as a girl, crying, “Goodbye, Mother, Father!” while filled with feelings of despair. Behind her parents who cried as she went away was an old man looking at Olivia with disgust.

She had to live with him looking at her like that? And her parents did what that old man said?

Olivia walked along with a façade of joy. Arthur watched her from behind feeling anger towards her family and sympathy for her.

But...what does it mean that I can see into her heart, too?

Chapter 30: Nothing's Happened Yet

ONCE they got Lionel back to the restaurant, Arthur took his horse and rode to where Lionel was staying. As expected, it was one of the villas.

"Where are you staying, Lionel?" he asked before leaving.

"It's owned by the head of Fied & Co. Uh, it's the biggest villa, at the end of the road. I think he only recently bought it when it went up for sale."

"Ah. Yeah. I know the one. I'll go get them."

Arthur raced off on Annie and quickly came back with a carriage.

"Lionel, you worried me heading out before sunrise and not coming back for so long," said his mother.

"We were beside ourselves," said his father. "We debated on going to Lord Marlais to ask for help. I'm glad you're all right."

"I actually wasn't all right. I was swept away by the river and nearly drowned. These two found me unconscious."

Lionel's parents were shocked to hear this and incredibly grateful to Olivia and Arthur. The villa itself belonged to the head of the merchant company Fied & Co., while Lionel and his family, nobles, had been invited to stay. They'd come to enjoy this villa life that was all the talk in the capital right now.

"Right, well, I've got to head to work," said Arthur.

"Have a nice day at work," said Olivia.

"Thank you for looking after our son," said Lionel's father.

And, having each said their part, Arthur left.

"Mother, Father," said Lionel. "The soup in this restaurant is very popular. I just had a wonderful onion, asparagus, and cheese soup."

"We'll have to come back then, as a thank you. You have my gratitude, really," said Lionel's father.

"I look forward to your visit," said Olivia.

After changing into the fresh clothes his parents brought, Lionel left with them on steady legs.

Olivia saw them off then went back into the restaurant and one of her regulars who had been staying quiet until then called her over. He'd come before the restaurant opened to drop off some of his extra vegetables he wanted to share with her, then stayed to keep an eye on the bustle caused by the noble family.

"Olivia, looks like your restaurant's seeing these nobles visiting too."

"Yes, but I imagine they'll only come once more." And she truly believed that at the time.



THREE days later, Lionel and his family came back along with a woman in her late twenties who was apparently his cousin. Olivia's heart raced the moment she laid eyes on that cousin.

She looks exactly like my cousin. I forgot her name, but I remember those tight blonde curls and the mole by her mouth.

She took their orders and went to prepare them, unable to hold back the unpleasant memories bubbling up from inside her.

"Brother, there's something wrong with this girl. She was just talking to a sparrow."

"Huh. Hey, Olivia. What were you talking to the sparrow about?"

"Um, the sparrow said... It said there were some yummy grass seeds over there."

"Did you hear that? She says the sparrow talked!"

"It's true! I'm not lying!"

"Brother, maybe she isn't human after all. Maybe she's a sparrow."

They were two siblings laughing as they mocked her. Her mother came out with an uneasy expression and said, *"Be a good girl and go to your room."*

On a different day, there was some sort of event that brought in a lot of guests, a tea party or the like, and her cousin loudly told all the adults about Olivia.

"Father, Olivia was talking to the garden cat earlier. They were talking for sooo long."

"Julia, is there something wrong with Olivia? You had the doctor see her, didn't you?"

"Yes, brother. The doctor said she was likely just more fanciful than other children."

"She's five. She's old enough to tell the difference between fantasy and reality."

"Yes... Of course..."

The guests openly gawked at Olivia. Her mother, Julia, was filled with sorrow, while many of the guests thought things like *What a strange girl* or *We can't have something like that in our family*.

Outside her memories, Olivia decided to stop chopping vegetables before she cut her fingers because she couldn't control the force in her hand.

"I thought I'd gotten over this," she murmured. "It was so long ago. Twenty years. It's fine. She's forgotten me, anyway."

She took a deep breath and went back to chopping the vegetables while using thoughts of the loving couple who took her in to calm herself.

"You are our pride. Every little bit of you is wonderful, how you love animals, how you work so hard. No matter what happens, never look down on yourself."

"Olivia, you are our treasure."

Her adoptive grandparents had been so very kind. One day, she worked up the courage and called them Mom and Dad. They looked happier than they ever had, but then quickly chided her. *"Don't call us that,"* they said. *"Call us Grandma and Grandpa."*

And then they gave her a piece of paper.

"If you ever find yourself in trouble, this piece of paper will help. Make sure you keep it safe, even after the Lord has called us back to His garden."

That's right, thought Olivia. *I have that paper. Everything will be fine. Just calm down.*

She brought the group of four their food: A cream soup with summer vegetables, a side of trout, and garlic toast. Her cousin said nothing. She didn't seem to notice anything. The food was well received. They were all focused on eating.

There weren't any other customers in the restaurant, which meant no one said her name in front of the group.

Good thing the restaurant happened to be empty, she thought, feeling relieved by her own good luck.

Eventually, the group stood to leave. They handed Olivia the payment for the food, along with an extra five large gold coins.

"Thank you, but we help each other out when we're in need. You don't need to pay me. I appreciate the thought, though," said Olivia.

"Sweetie, you saved my precious little boy. Please accept," said Lionel's mother.

"No, really..."

The two of them were locked in an attempt to push the money back on the other when three of Olivia's regulars came in. They didn't even look at the board for the day's soup before ordering.

"Olivia, could I get today's soup and sides. And two slices of bread."

"Same for me."

"Same. Oh, but only one slice of bread for me, Olivia."

"Ah, of course."

Olivia nearly shoved the gold coins back into the lady's hands then gave a quick, "Excuse me," before walking over to the customers who had just entered.

Olivia? Did that man just call her 'Olivia'? That's the name of my cousin who went missing. From behind, Olivia could hear the inner voice of her cousin, clearer than she'd ever heard someone's voice before, and she felt her stare bore into her back.

Olivia kept herself from turning to look and forced a smile on her face to hide how shaken she was. She greeted the new customers with that smile, then kept it on as she pulled back into the kitchen.

"It's fine. She didn't remember my face, anyway. It's fine. Just calm down," she told herself.

Lionel and his companions boarded their carriage and left. Olivia busied herself with work in an attempt to forget about her cousin. She took care of the goats, fed vegetable scraps to the hedgehogs, polished the floor, and preoccupied herself with prepping for dinner.

Thankfully, the evening mealtime was busier than usual, allowing her to forget her worries for a short time.



"OLIVIA, I'm back."

"Hello, Arthur. Would you like dinner?"

"Please. I was thinking about that cream soup the whole way home."

Arthur came home shortly after Olivia closed the restaurant. She quickly put their dinner together while they chatted about the same things they normally did.

The two sat down at the table in the kitchen and started eating, then Arthur said, "Olivia, did something happen today? Your emotions seem all worked up."

"Nothing happened. The restaurant was just busy again today."

"Hm." Arthur didn't push it any further then, but, once they finished eating and had a cup of tea, he still didn't move despite it being the time they normally went to their separate rooms for the night.

"Um, Arthur, if you want a bath, I have some water heated up. You're welcome to use it," said Olivia.

“You’re keeping something from me. I thought I told you. It’d hurt me if something happened to you, and I had no idea what was going on.”

Her grandmother’s words flitted through her mind again: *“Olivia, humans do foolish things, but they also do the right things. I hope someday you’ll be able to trust them.”*

You’re right, Grandma. I need to trust him.

“Actually, Arthur,” she began, “today...”

And so, she told him about her cousin who visited the restaurant that day. Arthur listened quietly until the end and remained in thought once she finished.

“You don’t want to see your parents?” he said finally. “That’s the only part I’d be worried about. That old man who treated you coldly probably isn’t alive anymore. If you want to see your parents, you could. So, do you?”

While Olivia was surprised that Arthur knew even about her real grandfather, she looked carefully into herself and realized that a small part of her did want to see her parents. They were sad when they did what her grandfather said and sent her away. She knew they at least didn’t hate her. They just couldn’t handle Olivia, who so naively talked about speaking with animals and hearing other people’s inner voices.

Despite that, they did in the end choose her grandfather’s opinion over her, and parts of them were sad and suffering because Olivia wasn’t normal.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Part of me wants to, but I also don’t think seeing them will lead to anything positive. Though, I can’t say anything for sure unless I do it.”

“Mm.”

“Is there something you want to say?”

“Well, I want you to stay here. It’s probably a good thing for you to have a relationship with your parents, but...to be honest, I’ll be sad if you close the restaurant and go to be with them. I know this is just my own selfishness talking, but my life here means a lot to me. I’d like to keep living here with you.”

What do I say to that? thought Olivia. *No, this isn’t about what I should say,*

it's about what I want to do.

"I appreciate that," she said. "I don't want to give up my life here either. I want to keep living here in peace and calm. It's just, I don't know what I should do when I think about the fact that I could be causing my parents to suffer."

