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The Tea Dragon Tapestry

The third
story in the
award-winning
Tea Dragon
series

Katie O'Neill

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The Tea Dragon Tapestry





FOR

**Frank, Jane
& Michael**





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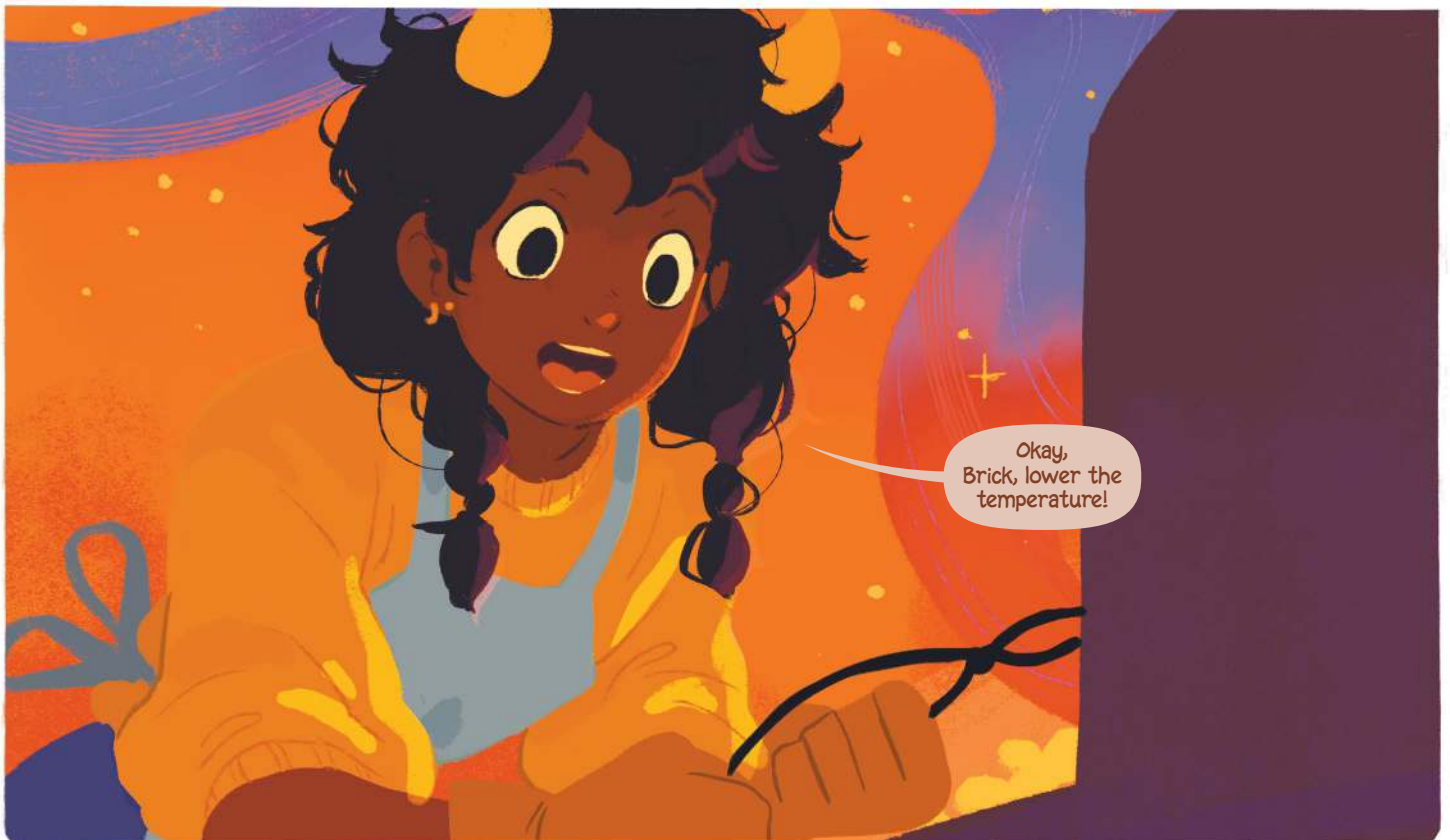
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Chapter One











Maybe the
fire is a bit
scary...

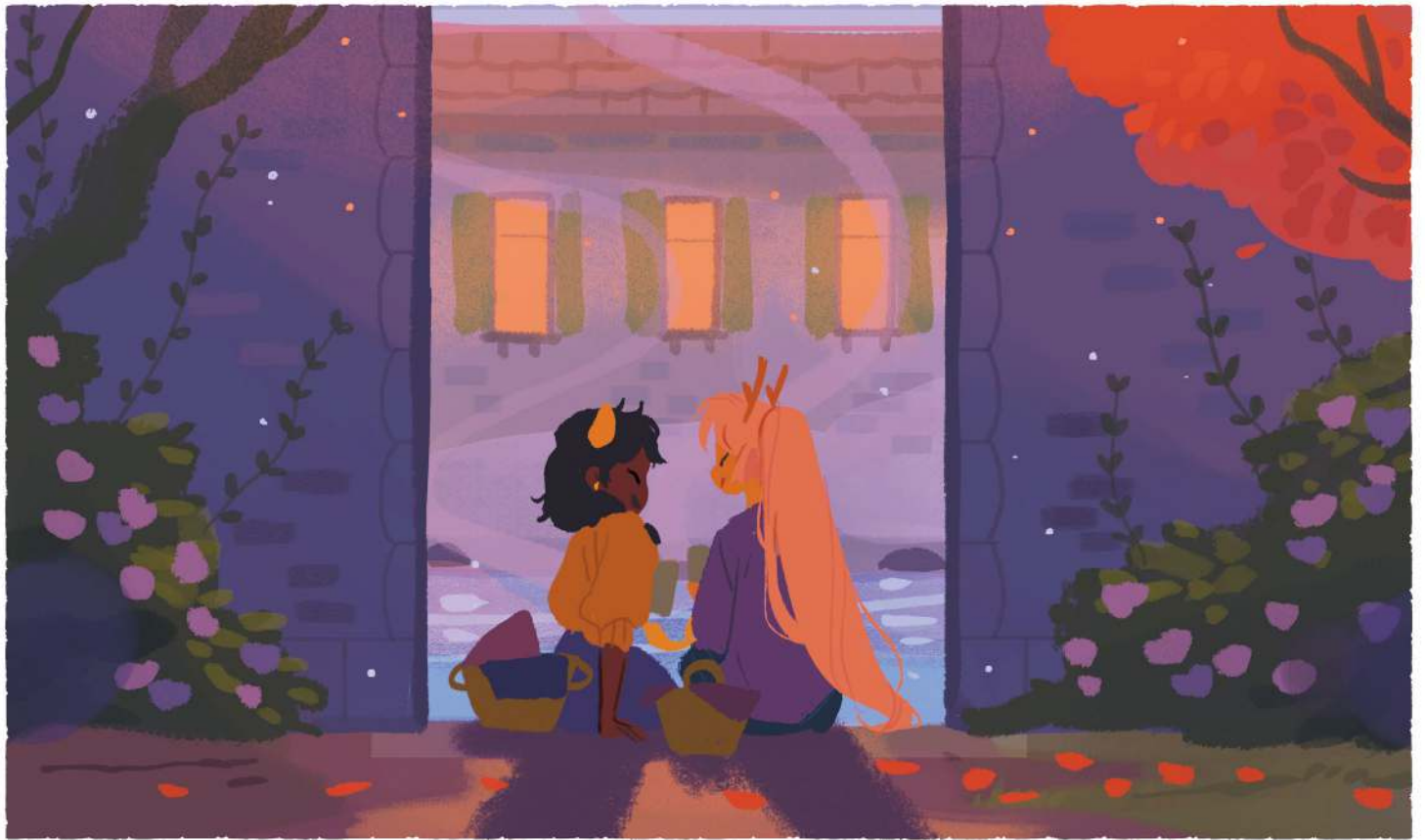
But don't
worry, Ginseng,
Brick is a coal
sprite! He protects
everyone in the
forge.