They both fell into silence. There wasn't a single sound in the quiet room.

Eventually, Olivia got her grip back on her emotions and said, "Nothing's even happened yet. I don't even know if my cousin was certain it was me. I don't know if she'll say anything to my parents. And I definitely don't know if my parents will come here to check on what she tells them. There's no need to take the whole thing this seriously just yet."

"Suppose not. All right, think I'll go take a bath."

"Of course."

Arthur left the kitchen, and Olivia walked over to Rob sleeping in his bed and stroked his head. He opened his eyes, licked her hand, wagged his tail, then closed his eyes again.

"Good night, Rob. I'm sure tomorrow will be a good day, too. Sweet dreams."

Chapter 31: Mushroom and Onion Soup and a Sin

DAYS passed, and Olivia's parents didn't come to the restaurant.

It was the start of the ninth month. All sorts of mushrooms were appearing in the forest.

"It's hard to catch trout when the days are still a bit hot like this, but I gathered a whole lot of mushrooms," said Olivia. "And then, once autumn is in full swing, we'll be able to fish lots of trout again! I can't wait for autumn."

"Me neither," said Arthur.

"And nothing's happened that we need to worry about."

"Nope."

Arthur glanced sideways at her while he replied. He was making money from his job at the pharmacy but had nothing to spend it on since he wasn't paying for room or board. *I feel like a freeloader making her pay for everything. I don't like it.*

But she refused to take his money, since she got such a "high-quality bodyguard" by having him around.

On his way home from town he'd stop and buy sweets, tea, sugar, butter, and whatever else caught his eye, but Olivia was always hesitant to accept them.

Maybe I'll buy her a ring or a bracelet. No, a pendant. One with gems the same color as her eyes. Then I'll ask her to marry me.

That desire had been swirling around his heart for quite some time, but he made his decision now that it'd taken a solid form. Every day his feelings grew stronger. He wanted to live with her, and he didn't want another man to take her away. The only thing that had kept him from saying something sooner was his inability to forget the images of all the dying soldiers he had cut down just to put bread on the table.

When he was still a mercenary, one of the more experienced mercenaries

noticed Arthur's uncertainty and told him, *"If you don't kill them, they'll kill you. It goes both ways. Forget about them."*

It was the other mercenary's attempt to make him feel better, to encourage him. Arthur kept telling himself the people he killed were his enemy and tried not to think about it too deeply.

When a fierce battle was won, the country's soldiers would let out cries of joy, drink, and celebrate. But, while the mercenaries might look cheerful at first glance, there was a darkness in their eyes. Soldiers fought to protect their country, their families. They weren't like mercenaries. It wasn't uncommon to see a mercenary they knew well on the opposing side.

Arthur kept thinking about how the people he killed had parents, siblings, maybe their wife had just given birth to their child, and one day he just couldn't take it anymore. It's why he was so hesitant to find his own happiness.

But his heart had been healing, little by little, ever since he'd come to Soup Forest and started living like a real human being.

It's time to look to the future, he thought.

That day, he put several small gold coins in his pocket before heading off to work.



THE restaurant was filled with regular customers that day at lunchtime. Olivia loaded the mushroom and onion soup into deep bowls and grated cheese on top. You could watch the cheese melting. There was a knack to eating the soup right. You had to scoop the mushrooms and onions up, coating them in the cheese before it all melted.

"Olivia, this is great."

"Olivia's a famous mushroom gatherer."

"I learned everything about mushrooms from my grandmother," she said.

The delicious aroma filtered through the restaurant, and conversation bubbled between all the potted plants.

The bell above the door clanged. Olivia turned to welcome the newest

customers and froze.



They looked much older than her memories from twenty years ago, but there they were, her parents, standing there looking at her. Her mother, with her mostly gray hair swept back in an elegant bun, moved towards Olivia, looking like she might burst into tears at any moment. And then she threw her arms around Olivia.

“Olivia? It really is you, isn’t it? I couldn’t believe it when Emily told us, but I couldn’t stand it any longer. I had to come and see if it really was you. Olivia, you’re alive!”

“Olivia,” said her father, “do you remember us? Oh, you still look the same as you did back then...”

Silence fell over the customers.

“Um, perhaps you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” said Olivia. “My name is Olivia, but I don’t recognize you.”

“Oh, Olivia, dear. You must have forgotten. You were only five at the time. There’s no mistake, you are my daughter,” said her mother.

“She’s right, Olivia. You look just like your mother,” said her father.

He was right. She did resemble her mother. But Olivia managed to remain far calmer than she imagined she would in this situation. Her mother’s heart was open, and all sorts of thoughts and emotions flowed into Olivia. The nature of those thoughts was enough to cool Olivia’s own emotions.

When she was a girl, Olivia would sometimes imagine her reunion with her parents. She would explain her ability to them, and they would accept her, gift and all. But her mother’s heart right now was very far from what Olivia had imagined. Her mother wanted to dress Olivia up and parade her around her social groups to spread the word that her daughter was safe and “normal.”

The girl I gave birth to isn’t a freak. She grew up into a perfectly normal adult. I need everyone to see.

Her mother’s thoughts went on to paint a picture of her pairing Olivia off with some noble’s son, and them getting married. This imaginary Olivia was dressed up and attending balls, engaging with proficiency in conversations like the

daughter of a good noble house with nobles Olivia had never met.

Olivia gently pulled out of her mother's embrace. "I'm very sorry, but I'm working at the moment. This is making it a little difficult."

"Olivia, I thought you were dead! Meeting you again like this is a blessing from God," said her mother.

"God protected you. Olivia, I am overjoyed that you're alive. I prayed every day, and those prayers were answered," said her father.

Olivia felt something snap inside her, like a crack ran through something precious in her heart. *No*, she thought. *It's thanks to my grandparents that I'm alive now.*

There was no way her way of thinking could mesh with theirs. This didn't anger her, but knowing how vast the gulf between them was sapped her of her strength.

"Please, take a seat," she said. "There's something I'd like to show you." She ran up the stairs, all the regular customers around her watching with bated breath.

Grandma, Grandpa, it's now, right? This is when I use it, isn't it?

She pulled an envelope from the drawer in her grandfather's desk and went back downstairs.

"Please, look at this," she said. "I was adopted by my family when I was a baby. When I was a *baby*."

Her parents stared at the paper they pulled from the envelope. Inside was paperwork which said, "Olivia Eagleton was a child born out of wedlock to one of my servants. She was adopted at birth by Jenkins and Marguerite Eagleton. This shall act as proof of the adoption."

As her parents read, they muttered, "What in the...?" and "This can't possibly be true."

"If you doubt the authenticity of the paperwork, please contact Duchess Louise Arche for confirmation," said Olivia. "That document was written by Her Grace."

Her parents stiffened. They were aware they couldn't question the validity of a testimony written by a former princess of their own kingdom.

"Excuse me for barging into your conversation," said Joshua, one the regulars, "but I can also say Olivia's been here since she was a babe. I saw her. She was an energetic little one, cried so loud."

"That's not possible," said Olivia's mother, arguing with Joshua. "She is *my* daughter. I gave birth to her. I raised her until she was five. I know my own daughter!"

Then one of the other regulars, Billy, stood and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but what he says is true. Jenkins came to my place every morning to buy goat milk for her when she was baby. She really drank a lot. Slept well, too. She was a healthy thing."

A voice came from another seat. This time it was Bob. "I remember seeing her toddling around. I swear it."

"No, that can't be! You're all lying!" cried her mother.

"Julia, please stop," said her father. "Let's leave it here for today."

"But—!"

"Miss Olivia," he said, "I apologize. It seems we've made a mistake. I'm sorry for causing such a fuss while you were working."

He pulled Olivia's crying mother into his arms and left the restaurant. The regular customers looked at Olivia with concern in their eyes as she watched them go.

"Olivia, sorry for jumping in there and saying something, but Jenkins and Marguerite asked me to," said Joshua. "Never thought it'd come up like this, though."

"They asked you to? What do you mean?" said Olivia.

"They asked me, too."

"And me."

"Billy? Bob? Both of you too?" said Olivia, confused.

Joshua, the eldest, explained for her. “Jenkins and Marguerite were worried this day might come. They said, ‘If Olivia’s parents come to see her and she seems happy, don’t say anything. But if she doesn’t, I want you to make sure they don’t force her to go with them. Can you tell them we raised Olivia here from when she was a baby?’”

“They can’t take you away if both Duchess Arche and us say you’ve been here your whole life,” said Billy.

“Joshua, Billy, Bob... Thank you. My grandparents really prepared for anything, didn’t they? You really helped me today,” said Olivia.

“Tell that to Jenkins and Marguerite for me,” said Joshua.

Her grandparents even worried about what would happen to her after they passed on. Olivia’s heart was a whirlpool of pain over having rejected her parents, and gratitude towards her grandparents.



OLIVIA’S mother cried as the carriage slowly carried them away, silently cursing her husband as she did.

“She’s alive and well,” she said. “She shouldn’t be living in that house in the middle of nowhere. She would be so much happier living at home as a noblewoman. Why, Olivia...?”

“Julia, we abandoned her when she was five.”

“But only because your father insisted.”

“Still. We abandoned her. There’s nothing we can do if she wishes to reject us now.”

“No, I will not accept that!”

Olivia’s father consoled her mother, his eyes fixed on a point in the distance. “She was smiling. She almost never smiled as a child. She always looked troubled, scared. I remember it now. Julia, don’t you think it would be a sin to take away that girl’s smile again?”

Chapter 32: Soulmate

ARTHUR came home later than usual that night and was startled to see Olivia sitting on the bench in the front garden. All the lamps were out, the garden lit only by faint moonlight. Olivia sat there in the darkness, staring out into nothing.

“Olivia, is something wrong?” he asked.

“Arthur...” She stood, then went straight over to him and wrapped her arms around him.

He was overwhelmed by a wave of emotions and memories the moment she embraced him. The ones that stood out most were images of a woman that looked a lot like Olivia and a man wearing a calm demeanor.

“Who are they?” he asked.

“You can see them?”

“Yeah. Did your parents show up? They look like you.”

“They came. They tried to take me back to show me off around noble society and marry me off to a nobleman. They thought it was for my sake, too.”

“They said all that after just meeting you?”

“Not out loud, of course. I saw it in my mother’s mind. It was her unvarnished true intentions.”

“Oh.”

“She was screaming inside, *The child I gave birth to isn’t a freak! My daughter is normal! Everyone needs to know!*”

“Oh...”

“I don’t think we could have understood each other. If we tried to build a relationship, we’d end up in the same cycle of causing each other pain as we

were all that time ago. So, I showed them this paper.” She took the folded paper from her pocket and handed it to Arthur.

He read what Louise had written and frowned slightly. “What is this?”

“It means I’m the daughter of one of her servants and I’ve been living here since I was a baby. I’m sure my grandmother asked the Duchess to write it.”

“She went all the way to making something like this? She must’ve been determined to protect you.”

“I think so. My grandparents really did love me. They were that concerned for me, but my own mother... Her heart was stuffed full of nothing but her own desires.”

Arthur gently stroked Olivia’s hair. He thought she would’ve cried, but she didn’t.

“It was so pointless,” she said. “I always imagined my parents and I could finally understand each other if we met again. I almost felt like I could hate her, when I saw her feelings and realized she just wanted to force normality on me. She doesn’t have ill intent, though. I know that. She believed bringing me back to noble society was an act of goodness. She didn’t doubt it. That’s what was so scary.”

“It must have been frightening,” said Arthur. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I don’t want to hate my mother. Which is why I don’t want to be involved with her at all.”

“Hey, Olivia.”

“What?”

“I think your sadness must be really strong. Your friend came to check on you.”

Olivia pulled her arms back from around Arthur and turned around. At the edge of the forest, just between the last trees, was the mother wolf. She was wary of Arthur and didn’t approach any further, staying far enough that she could run at any moment, but she was concerned.

Olivia rushed over to her. "Did I worry you?" she said.

Hurt?

"Yes. My heart hurts a little."

Heart hurt. The wolf let out a soft whine.

"I feel better since you came. Thank you."

You pack. You friend.

"Thank you for thinking of me as a friend."

Hurt?

"I'm fine now. It doesn't hurt anymore. Your mate's going to worry if you stay too long."

No hurt?

"No, I don't hurt now. I'm all right."

The wolf seemed relieved and slowly retreated back into the forest.

"Seemed pretty worried about you," said Arthur.

"Yeah. She thinks of me as a friend."

"Yeah?"

"She worried about me after just meeting each other a handful of times, but my own mother..."

"Olivia, I'm not sure it's a good idea to keep talking about it. I don't think those are the kind of words that make you feel better if you say them. I think they'll just hurt you more. Probably best to just try and forget them."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Oh, by the way, I have something for you," he said as he dug through his backpack and took out a small, red box. "I'd like you to have this."

"You bought me something today, too? You don't have to," said Olivia, but she opened the box anyway and saw the pendant inside. "These aren't real emeralds, are they?"

“They are. I picked that one ’cause it matches your eyes. The jeweler said I should pick something that matches my eyes, but mine are brown. This is prettier.”

“Why did you buy me something this expensive?”

“I want to live with you forever. I don’t want anyone else to take you away. I want to be your husband.”

Olivia stared at him in silence. Her family had thrown her away for being too much of a burden, and now his words kept repeating in her mind: *I don’t want anyone else to take you away.*

“When I became a mercenary, the only goal I had in life was survival,” he said. “But, it’s been different since I met you. I want to protect you. I want to be the person who protects you. I want you to be the center of my life. You made me remember what it was like to be happy. Olivia, am I good enough for you?”

Olivia threw her arms around him again. “Of course, you’re good enough. How could you possibly not be? I want to be close to you, to live with you. I want to be with you forever and ever. I want to live happily together, smiling all the time like my grandparents did.”

Arthur circled his arms around her, gently, like he was embracing a delicate glass sculpture that might break with a touch.

They stood there in silence for a while.

“Ah, I’m so glad... I was really nervous you’d say no,” he said.

Olivia didn’t say anything, just laid her head on his muscular chest.

“And, uh, Olivia. Seems you’re popular. Another concerned animal’s come to check on you.”

She followed his gaze and saw a hedgehog waddling over. It scratched at the dirt in the flowerbed then glanced up at her. “Did you come because you were worried?” she asked. “Oh, you came for food. Go on, eat as many bugs and worms as you want.”

“Huh, I thought it came ’cause it was worried,” said Arthur.

“Looks like it just wanted food. Hedgehogs don’t really think about detailed

things.”

“Haha, all right. That’s cute. Now that you mention it, I’m starving.”

“I bet. Let’s have dinner.”

“I’ll help.”

They walked hand in hand, though who reached for who first, they couldn’t really say. Olivia’s emotions were much calmer, and Arthur was relieved.

“It’s nice holding hands like this,” he said.

“It is. It makes me feel at peace.”

“I wonder when’s the last time I held hands with family. I can’t even remember.”

“Me neither. It’s just holding hands, but it’s so reassuring.”

“I’m way too relaxed right now. We’d be in danger if someone attacked right now.”

“Oh, Arthur.”

Arthur tried desperately to get control over his expression, but it didn’t go very well.

“Haha, it’s true,” said Olivia. “I feel all sorts of warm, fuzzy feelings from you right now!”

“That’s what it feels like when I’m walking on clouds. Every day from here on out’s going to be an avalanche of warm, fuzzy feelings. You better be ready.”

“Ha, an avalanche? It’s actually fun for me, too, being washed away in all these nice feelings.”

“I wonder why I started being able to sense your feelings and memories. And, for me, you’re the only one it happens with.”

“I think it’s...”

“Think it’s what?”

“Uh, well, we’ll talk about that later. Let’s eat.”

There was a reason she trailed off like that. A long time ago, when she was

still lamenting the fact she hadn't been born an animal, the golden deer had said something along the lines of, *Someday, you'll meet your soulmate.*

Olivia just gave a wry smile when he said that. "There's no way I'll find a match," she'd said. "Not with what I am."

True mate few.

"What's a true mate? How do you tell the difference between a mate who's true and one that's not?"

True mates understand each other.

"Hm."

On that rainy day when she invited Arthur dripping wet into the restaurant, she could tell that this man, who was putting everything into surviving despite his suffering and terrifyingly wounded heart, was of the same type as her.

The moment she thought that, her heart was filled with the desire to heal him, to be the strength he could lean on. It surprised her, that feeling. She'd only just met the man and had no idea what sort of person he was, but she still wanted that with every fiber of her being. It was too strong to be a simple passing fancy or love at first sight. It was like she'd been given a duty.

She invited him to sit in her grandfather's chair, where she never allowed anyone else to sit, gave him food, and let him stay in the annex because she was moved by the urge to help him, even if only just a little.

The golden deer said I'd know if I met my soulmate. Maybe this is it, she'd thought. She was never confident about that, but, when she learned Arthur could feel her emotions too, she thought, *He is my true mate.*

The more time they spent together, the stronger that belief grew, but she couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. She worked hard to keep it from showing in her emotions.

I can't say something as intense as "soulmate." No, it's fine. I shouldn't say it. It's fine, so long as I know.

That's what she kept telling herself. That's why she was so utterly filled with joy when Arthur said he didn't want her to be taken away by anyone.

The two of them ate their dinner, Olivia enjoying every moment as she stifled her laughter at Arthur's so called "fuzzy avalanche" of emotions.

Arthur could tell from Olivia's expression and emotions that his joy-filled heart was still plain for her to see. At some point during dinner, it got so embarrassing that his face and ears were bright red as he spooned soup into his mouth.

Chapter 33: The Wedding and the Reception

SOUP Forest was closed for a special occasion.