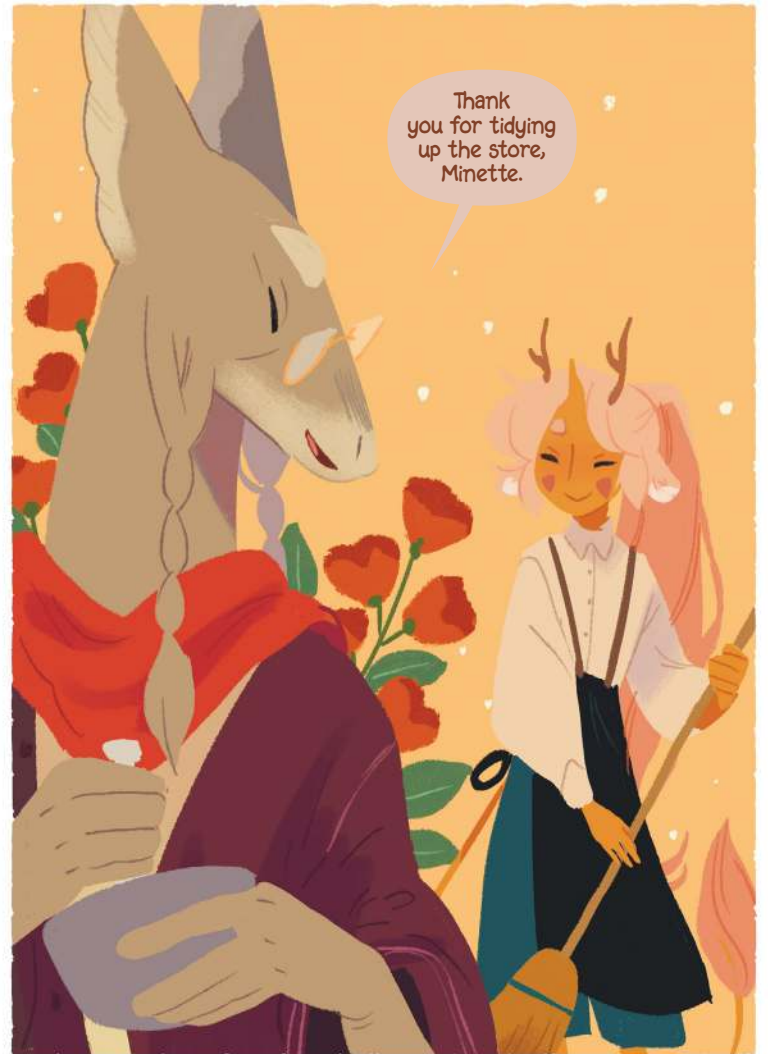


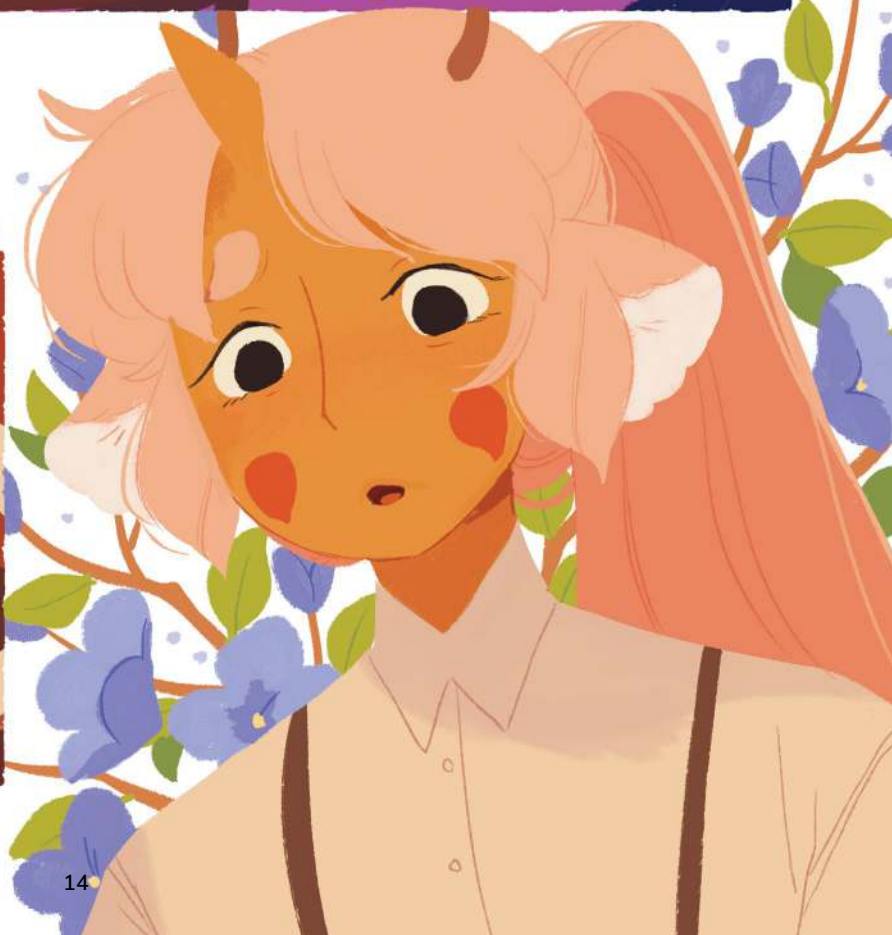
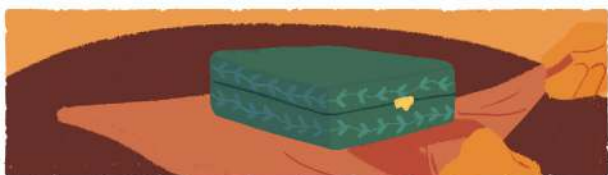
Is Ginseng still
not interested in
blacksmithing?













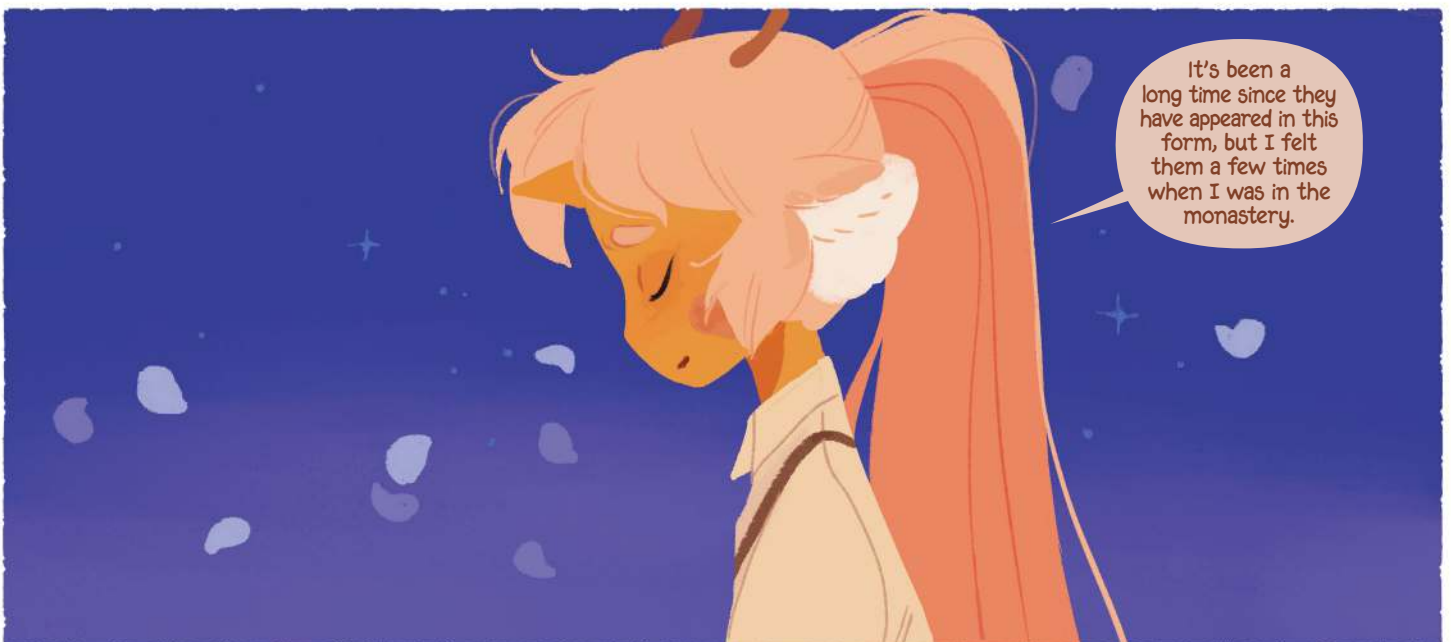
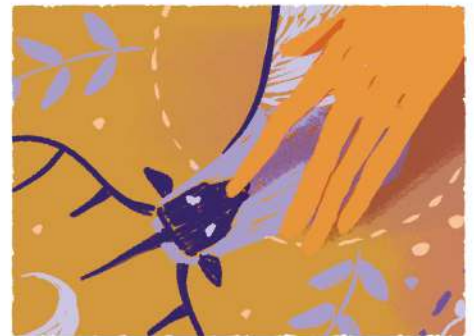
It's very detailed. Were you working on this as part of your discipline training?