The reception announcing the marriage between Olivia and Arthur was held in the restaurant. They invited all the regular customers as well as Louise and Freddy.

A notice about the restaurant being closed was put on the door three weeks in advance and letters sent to Louise and Freddy.

The night before the reception, the two went about rearranging the furniture in the restaurant.

“Olivia, what should I do with these plants?”

“Can you line them all up along the wall? I think you can leave the ones hanging from the ceiling where they are.”

“I think if we’re moving the tables, we need to move the hanging plants, too. Otherwise, a lot of people are going to bump their heads.”

“Oh, you’re right. If you don’t mind moving those, too, then.”

“No problem.”

Rob walked around huffing every time they moved a table or chairs but got tired partway through the process and laid in his round bed.

After some work, the restaurant was spick and span with the tables and chairs arranged in the center into one long table.

“All right, let’s leave it at that,” said Arthur.

“I’m going to finish off the cooking.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. Normally the women of the neighborhood would help out with that sort of thing, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, but I want to serve food I made.” She’d been cooking food for the guests since the night before.

“I’ve been wondering, why do you have so many plants in the restaurant?” asked Arthur. “Must be hard taking care of them all.”

“Plants don’t lie. I find them soothing.”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess they would be.”

Olivia appreciated it when Arthur didn’t say anything more about it. He’d never acted disgusted about her ability.

Finally, it was the day of the reception, and the table was filled with food. All of the dishes were things Olivia had served at the restaurant before, but today she’d taken special care with the presentation.

As the start time for the reception approached, the restaurant’s regulars gathered with celebratory gifts in hand. There were also presents already stacked in one corner of the restaurant. They were from the people she’d helped with her medicines.

There were boxes of wool yarn, jars of honey, baskets filled with dried vegetables, handmade soaps, and a mountain of pumpkins. Some, who may have been a little ahead of themselves, gave baby blankets and little pajamas.

Joshua came with his family. His wife, Mila, made Olivia sit down as she smiled and said, “All right, time for the bride to sit down. I’ll take care of warming the food.”

Olivia was wearing a pale cream dress and the emerald pendant Arthur gave her. And, as was custom in this region, she wore a crown braided together from in-season plants. For this month, the ninth month, Olivia used white marguerite daisies.

“You know, in any normal situation, I would’ve done the cooking for you,” said Mila.

“I know, and I appreciate it,” said Olivia. “I just really wanted to serve food I cooked.”

“And I understand that. It all looks wonderful.” Mila chatted as she quickly checked the contents of the pots, warming the food while being careful not to burn it.

Arthur had only owned his everyday clothing, so he purchased a new shirt and trousers to wear for the day. He had a bundle of marguerite daisies in his breast pocket to match Olivia.

“Arthur, looking handsomer than ever in that outfit,” said Freddy. “I like your hair like that, too. I barely recognized you.”

“Enough teasing, Freddy,” said Arthur with a lopsided grin, but Freddy was honestly impressed. Freddy always knew Arthur was a good-looking man, but people generally thought of him as a powerful, well-built man before they really noticed his face. He looked very good now, though, with his crisp new shirt and gray bangs swept back.

The last to arrive was Louise. She wore a high-quality formal dress, but it wasn't so extravagant as to overpower the other guests. The impression she gave was that of the wife of a wealthy, retired merchant. Louise's personality was apparent even in that level of consideration she gave others.

Louise did visit the restaurant, about once a month, but she always contacted Olivia in advance and came after the lunch rush when things were calmer. This meant the regulars had seen Louise around, but they never would have guessed she was royalty. They generally just thought she was a wealthy old lady who liked to eat at this country restaurant.

Louise was the first to give her blessings to the couple. “I am certain Jenkins and Marguerite are with us now. I am also certain they are overjoyed to see Olivia's good fortune, as they loved her with every fiber of their being. From the bottom of our hearts, Jenkins, Marguerite, and I, wish you two newly married lovebirds happiness for all eternity.”

The older ones among the regular customers had a tear in their eyes when they heard mention of Jenkins and Marguerite. But they told each other, “Tears are forbidden at the seat of celebration,” and the restaurant bubbled with their voices.



The food was met with compliments as it steadily disappeared inside empty stomachs. Twelve bottles of the expensive wine Louise had gifted them for the reception were drained empty.

Eventually, the wedding reception came to a close, filled with joy and without incident.

The women who came as guests washed and dried all the many dishes that were used, then left with smiles as they said, "All right, time for me to head home. Thank you for the food. And congratulations!" They dragged off their drunk, cheery husbands, leaving the newlyweds alone.

"It's suddenly quiet," said Olivia.

"Yeah. I've never had anyone celebrate something on my behalf like that. My heart felt full of emotions."

"Now that you mention it, you barely ate anything. Do you want something?"

"You're right. I'll have some bread, if there's any left. I want to put some of that honey we got as a present on it. I'll get it myself, though."

"Do you mind making me a slice, too? I'll make some tea."

They faced each other, loading their bread with honey and waiting for it to soak in before eating it, letting out exclamations over how sweet and tasty it was as they did, sipping their tea between bites. Then they heard what sounded like a carriage outside. They looked out the window to see it stopping in front of the restaurant. Someone stepped out. Olivia went to the door. It was her father.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello. I'm sorry for the fuss my wife caused the other day," he said.

"It's all right. The restaurant's closed, at the moment, though. I apologize, even though you've come all this way," Olivia said.

"I know. One of my attendants has been into the restaurant. He told me about the notice and the day you would be closed. I wanted to give my congratulations on your marriage."

Arthur, from behind Olivia, was somewhat wary as he joined the conversation and said, “Why was your attendant in the restaurant? Did he come to spy on Olivia?”

“I can’t stop you from interpreting it that way, but, no. We have a gardener who has worked at our home for many years. He said he wanted to see Olivia when he overheard us speaking about her.”

She remembered then when her father said that. About two weeks ago, an elderly couple came to the restaurant, sat at a corner table, chatted pleasantly with Olivia, ate their food, and left. She believed that man was the gardener. The couple had been dressed up in their nice clothing, so Olivia hadn’t made the connection, but she now recalled faint memories of the gardener who worked at her parents’ home.

“You like animals, don’t you, young miss?” he’d say, smiling so much at her. It wasn’t like he’d taken particular care of her, but he was one of the few people in that uncomfortable home who treated her without prejudice.

“He was very happy to have been able to see you, to know you’re living a nice life,” said her father.

“I see,” said Olivia.

“My wife seems to have given up completely on you, once she heard you were going to be married. She seemed disappointed. She said she could no longer welcome you as a daughter of our family if you married as a commoner.”

“I’m very sorry, but I’m not the person you’re looking for,” Olivia said flatly.

“I know. But I was wondering if you might allow me to come here and see your face once a year. I ask for nothing more.”

Olivia managed to keep calm until that point but didn’t know how to respond to that. Would her father truly be satisfied with just seeing her? She wasn’t certain how much she could trust him. She barely knew him. They’d only lived together until she was five.

She normally avoided looking into people’s minds, but, just this once, she peeked gently in. She found it difficult to read him, since there were multiple layers of protection around his heart, but she vaguely felt regret and self-

recrimination swirling inside him.

She couldn't push him away anymore.

"Would you like a cup of tea? I can also serve you bread and honey, if you like," she said.

"Uh, yes, please. Are you sure? You must be tired after the wedding."

"It's fine. Please." She invited him to sit at the table in the kitchen then boiled water for the tea. He sat quietly at the table meant only for family.

"After we came last," he said, "I looked a little into your relationship with Duchess Arche. The woman who raised you was a famed herbologist. And the wife of a knight."

"That's right," said Olivia.

"I can tell by looking at you they raised you with love."

"You think so?"

Her father elegantly cut up his piece of bread loaded with honey and ate it. "Mm, it's lovely. I've never had it like this. Simple, but very nice."

"I think so, too."

"Olivia, I am not a good man. I became the head of our family, but was constantly scolded by my father, who was a man of many achievements. He died before I could ever surpass him in a single aspect."

"And...?"

"Now that I am as old as I am, my regrets weigh even more heavily on me."

Olivia didn't say anything. She waited for him to continue.

"I let myself do as he insisted and gave up my precious daughter. Regret has taken root in my heart ever since. Not only was I a poor son, I am a cruel father."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say."

"I don't even care if you're not my daughter. Would you please allow me to apologize? All I want to do is apologize to my daughter, who ran away into the

forest, all alone.”

He covered his eyes with a hand.

“They told me it was evening when she ran,” he continued. “The woman with her searched along with the driver until it was pitch black, but they found no sign of her. I immediately sent a tracker out the moment they reported in to me, but he was never able to find her. When he reported to me, he said she was likely dead, as there were bears and wolves in the forest.”

Olivia placed a hand on her chest over her shaken heart as she listened.

“Ever since, even though it’s been twenty years, whenever I close my eyes, I see my little girl running through the forest at night.”