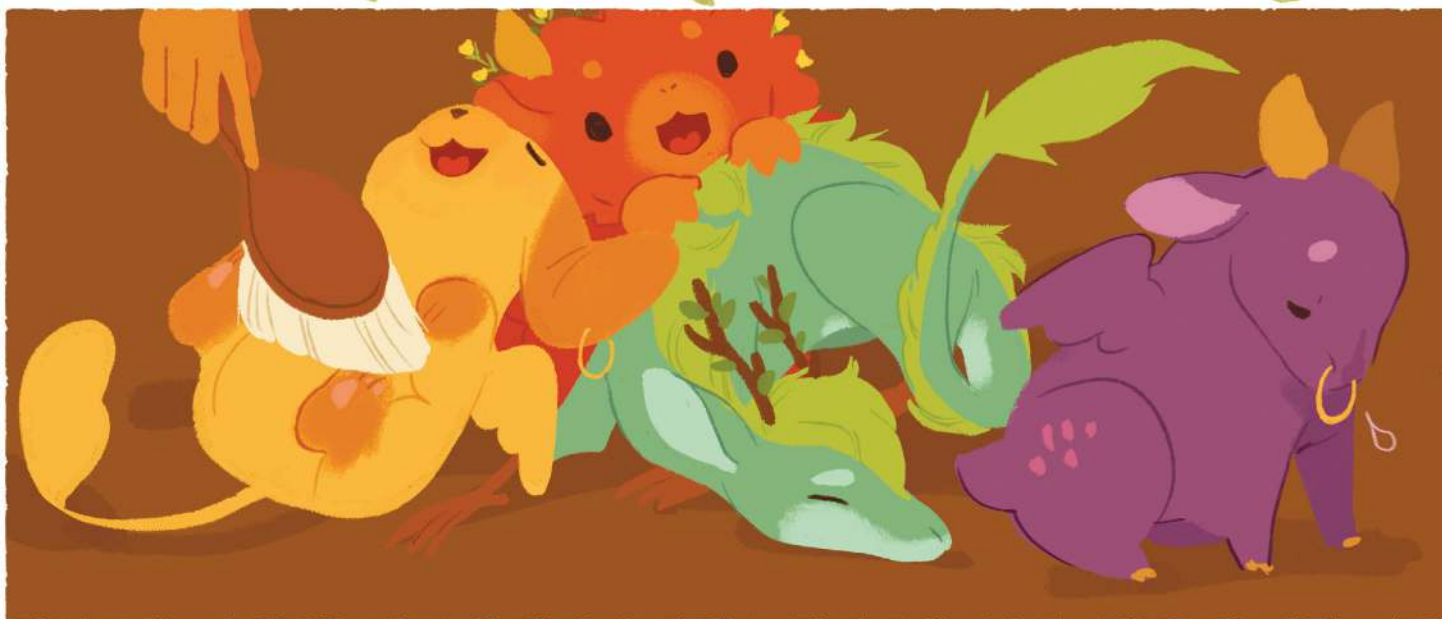
No, this was for fun.



This is the Ancestor, who loves and protects my people. All our daily rituals and prayers were dedicated to them.



It's been a long time since they have appeared in this form, but I felt them a few times when I was in the monastery.







Hesekiel...
is it normal for
a Tea Dragon to go
this long without
growing back any
tea leaves?

It's been
over a year since
I started looking after
Ginseng, and I feel like
she hasn't gotten
any closer to
regrowing her
leaves.



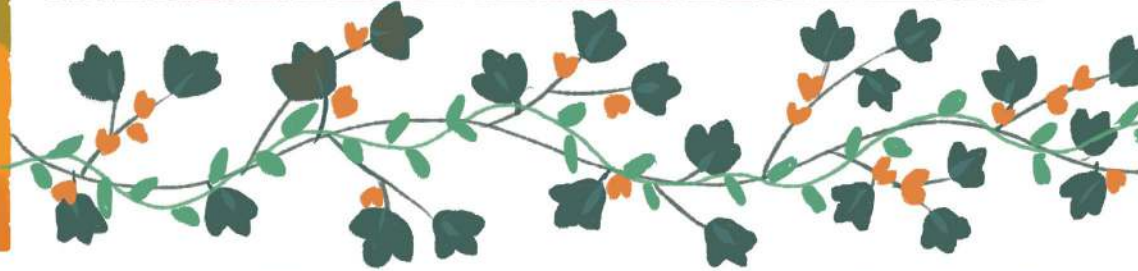
I know it is
hard to witness.
But Tea Dragons have
an extremely strong
bond to their
caregivers.

When
they shed their
tea leaves after their
passing, it is an expression
of shock and grief, as well
as their private way of
mourning that
person.



Every
Dragon is different,
too. And Ginseng
Dragons are known
to be very
loyal.

You're
doing a great job,
Grets. Just keep at
it, it's okay for it
to take some
time.





Kleitos!



Greetings.
My goodness,
you two really
did retire to
the country.

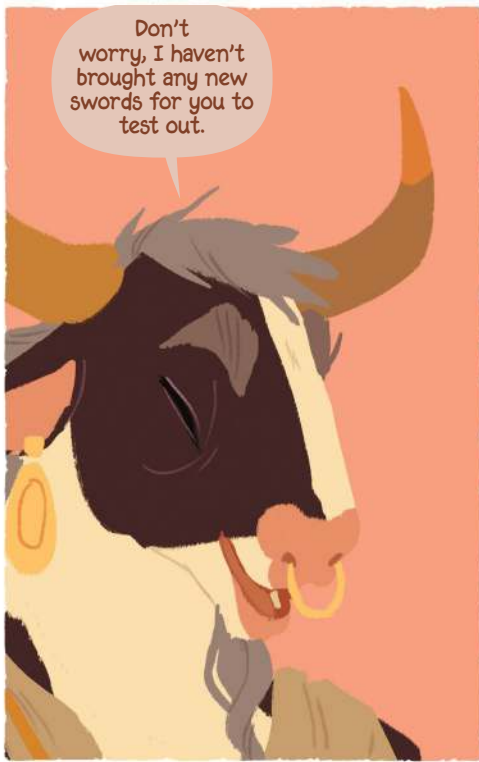


I would
think you'd be at
home in a bit of
pasture!



If you two
are going to start
sparring, please do
so outside of the
shop.

There
are a lot of
breakables in
here.









Chapter Two

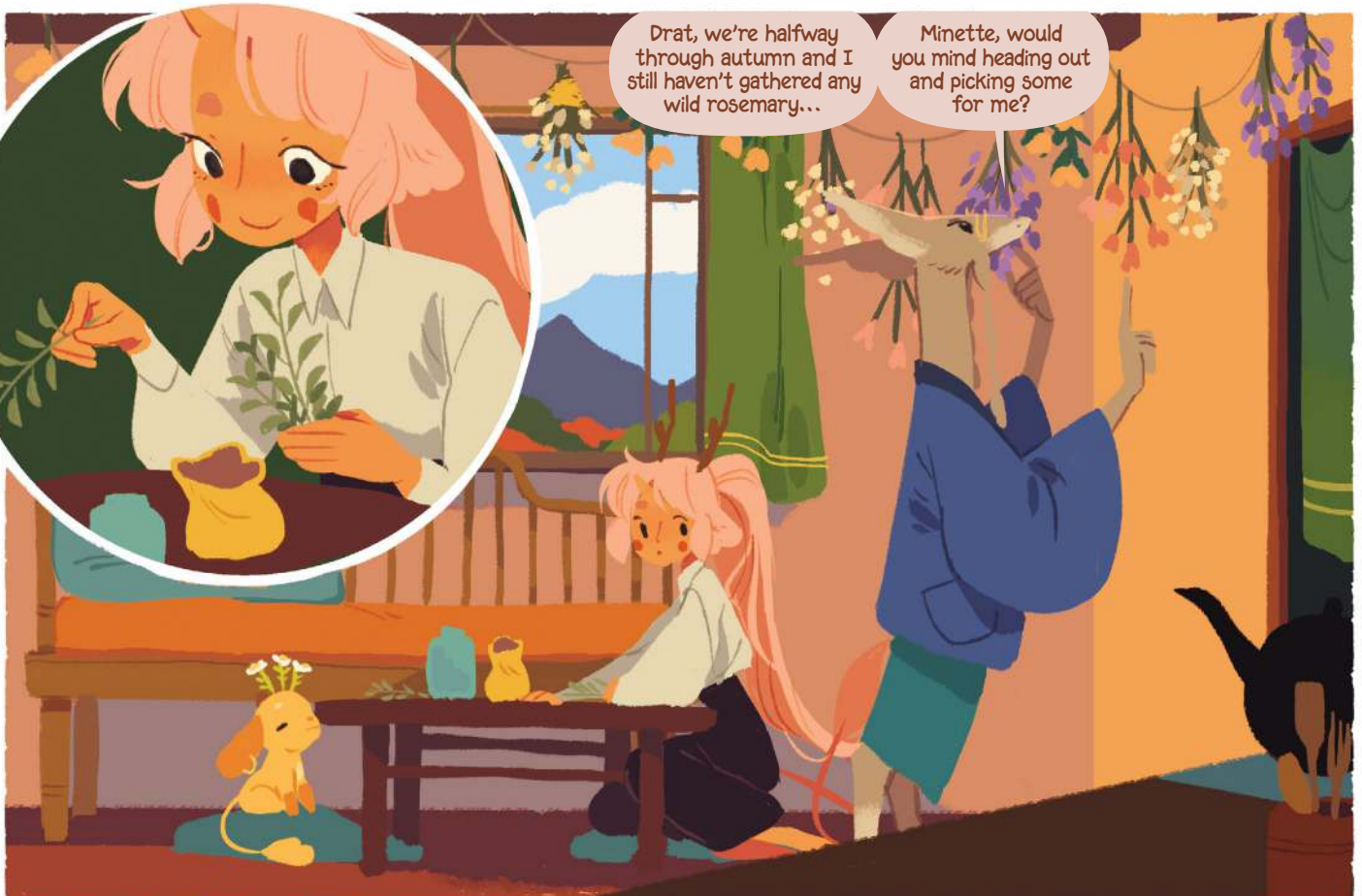


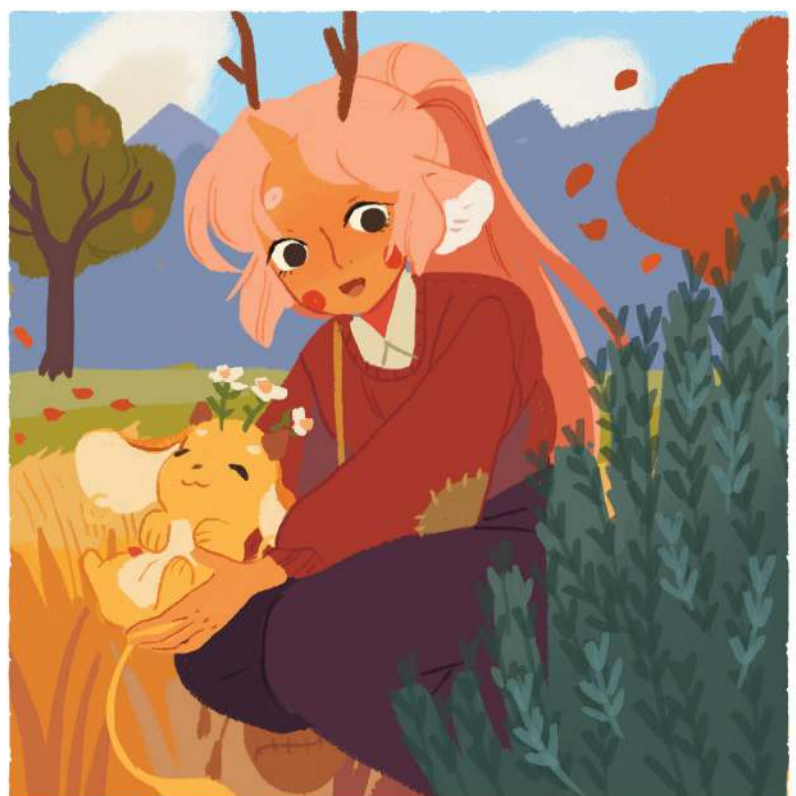
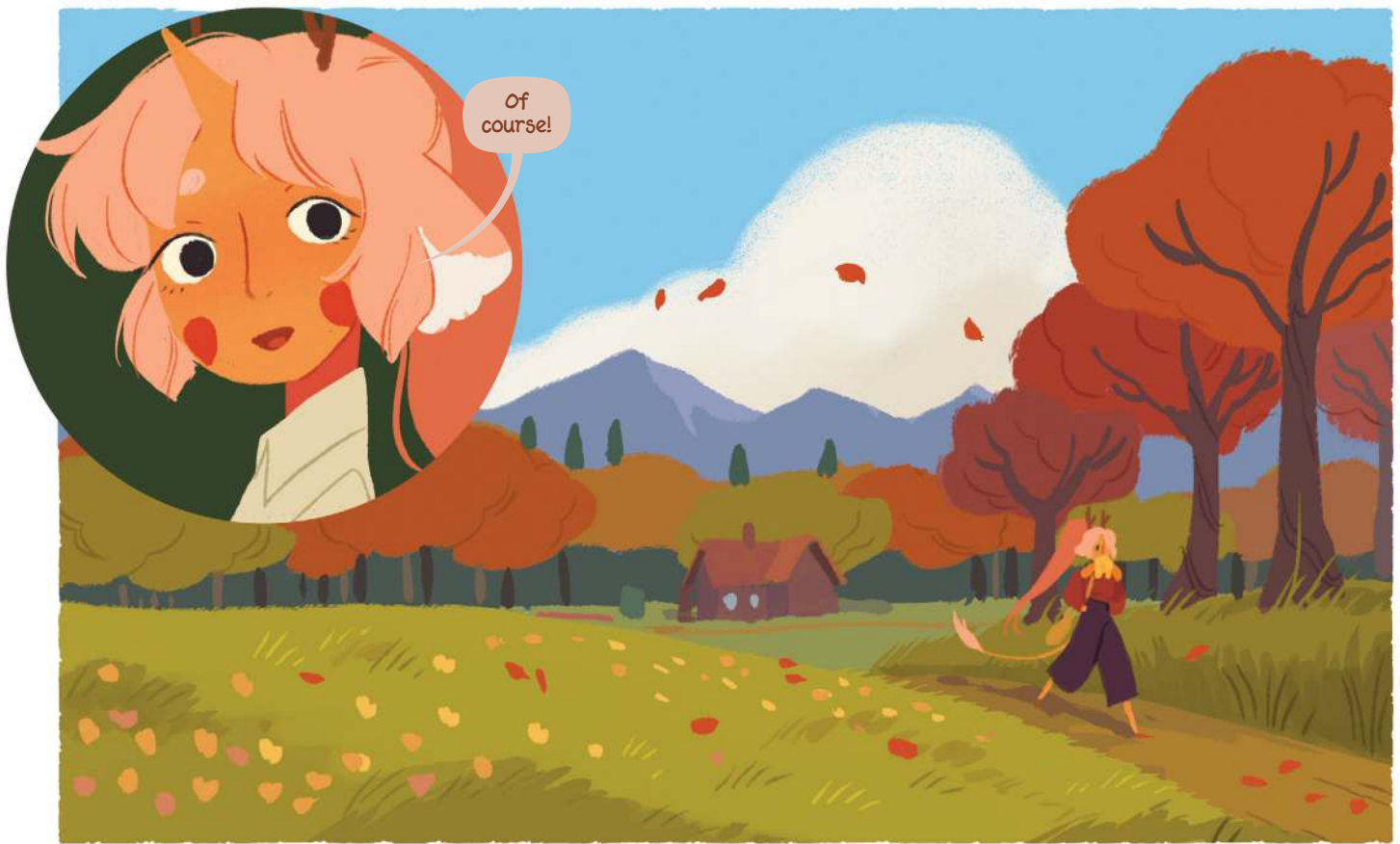