“If... Just if...” Olivia began. It pained her too much to see her father cry. “If I was this daughter of yours, I think I would say something like this: I survived the forest at night when I was five. I was taken in by a lovely family, and I lived very happily. You don’t have to feel sad. You don’t have to suffer from regret anymore. I don’t hate you or Mother.”

He looked up, his face tearstained but hope in his eyes. She steeled herself to say what she needed to him.

“And I would also say this: If you truly want me to be happy, you will forget about me and move on.”

“What?! How could I possibly forget you? Why would you say something so cruel?” He was thrown into chaos, and his heart became clear to see.

“I hear the inner voices of animals and humans,” she said. “I wasn’t crazy when I was a child. I can see inside you, right now. I can see that you haven’t loved your wife for years. I can tell that you’ve developed a relationship with a red-haired woman named Rosie. That’s what I mean. Knowing that, do you still want to come see me every year?”



OLIVIA and Arthur watched the carriage leave then returned to the restaurant.

“Olivia, are you all right?” Arthur asked.

“I’m fine. I feel relieved to have said it out loud. I never mentioned my real family to my grandparents because I was trying to survive. I realized when I was just five that going back there would crush my soul. Even when I wanted to see my parents again, I would tell myself I didn’t want to return to that house.”

“Yeah... You had to handle a lot when you were five.”

“I did. It was so much.”

Arthur gently put his arms around her shoulders. While in his arms, she thought back to herself, five years old and running on and on through a dark forest.

“I’ve been like one of the animals of the forest, always so desperate just to survive.”

Chapter 34: Chestnut Gathering

ARTHUR moved into the main house after they were married. He continued working at Freddy's Pharmacy the same as before, and Freddy told him he just had to deliver the plants he gathered in the evening on the days he went foraging. It wasn't a coincidence those days lined up with the days Soup Forest was closed. Freddy did it on purpose.

Today, Arthur and Olivia were walking through the forest, he was looking for medicinal herbs and she was looking for mushrooms.

"There are so many mushrooms. Arthur, do you know much about mushrooms?" she asked.

"I only know about two or three types. One time, I ran out of food on the battlefield, so I tried toasting some mushrooms I recognized. Puked my guts up and hurt so much I thought I was going to die. I've tried not to touch mushrooms ever since."

"Poisonous mushrooms often grow near edible ones they resemble."

They chatted as he picked herbs, and she plucked mushrooms. They were headed to a large mountain chestnut tree that day. Olivia gathered up the chestnuts after they fell each year and roasted them with pork belly or chicken. It made a nice stew or side dish if you reduced the liquid and loaded it up on bread.

I can gather even more than usual since I have Arthur with me this year, she thought. She was excited thinking about what she would make with the chestnuts.

They came to their destination after walking for a while. "Here it is," she said. "Look. It's an amazing tree, isn't it?"

"That's definitely a huge chestnut tree."

"It's a fight against the squirrels and boars for chestnuts every year."

Sometimes even bears come to eat them. You can't let your guard down here."

"Then let's gather them up before a bear shows."

The two stopped talking and went to gather chestnuts. They stepped on chestnuts with opened burs and used tongs to pull out the shiny nuts inside. Once they had them, they tossed them in the baskets they carried on their backs. Rob got wind of a rabbit and raced off. He didn't return for a while.

Seeing chestnuts reminded Arthur of his family. As he gathered the nuts, he wondered how hard it must have been on his parents, having two children who weren't old enough to work.

He eventually pulled himself out of his memories and looked up, his eyes going round when he saw Olivia. She was sitting on one of the tree's roots, nuts from her basket held out on her palm.

"Go on," she said. "It's the mountain's blessing. Go right ahead. I see you, too, over there. You're welcome, too."

She was smiling and talking to squirrels. Arthur realized they were all over the place.

The squirrels seemed nervous but unable to resist the chestnuts Olivia had removed from the burs. One inched closer to her and took a chestnut from her hand, then, having seen that, the rest of the squirrels clambered all over her for their own go at the chestnuts.

She's like a mountain goddess, thought Arthur, finding himself enchanted by his wife until he thought, *Uh-uh. I need to focus on gathering chestnuts.* He focused his eyes on the ground, but they were soon drawn back to Olivia because of how much fun she seemed to be having, apparent in her heart, voice, and body.

"We should probably head back soon," she said after a while. "We need to leave some of the chestnuts for the boars."

"You're right. Let's go home. Oh, by the way, Olivia... I am looking forward to whatever nice things you make with these, but I'd like to have some just boiled."

“Sure. They’re nice and soft like that. And boiling them with a pinch of salt really brings out the sweetness.”

They walked side by side, both reaching to hold the other’s hand. They didn’t talk, but they could feel each other’s hearts slightly. Olivia was thinking about cooking the whole time, while Arthur was remembering his family, surrounded by boiled chestnuts.

Olivia could sense Arthur’s memories. She saw a family working hard for each other, as closely tied to each other as a pack.

She thought back to her father’s expression when he learned that his daughter could read minds. It was a look of anger that started when she told him to forget her, and he couldn’t understand why she would say that. That look froze in place when she said the name of his lover. It then turned into shock. By the time he left, there were hints of fear. She doubted he would come back to see her.

It’s for the best, she thought. Both sides will be in pain if we get involved with each other, forced to endure each other. I don’t want to restart relationships I know will slowly eat away at my heart because I know I’ll come to hate them in the end.

Hedgehogs and wild birds didn’t maintain a relationship with their children once they were done rearing them. If the children ransacked the parent’s territory, the parent would chase them away with full force, even if they were their own child. There was no resentment there, no thoughts of, *Oh, but you’re my mother, or How could you? You’re my child...*

“I really should have been born an animal,” she said.

“You’re thinking about your dad?”

“Yeah. I know I caused it, but finding out for certain that I was the sort of thing that caused my parents fear and disgust, well, it was a little painful to bear.”

“I’d be in a hard spot if you were an animal. What would you want to be anyway?”

“A deer, I think.”

“You can’t forget the golden deer, can you?”

“No. Wait... Arthur, are you jealous of a deer?”

“No. I’m not jealous.”

“You are. I can feel it.”

“You know, Olivia, I’ve been thinking of mentioning this, but you know a buck mates with loads of does, right? And once the doe’s pregnant, the buck leaves and has nothing to do with raising the fawn. I’m not like a deer!”

“Huh, is that true? I’ve only ever seen deer in pairs.”

“That’s just a coincidence. I’ve seen a buck with a group of doe plenty of times in the mountains.”

“One husband to many wives... No, I don’t think I’d like that.”

After a little bit, Arthur gave an embarrassed smile. “What are we even talking about?”

“I know. We’re human. And actually, I’m glad I’m human. It means I met you.”

“I’m glad, too. I have no clue what I’d do if you were a hedgehog or a deer.”

Olivia couldn’t hold in her laughter when she imagined Arthur living with his hedgehog wife. “Let’s have boiled chestnuts and chestnut stew for dinner tonight.”

“Sounds good. And you’re laughing too much, Olivia.”

As they walked hand in hand, Rob—who’d come back when Olivia whistled for him—was having fun walking around them, panting the whole time.

This is so peaceful, thought Arthur.

It really is peaceful, isn’t it? thought Olivia.

Before they realized it, they were having an inner conversation with each other.

“Convenient, isn’t it?” said Olivia.

“I can call for you without shouting.”

“Hm, yeah, but I barely sense your inner voice when I’m focused on

something. Besides, up until now, I've tried my best not to look into other people's minds."

"Yeah. But I'm thankful that we can understand what the other one is feeling. I'm not exactly great with words."

I even like that about you!

Arthur blushed when Olivia's inner voice reached out to him and said that. "No fair, attacking when I'm off guard," he said.

"Fine, I'll just tell you with words."

He looked away in his embarrassment, but he loved her from the very bottom of his heart.

When they got home and Olivia was preparing the stew, she thought of the golden deer. He had told her over and over that she was human. She'd only taken that at face value, but now she understood a "mate" to a deer was not the same as to a human.

"That's right. Humans and deer are different. I want to be someone's everything, and I want to be that person's only companion. That, to me, is a true mate."

That evening, the restaurant served chestnut and pork belly stew, a leafy salad with carrot, and bread. The customers raved over autumn's blessings.

"Eating this really makes me realize autumn's here," said one.

"I serve it every autumn," said Olivia.

"This takes me back. You season it just like Marguerite did. It's so good," said another.

"I'm glad you like it," she replied.

When she and Arthur ate their dinner, memories that made her smile kept flowing from him. He associated chestnuts with pleasant memories of his family.

"So good. Chestnuts make me think of my hometown," he said.

"I can tell. It's nice having good memories associated with food. Let's make

the flavors of our own memories from here on out.”

“With how good you are at cooking, I think our memories will be filled with flavors.”

They ate together and slept together. Their life was peaceful and serene. Olivia hadn’t felt that at ease since her grandparents died.

Olivia and Arthur were currently using her grandparents’ room as they redecorated it. It was already a spacious room, but Arthur had recently started building a lofted area.