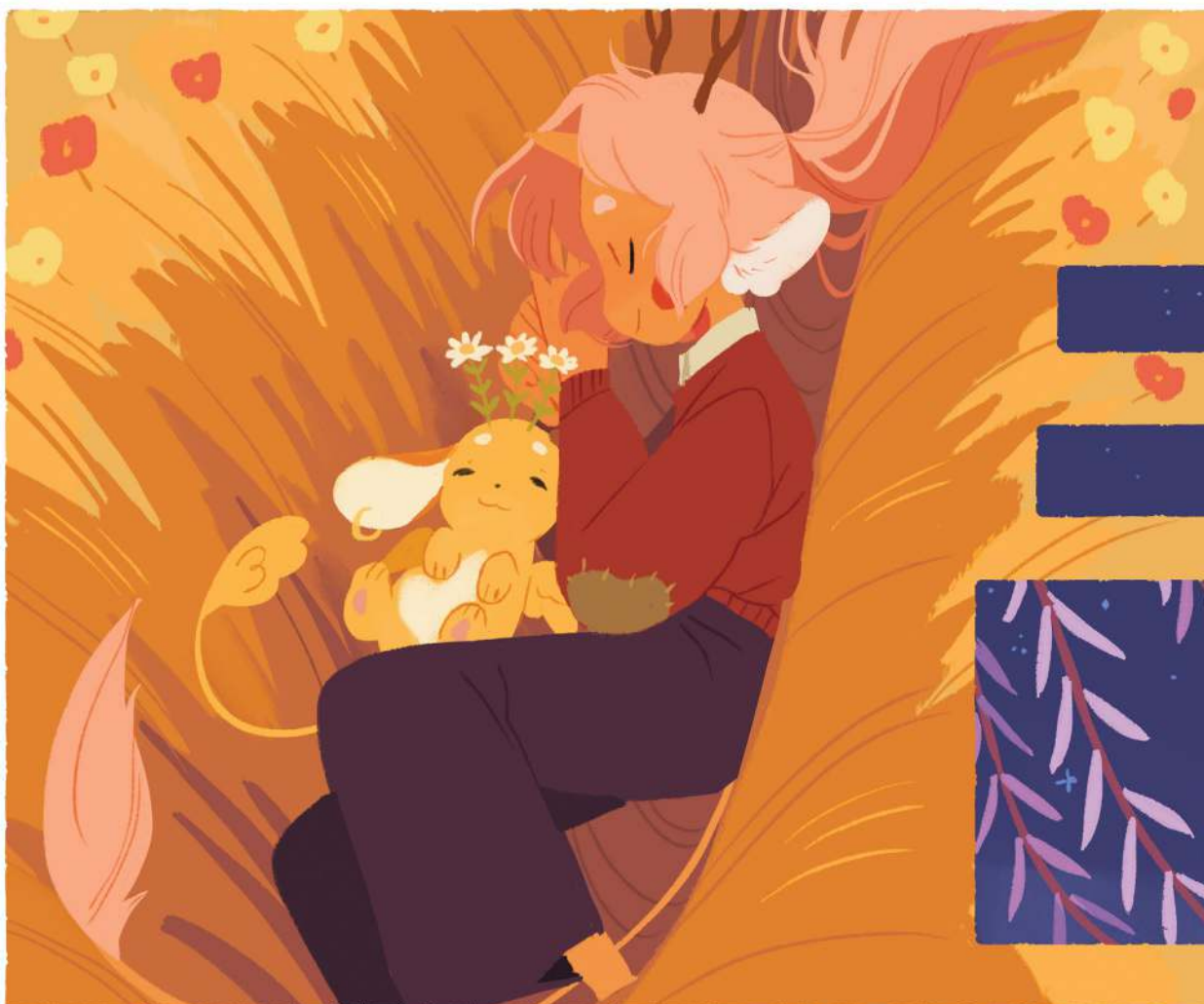


Drat, we're halfway through autumn and I still haven't gathered any wild rosemary...

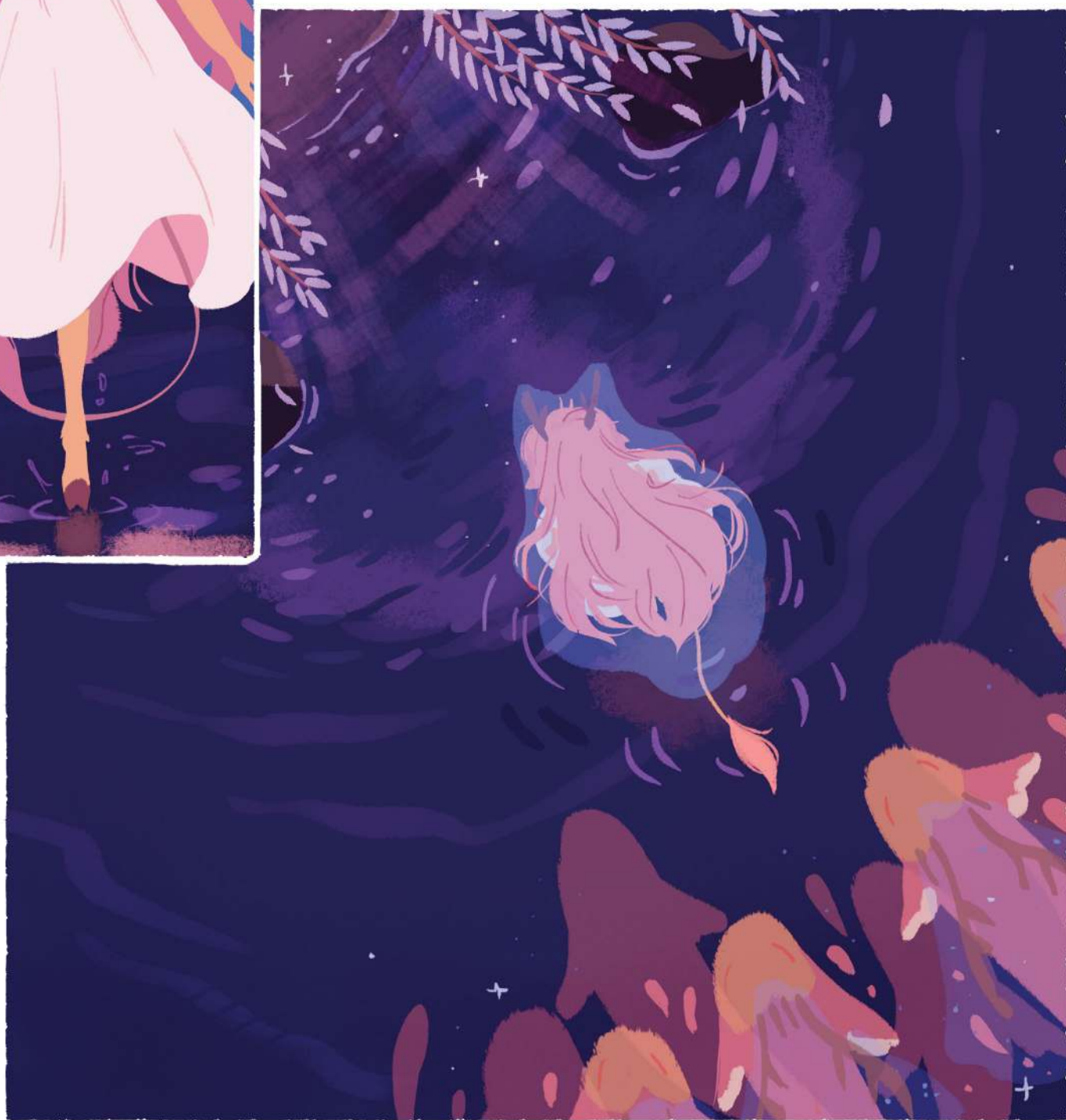
Minette, would you mind heading out and picking some for me?

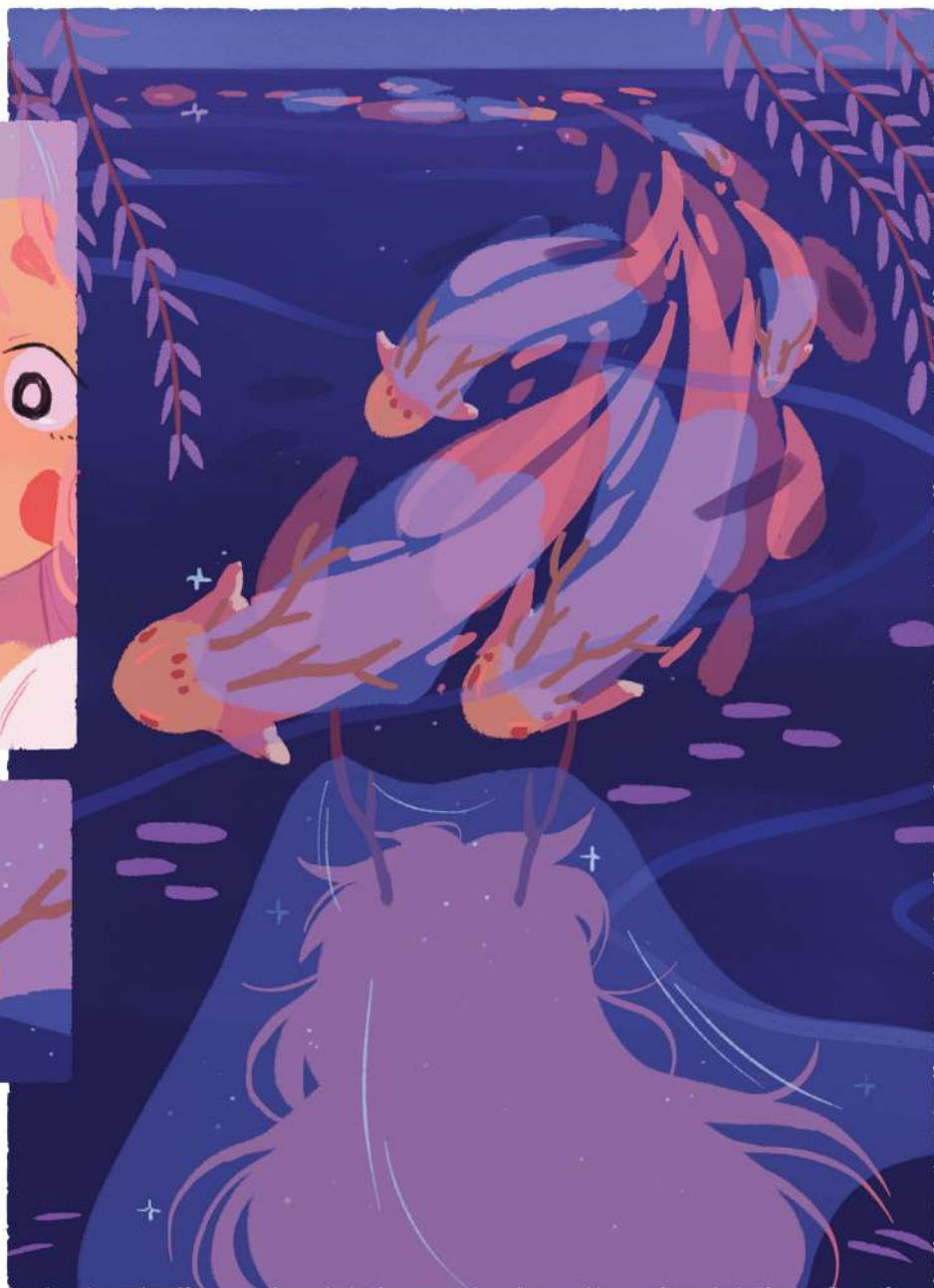




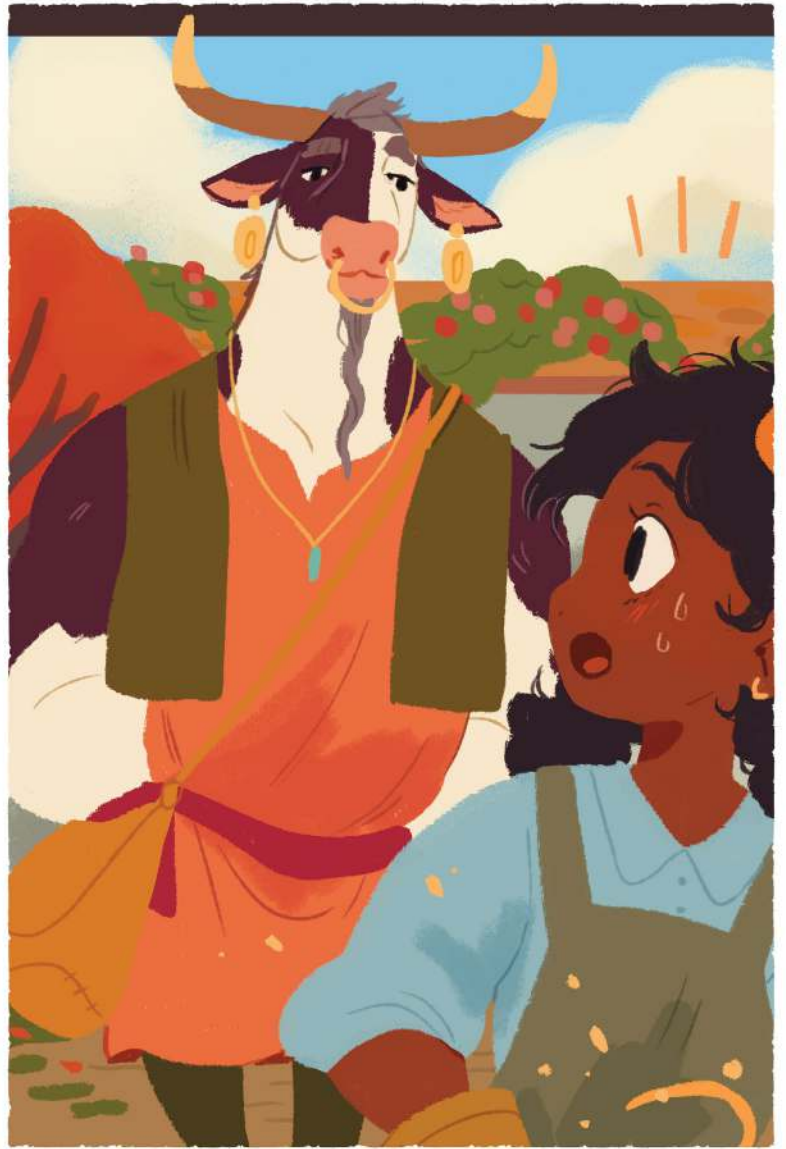
















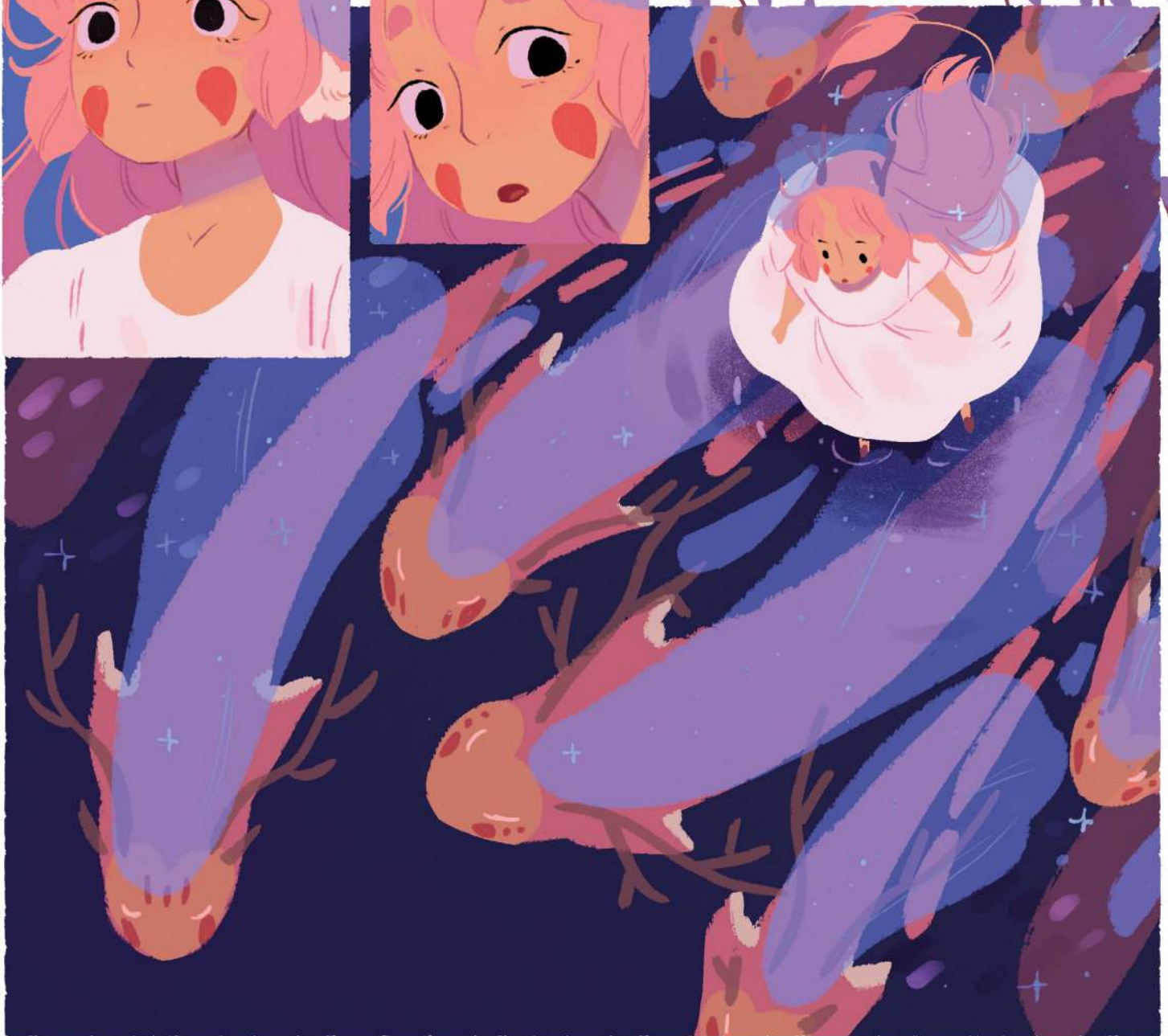


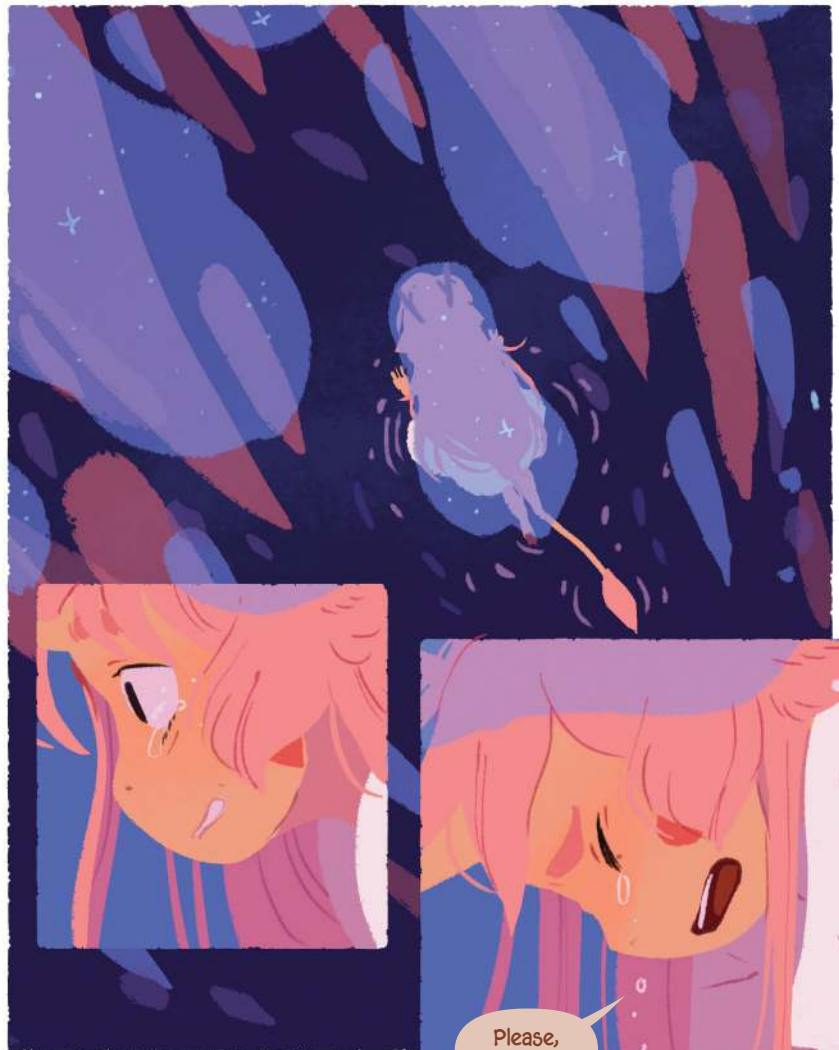














Chapter Three