“At night, you stay downstairs to read or do your sewing and stuff,” he said. “Cause you don’t want to bother me, right?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid the light from the lamp will wake you.”

“But I get lonely if you’re not nearby. I want to be in the same room. If I use all this space up to the roof, I can make you an area up there in a loft. Then we can be near each other even if I’m sleeping.”

“That sounds nice.” She smiled. It was sweet to hear a big, strong, skilled swordsman like Arthur was lonely without her. Then a thought struck her. “I’d like to go to your hometown. I want to see your family and tell them we got married.”

While they talked, Olivia saw Arthur’s memories of when he buried his family, all by himself. How must that have felt? She worked to keep a smile on her face. The memory was so painful she felt bad for looking.

“We can do that,” he said. “But you’d have to close the restaurant for at least ten days, considering how long it’d take to get there and back, even if we get a carriage.”

“I don’t mind. I just have to put up notice in advance. Will it be all right with work at the pharmacy?”

“Freddy did say I could take a break, since you only get married once.”

“Then let’s do it. Let’s go to where you grew up.”

“All right. I’d like to show you the lake where I learned to swim, and the forest I used to run around.”

“It’s decided, then. I want to tell people about the restaurant being closed, so, should we do it in three weeks?”

“Sounds good to me.”

The two went upstairs and opened the window in the bedroom. They stood there, looking out to the blackness of the nighttime forest stretching out far into the distance. A cool autumn breeze came in through the window, rustling Olivia’s hair as it passed by.

An owl called in the forest, and insects chirped in the garden.

“I’m looking forward to our trip,” said Olivia.

“Me too. I have to show off my wonderful wife to my parents and sister.”

She looked up at him and smiled, and he gently pulled her closer.

Side Story 1: The Grandparents' Wish

ONE day when Olivia was ten years old, her grandfather was about to set out.

"Grandpa, where are you going today?" she asked.

"Into town, to Marlowe. Come with me to go shopping."

Olivia's expression turned gloomy when he mentioned town. She was afraid of people's hearts. If there were a lot of people, she could hear a lot of inner voices, which made handling Marlowe difficult for her.

"You hate town?" he asked.

"I don't hate it, but I like home better."

"I see. But, Olivia, here's the thing. The clothes you're wearing, the pots and dishes in the kitchen, even the meat and bread we eat all came from Marlowe."

"Hmph."

"Me or your grandma buy them now, but once you grow up, you're going to have to take over that job."

Along with his words, Olivia could sense his inner voice saying, *I wish I could be with you forever, but I can't*. At ten years old, Olivia understood what that meant.

They're worried about what will happen to me after they move on to God's garden, she realized, feeling sad. "Let's go together," she said.

"That's a good girl."

Marguerite, her grandmother, saw them off. She rode with her grandfather on his horse. It was a fairly old horse, but it adored Jenkins. Olivia could feel thoughts of, *Happy, happy!* because it was being useful.

Their first stop was the butcher.

"Welcome, what can I get for you today?" asked the butcher.

"Some pork, please. Marguerite gave me this," said Jenkins, handing over a list. The butcher went into the back for a moment then returned with a large hunk of meat.

"Six pounds pork leg and twelve pounds beef shin. Is that all?"

"And two chickens, please."

"Sure thing." The butcher brought over two plucked and cleaned chickens.

His heart was calm, and Olivia couldn't feel anything from him. She was just feeling relieved when she heard it.

Ah, for the love of God, my back itches. Just grit your teeth through it. Can't really go scratching your back in front of customers. Agh, I think something bit me. This itch just won't go away.

Olivia kept quiet the whole time, hiding behind Jenkins while she waited for him to finish shopping. They went outside and Jenkins went to put Olivia back on the horse. "Right, next is the general goods store. Need a spool of white thread, and two spools of black."

"Grandpa, can I go back into the butcher's for a second?"

"Sure, go on." He tried to ask if there was something she wanted to buy, but she was already inside.

"Um, excuse me. Please use this," she said, a small tin can an inch and a half across sitting on her little hand. The butcher took it and unscrewed the lid. Inside was an ointment with a crisp smell.

"What is it, miss?"

"Anti-itch cream. You said you had an itch earlier."

"What? I did?"

"Yeah."

"Is this some of Marguerite's medicine?"

"Yeah. I always keep it with me because she said to use it immediately after getting bit by an insect."

"You sure I can have this? I appreciate it. Once I finish it off, I'll go see

Marguerite and pay for it.”

Olivia nodded then ran back outside to Jenkins.

They continued on, visiting four stores in total while Jenkins showed her the names and locations of the different shops, as well as how to order things. Once they got back to their home on the edge of the forest, she went out into the garden and watched butterflies and ants.

“Thank you for doing the shopping,” said Marguerite to Jenkins.

“Marguerite, Olivia gave some medicine to the butcher. I can’t figure out why she’d do that.”

“Did she?” Marguerite looked inside Olivia’s satchel which was hanging from a hook on the wall. “I don’t see her itch cream.”

“Hm. The butcher didn’t say anything.”

Three days later, the butcher stopped by Jenkins’s Diner.

“Marguerite, that itch ointment your little lady gave me worked wonders. It’s still a tiny bit itchy though, so I was wondering if I could buy some more.”

“Of course. Here it is.”

“Gosh, I still can’t believe I said my back itched in front of customers. Must’ve just slipped out. Then the little miss took care of it. Feeling a bit sheepish, now,” he said with an embarrassed smile.

Jenkins watched him go from the window as he stirred the soup. He turned to Marguerite, an odd expression on his face. “Hey, Marguerite, could you come here for a second? Where’s Olivia?”

“She’s gathering plants in the forest nearby. What’s wrong? Is there something you don’t want her to hear?”

“I’m absolutely certain the butcher didn’t say anything about an itch. Positive. Am I overthinking things by imagining she has some special ability?”

Marguerite’s expression didn’t change as she listened quietly to her husband.

“You don’t seem surprised,” he said.

“I’ve thought the same thing several times. I was also wondering if that was

why she seemed so reluctant to go into town. And, actually..." she said, showing Jenkins a cut on her left forefinger. "I accidentally cut myself, but I definitely didn't say anything out loud. All I did was quickly wrap it in a towel and apply pressure. But the moment I thought, 'Ow!', Olivia came running down from upstairs, her face white as a sheet."

Jenkins took the pot off the fire and sat at the table across from Marguerite. "Now that you mention it, something similar happened to me. I was with Olivia in the forest and all of a sudden she said, 'I don't want to go that way.' But she wouldn't say why."

"What happened?"

"There was a wolf, its fur stood on end and growling at us. We'd gotten too close to its den, and it had pups. But the den was on the other side of a thicket that I'm certain Olivia couldn't have seen over."

Marguerite pressed her hand to her forehead and closed her eyes. "Jenkins, why did you keep such a serious event secret from me?"

"You would've worried if I told you. And nothing happened, in the end. Don't be angry about that now. Besides, that's not the point I'm trying to make. I'm trying to say—"

"That maybe Olivia can hear the inner voices of people and animals?"

Jenkins blinked several times. "You think so, too?"

"Jenkins... Animals are one thing, but would you like to constantly hear what people are really thinking?"

He looked his wife in the eyes, then slowly shook his head. "No thank you. Just imagining it gives me chills. I don't want to know what goes on the depths of people, to hear things that aren't held in check by common sense and logic."

"Maybe that's why Olivia ran away from home. What sort of life would it be in a noble house for a child who could hear everyone's true feelings?"

"Probably depends on the parents, but if it's anything like I imagine it...every day would have been suffering. Her heart would never get a break. She'd learn to fear humans."

Marguerite quietly sipped her tea. “Maybe that was the suffering she was running from that day. Maybe why she kept saying, ‘Don’t send me home. Let me stay here.’”

“We can’t ever lie whenever we’re dealing with her, can we?”

“We can’t. And we absolutely cannot tell anyone else about this. Not even Freddy.”

“I know.”

Later at dinner, Marguerite made a suggestion. “Hey, Olivia, why don’t we get a pet cat or dog?”

“Why?” asked Olivia.

“I just thought you could use the company. All the customers here are adults. There aren’t any children in the area your age.”

Olivia stopped chewing her venison stew and stared at Marguerite. Marguerite felt a little uneasy, like those emerald eyes were piercing right into her very soul. They said emeralds held the power of the spirits. What if this girl had the power of the spirits too? It was very unlike Marguerite to think something like that, but she couldn’t help it.

“I don’t need a pet,” said Olivia. “Dogs and cats don’t live very long.”

“Not as long as humans, no.”

“I’d want to be with them when they died, but I wouldn’t want to.”

“All right... As long as you’re not lonely.”

“I’m not. I have you and Grandpa. I don’t need friends. I don’t need a cat or a dog. I don’t need anything. I’m fine so long as I have you two.” There were tears in Olivia’s eyes.

“Oh, dear. I see you’re fine without friends or a dog. I understand. Don’t cry. I’m not going to force you to get a pet if you don’t want to.”

“But you tell me to go to Marlowe even though I don’t want to.”

“Yes, we do. Do you understand why?”

Olivia shook her head.

“We humans need to interact with other humans to survive. You need money to buy things, and you need to interact with people to get money. You, too, will have to interact with people in order to survive.”

And you’ll be on your own when we die, Marguerite found herself murmuring in her mind.

Silent tears streamed down Olivia’s face, a lump of venison still in her mouth. Marguerite pulled her into her arms as fat tears fell from Olivia’s cheeks. *Oh, look what I’ve done now,* she thought, angry at herself.

“Humans do bad things, but they also do good things,” she said. “So, I don’t want you to avoid all people. I’d like you to be able to live with someone other than us, someday.”

“There’s no one else I could live with.”

“There is, I’m sure of it.”

“No, there’s not!”

“Ah, Marguerite, try not to make her cry so much,” said Jenkins. He took Olivia in his arms and put her on his lap. “There, there, don’t cry. Me and your grandma are still full of life. We’re going to be here for a while longer. And I’m sure you’ll find someone you can live happily with.”

“Really?”

“Yep, really. Someone who’s a perfect match for you will come along. You’ll know when you meet them. The first time I saw Marguerite in the castle, I knew I was going to marry her.”

“Really? Just by seeing her?”

“Really. I knew right away. Olivia, if you find someone like that, don’t let them get away. Be nice to them.”

“All right.”

Olivia seemed in a better mood after that and went back to eating dinner.



WHEN Olivia was fifteen, she found a badger curled up in the front garden. It

looked like it was wasting away.

“When a wild animal is injured or weakened, the ticks on it will move to humans in search of blood,” said Marguerite. “I know it seems mean, but we can’t bring the badger inside the house.”

Olivia nodded without saying anything. Marguerite used the word “weakened” rather than “dies” to avoid upsetting Olivia.

Olivia always did as her grandparents said. She placed an empty box under the shelter of the woodshed’s roof, then lined it with a rag. She put the badger in there and began looking after it constantly.

She applied a salve to the bite wound from some animal on the badger’s hind leg and poured water in a dish which she put to the badger’s mouth to make it drink.

The badger stayed curled up, refusing to consume anything but the water.

Four days later, Olivia said she wanted to feed the badger soft meat. Marguerite gave her some unseasoned boiled chicken, which Olivia immediately took out to the badger. It scarfed down the chicken.

Marguerite had believed the badger was beyond saving, but strength slowly came back to its eyes, it developed an appetite and, two weeks later, trundled off into the forest.

“You must be sad to see it go,” said Marguerite.

“No. The badger was happy to go back to the forest. Probably,” said Olivia.

“I’m sure it was happy.”

“Grandma, I want to learn more about medicine. I want to learn all the ways it can be used. I want to help the animals who come to me and ask for help.”

“All right. I’ll teach you everything I know. But in exchange, I want you to learn about treating human illnesses, too. Humans and wild animals are the same. I want you to be the kind of herbologist who will go to people who are suffering.”

“Herbologist? Me?”

“Yes. You can’t be a herbologist just by learning about medicine. You’re only a

herbologist once you learn about both humans and medicine.”

“But I’m not good with people.”

“Even so, Olivia. I don’t want you to be afraid of them. I want you to see how incredible humans can be.” Marguerite clasped Olivia’s hands in hers.

“I’m not good with people... I wish I’d been born an animal,” muttered Olivia, seeming pained.

Marguerite swallowed back what she was going to say. *No matter what the nature of the pain this child has been forced to bear is, I want to heal it with my love*, she thought, stroking Olivia’s soft hair.

The moment she did, Olivia smiled and quietly said, “Thank you, Grandma.”

Side Story 2: The Fox who Hates Humans

WHILE her grandparents were still healthy, Olivia loved winter because she could go fishing alone. The neighbors would string up nets in the frozen river and wait for fish to come, but Olivia didn't use nets.

Fish were less likely to bite in winter, but they were still alive and therefore still needed to eat. Fishing wasn't entirely impossible because of that. Olivia would break open a hole in the ice, warming herself by a bonfire, then drop her hook in the water and kill time waiting. She normally read a book, waiting for the jingle of the bell attached to her pole that indicated she'd gotten a bite.

Just like every other day, she was sitting near the fire reading, being careful not to let her precious book get wet. She'd made significant progress in her book when the bell jingled.

She fished up a trout and laid it out on the snow, then waited for the next jingle. It was a leisurely time for her, though unclear whether she came more for the reading or more for the fishing. Either way, animal voices flowed into her mind during this sort of time.

Want eat, want eat, want eat.

It was a hungry animal. Its eyes were locked on Olivia's trout lined out on the snow.

"I wonder who that is," said Olivia. She looked around. Wild animals weren't always easy to spot. She was wary, assuming it watched from the forest. A wolf would target her over the fish.

The wolves of this forest knew to fear humans. They wouldn't attack one unless the situation was extreme. But sometimes, and in some cases, they did. There were times a wolf attacked a person after being unable to catch rabbits or deer for whatever reason.

"Perhaps I should head home," said Olivia. She left putting out the fire for last. She pulled out her fishing line, placed the four trout she'd caught in a

bucket, carefully stowed her book in her backpack, then put out the fire.

Want eat.

Olivia scanned the forest again, guessing where the voice's owner might be. She saw a flash of brown. It had stronger red tones than a wolf would. A fox. Olivia squinted and her eyes met the fox's.

Hatred and memories suddenly flooded into her. She saw a fox, in pain, a steel trap biting hard on its leg. She felt aching emotions. This fox's mate was caught in the trap. It stayed nearby, sad, refusing to abandon its mate.

"I'm sorry. That's a hunter's job. I'm sorry," said Olivia. She knew the fox wouldn't understand what she said, but she found herself saying it anyway. She even knew that animals hunted in the forest would simply say, *Like I care?*

Olivia took a trout from her bucket and placed it on the snow, avoided looking at the fox, and left the riverbank.

For a while after that, she made an effort not to go back to the river. If the fox started thinking fishers gave it fish, a fisher with a hunting rifle might kill it someday.



SPRING came. The snow on the roads melted, along with the ice on the river. The forest was bursting with life once more.

"Olivia, want to go fishing with me?" asked her grandfather.

"I do! I want some pan-fried trout."

"You do like your pan-fried food."

"Yep."

There was no way she was going to be attacked by an animal while with her grandfather. Wild animals seemed able to tell he was strong.

They used worms they found in the vegetable patch that morning as bait and fished up twenty-four trout between the two of them. Each of them carried a heavy bucket as they walked back home.

Olivia realized the fox was watching them, but it didn't seem like it would

approach because of Jenkins. She assumed her grandfather wouldn't notice the fox if she didn't say anything.

But he kept looking behind them and asked, "Olivia, have you ever given food to a fox?"

"Uh... Yeah. A fish. Just once."

"It's not good to give wild animals food. I think we've got a fox stalking us."

"I'm sorry. I thought one fish couldn't hurt."

"You shouldn't do that again."

"I won't."

Olivia was a good girl who didn't break the promises she made with her grandparents, but there was a reason she broke this one later.



"**I'M** going to chop wood," said Jenkins one day. Once back, he kept sighing.

"What's wrong, Grandpa?" asked Olivia.

"I lost the pocket watch your grandma gave me. I took off my coat while I was chopping wood and set it on a stump. By the time I looked, my pocket watch was gone."

"Did someone steal it?"

"No. Not a human, anyway. There's no way I wouldn't notice someone coming that close to me. I was in a clearing. I looked everywhere nearby, but there was no sight of it."

"I'm sorry, that's terrible."

That pocket watch had been a gift from Marguerite for Jenkins's sixtieth birthday. Olivia had gone with her to help pick out which one they thought was best. It was a fairly high-quality item, and Jenkins cherished it. He cared for it every day and always carried it on him.

"It might've been a crow," said Jenkins. "Oh well. I'll just look around there whenever I'm in the area."

Marguerite smiled and tried to cheer him up. “Losing a watch is better than being attacked by a wolf or a bear, don’t you think? I’ll buy you a new one for your next birthday.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I appreciate the thought, though.”

Starting the next day, Olivia went into the forest every day and asked each and every animal she encountered if they’d seen the pocket watch. She went around asking tits, jays, sparrows, squirrels, and rabbits as she called images of the watch to her mind. But they didn’t reply.

If they remembered seeing it, they would have responded. It seemed like none of them had.

“It’s no use...” said Olivia. She’d gone into the forest every day for two weeks, but she never encountered an animal that reacted to her mental images of the pocket watch.

One day, Olivia went a little deeper into the forest than normal. She asked a squirrel in a beech tree, *Have you seen a pocket watch?*

Seen, came a response, but it wasn’t the squirrel.

“Who is that? Where are you?” She quickly scanned the area and saw the fox she’d given the trout to. “Where did you see it?”

This way.

With that short answer, the fox turned around. That was enough to tell Olivia it wasn’t wary of her. She hurried after it.