I have never understood why Tea Dragons follow chickens around like that.

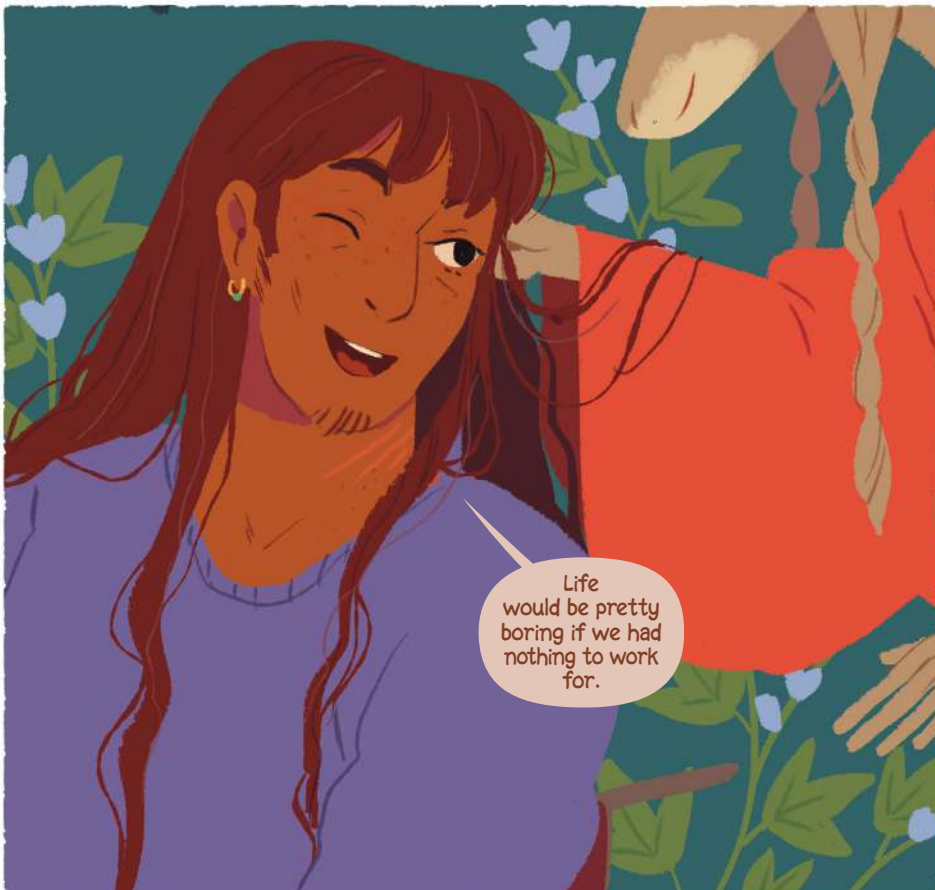


They seem to look up to them-- I reckon they think the chicken is a very nonchalant Tea Dragon.