“Hey, how far are we going? I can’t go too far into the forest. Wolves are scary,” she said, and the fox briefly turned to look at her. She had no idea if it understood her or not, but it just turned back and kept going.

“Oh no. I’m scared to go any further. Maybe I should give up,” she said, but thought, *But if I can find the watch...*

She kept following the fox.

Eventually, it stopped.

There, it said and looked up into an oak tree.

“Ah!” There was a tree hollow up high with a small piece of golden chain dangling from it. “How’d it get up there? A squirrel?”

The fox’s memories immediately flowed into her. A small, slender body. A marten. Foxes hunted martens.

The fox had chased the marten until it raced up the tree and into the hole. The fox looked up, watching the marten go with frustration. That’s when it saw the chain.

“Thank you for showing me,” said Olivia. “I want to give you a thank-you, but I only have a bit of bread. Is that good enough?”

She took the bread wrapped in cloth from her satchel and tossed it to the fox. It caught it in its mouth and instantly disappeared.

“Oh. Left already? Oh well. I guess you got what you came for. I should hurry home. I might get attacked if I’m all the way out here alone.”

She wanted to remember this location, but would she be able to by tomorrow? She wasn’t confident she could, since it was her first time here.

“Ah,” she said, pulling her knife from her bag. “I’ll leave marks on the trees with this on my way back. Then I can show Grandpa the way.”

She wanted to get home quickly, but she also wanted to make it so she could find the location of the pocket watch again, after having searched all this time. She hurried to cut chunks of bark off trees, not knowing when an animal might attack.

The forest was nearly dark. If she didn’t hurry, it would get so dark she wouldn’t even be able to see the ground she was walking on.

She worked hard at leaving marks on trees until she was back to a location she knew. By the time she got home, it was so late you couldn’t go walking outside without a lamp.

“Olivia! Where were you? We were looking everywhere for you!” said her grandmother.

“I found Grandpa’s pocket watch.”

“Really?”

“But it was high up in a tree. I couldn’t get it back. I can’t show you the way until the sun comes up again. I’ll show you the way tomorrow.”

Marguerite and Jenkins exchanged looks, their expressions frightened.

“Olivia, where exactly was it?” said her grandmother. “How far into the forest did you go?”

“Um... Quite far.”

“I thought I taught you not to go too far into the forest alone,” said her grandfather.

“...I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been going into the forest every day for a while now. Have you been going that far each time?”

“No. Today was the first day.”

“Then why’d you go that far today?” asked Marguerite, but Olivia couldn’t answer. She couldn’t very well say, “A fox told me it saw the pocket watch.” She looked down, looking sad.

“I think we’ve chided her enough, Marguerite,” said Jenkins. “It’s my carelessness that ended up with me losing the watch anyway. Thank you, Olivia. But next time, get me to come along with you when you want to go deep into the forest, all right?”

“All right. I’m sorry, Grandma, Grandpa.”

“Well, tomorrow we’ll go to find it together. Do you remember where it was?” asked Jenkins.

“Yeah. I left marks on the trees with my knife as I was coming back. That’s why it took so long.”

“Ah. I’m just happy you’re safe. But, Olivia, I want you to remember one thing: As much as I treasure that pocket watch, I treasure you more than a huge pile of a hundred pocket watches. If you got attacked by an animal just because of my pocket watch, well...I...”

“I’m sorry, Grandpa!”

“It’s all right, as long as you understand.” Jenkins went back to his usual smile and hugged Olivia.

The next day, Jenkins made preparations for climbing the tree, then Olivia showed him the way through the forest.

It was all this way? thought Jenkins. He had good reason to be surprised. The pocket watch was over a mile from where he lost it. And up high in a hole, on top of it.

This girl surprises me every now and again, he thought, but he didn’t say it. He threw a rope up into the tree and climbed while holding onto that. The pocket watch was undamaged, safe from the rain because it had been inside the hollow.

The hollow looked like it had, up until recently, been the home of a great spotted woodpecker. He recognized the white down spread across the nest, as well as the mottled black-and-white feathers next to red ones. The nest was empty even though it was too early for the chicks to have left the nest.

Did something eat the woodpecker’s chicks and bring the pocket watch in here?

He slipped the watch into his pocket and quickly slid down the tree.

“Thank you, Olivia. It’s thanks to you I got my watch back, and in good shape, too,” he said.

“I’m glad.”

“I wonder what was using the hollow as a home.”

“A marten. ...I think.”

“Ah, a marten. They do like that sort of place. Did you see one?”

“I did. I guess.”

Jenkins was curious about her stammered answers but didn’t press her any further. He’d learned from experience that if he pushed her for the hows and the whys in this sort of situation, she would just look frightened and uneasy.

“All right, let’s head home. This isn’t the sort of place we should be hanging

around for long. You're not to come this far again on your own."

"I won't, Grandpa."

That evening in his bedroom, Jenkins disassembled the watch and cleaned it, which was when he found several hairs tangled in the chain that did look quite a lot like marten fur. "It was a marten, after all," he said. "Why'd it take my pocket watch?"

"Even wild animals can be full of curiosity," said Marguerite. "There are all sorts of humans, after all. I'm sure there are all sorts of animals."

Jenkins put every last tiny part of the watch back where it belonged, checked to make sure the hands were moving, then closed the lid with a snap.

"Marguerite. Normal methods don't work when you're raising a kid, do they? Olivia's a good kid, but there are still some days where I feel like she's going to give me a heart attack."

"I know what you mean. If a girl like Olivia terrifies us this much, just imagine how much shorter our lives would be if we'd been given a mischievous child."

"Far shorter. I guess God gave us Olivia knowing how old we are."

"Probably. I was thinking the same. Raising Olivia makes me want to believe God is real."

"Me too."



OLIVIA saw that fox again later when she was in the forest, but she remembered what Jenkins said and didn't give it food. The fox waited for a while, but eventually left, likely deciding it wasn't going to get food even if it stayed longer.

"This is for the best," Olivia told herself. She couldn't give food to the meat eaters of the forest. It would only make things more dangerous for them in the end.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

She watched it go like that on several occasions, and eventually it stopped

coming to her.

Later, the fox would grow old and be unable to hunt for itself. Starving, it would come to Olivia's home, where its actions would result in three lives being saved. But that wouldn't happen for several more years.

Afterword

I started writing *Soup Forest* after seeing news of war every single day.

The COVID pandemic had already left me exhausted from not being able to see others, and then war started. It made me feel like I was going to be crushed by dark emotions and with nowhere to express them.

“It’s exactly times like this when I want to read something that soothes the soul,” I thought.

“I want a story about a kind person, sharing kind emotions with someone, going around to all sorts of people in various settings, like spreading a wave of kindness and compassion,” I mused.

“I’ll write a story about a good person living a simple life, a woman who can hear the hearts of animals and humans. I want to show the small, treasured moments in her normal life,” I pondered.

And it was from that desire that *Soup Forest* was born.

The protagonist, Olivia, grows as she’s soothed by the straightforward hearts of animals, while struggling with the complex hearts of humans, living her life at a distance from other people. She only opens her heart to animals and the grandparents who raised her.

Olivia is scared of people, but she definitely doesn’t hate them, and she doesn’t attack them, because she can see the true reasons why others hurt her. At a young age, she learned that everyone’s words and actions were motivated by something. That’s why she never hates or attacks the people who hurt her. In order to protect her heart, she just puts distance between them and herself.

Despite that, she quickly opens up to Arthur not long after meeting him. He’s gruff and clumsy, but sincere with a horribly wounded heart. After accidentally seeing inside Arthur, she couldn’t just abandon him. She reached out a hand of salvation, asking nothing in return, but found the doors to her own heart opening in the process.

Olivia kept her own heart shut despite being able to see others’. Arthur

became a mercenary in order to survive but was unable to endure the damage it did to his heart.

And all sorts of people watch over the two of them. All the characters are connected through the delicious taste of homemade soup.

Marguerite, Olivia's grandmother, who loved her so deeply, wished that one day Olivia would be able to open her heart and trust others. And surely, that wish will come true someday.

Please take your time and enjoy this story, where Olivia, who had always wished she'd been born an animal and suffered because of her ability, joins hands with Arthur and begins a life where she starts to look towards the future.

Muni kindly created the incredible illustrations for this book. I'll never forget how emotional I felt when I first saw the completed cover illustration. I remember thinking, "This is the *exact* essence I was going for!"

It was moving to see vague images in my mind take on such a clear form. It gave me goosebumps.

There's the inside of Soup Forest, the sort of place that makes you feel nostalgic, the detailed plants and animals of the forest, Olivia and Arthur with peaceful expressions. I was relieved to see they weren't wearing broad grins, as this is a story of them living while being hopeful for tomorrow despite the scars and painful memories they carry. Muni, I want to thank you so much for picking up on my intentions and giving them this form.

I hope that, not only do you pick up this book when you want to feel at peace, but also that you pick it up when you are in pain or tired, and that this story can give you that small courage you need to live to see another day.

On this lucky day, March 2023.



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