Rooibos is a bit of a fan.



You have such a green thumb.









Very elegant, as always.

Thank you. I am glad to be passing the knowledge on-- Minette, who lives here, spent time in a monastery and has a knack for ritual arts.



I'm glad to hear it. A good apprentice has been hard to find.



Do you think perhaps you are being too picky?

You, who had to test if Erik was good enough for a sword before you would sell it to him.



Perhaps....



In truth, I have not felt excitement for blacksmithing for many years, and that has made it difficult to find the will to teach.





That is natural, when you have been doing something for such a long time.

Then what changed, that brought you here to seek Greta?



Something about this piece interested me.

It made me feel, for a moment, envious of someone who had the freedom of mind to make something that existed purely for its own sake, just to create a joyful object.



You do not feel that?



It's amazing what cages the mind can build for itself!



I see....

I think Greta would be just the apprentice you're looking for.

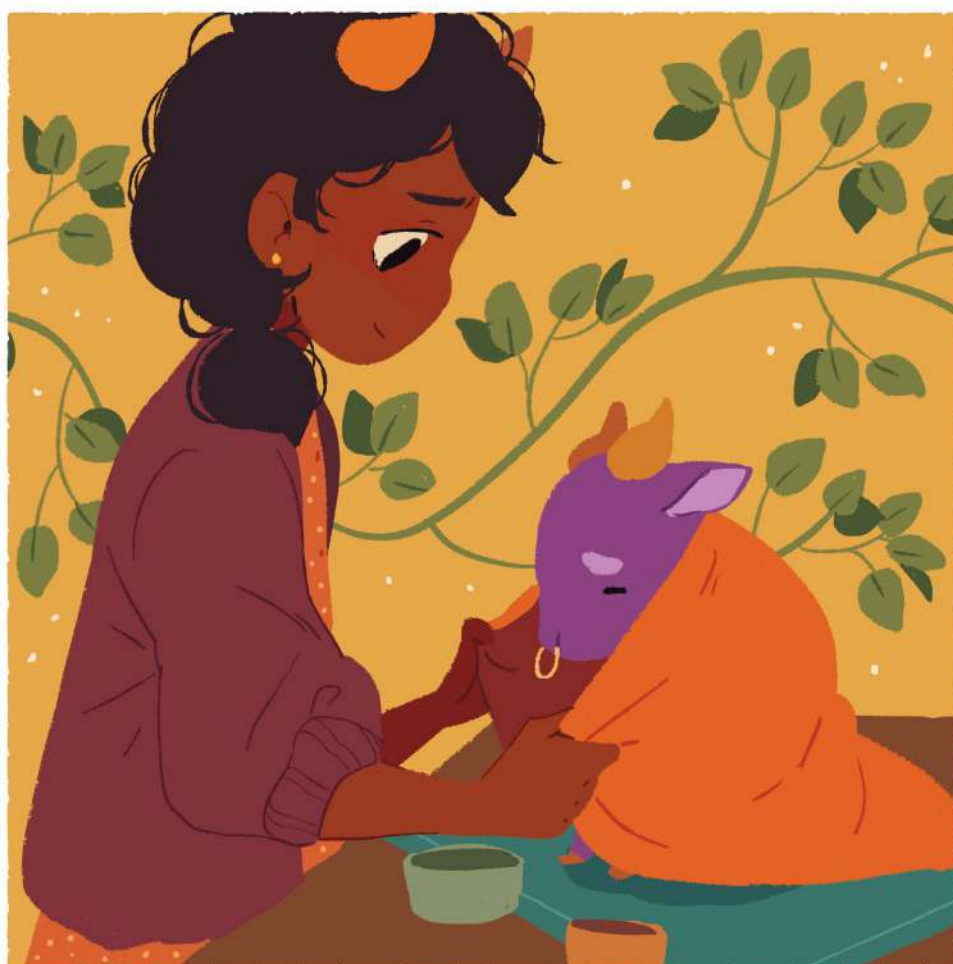


So now we've tried the warm thistle milk, the oats and berries, the honey carrots and the pickled figs....

And I think that's the last of the list of her favourite foods that Hesekiel passed on to me from her previous owner.

Maybe she's just not hungry right now.

She's still eating fresh salad leaves and a bit of vegetable broth, which is what Hesekiel recommended.







Do you miss them? Erik could take you for a visit to the monastery if you wish.

I do, but it's not that.



I don't have many memories of that time, but I do know one feeling.

It was like a warm hand in mine, the feeling of knowing my purpose and what I lived for....

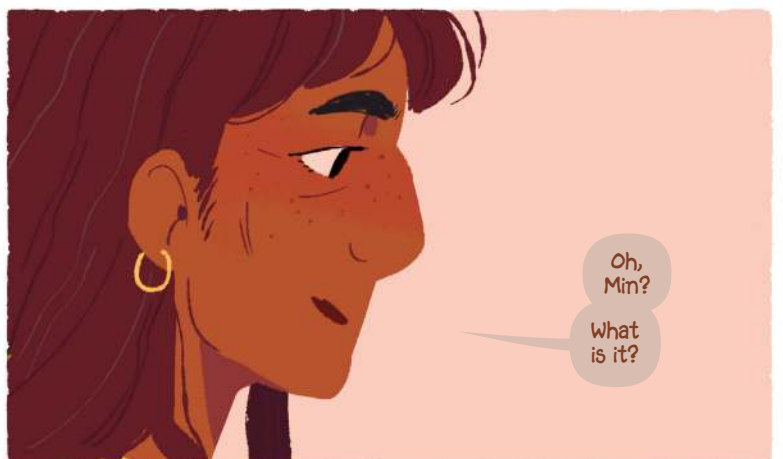


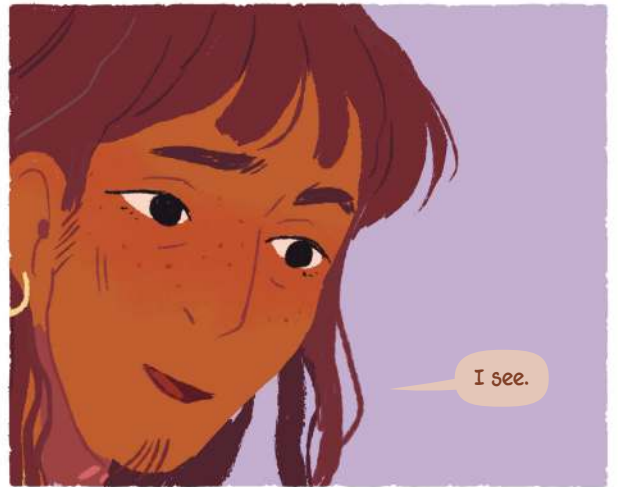
I don't have that anymore.



If there is anyone who knows how it feels to have their life's purpose change in a drastic way, it is Erik.


I'm sure he would be happy to listen.









Once I'd regained my strength a bit after my injury and gotten used to the chair, Hese and I did keep on adventuring together for a while!



I was fixed on that being my sole reason for living. I just wanted to get back on that path.



But those months spent quietly here in the tea house, pulling weeds, cleaning and rebuilding the place, stayed with me.



Over time, I looked more forward to coming home than leaving. I realised my new purpose was building a home for Hesekiel and me.







Chapter Four







Oooh,
how about
a custard
tart?



We're
supposed to be
finding something
Ginseng likes, not
you, Greta!















...So I decided to take over the merchant journey from Mama and Papa.

It was time for them to relax, and this way I can travel and seek new foods and places, with a home to come back to.



And you are still enjoying your life in the mountains?

I can't imagine living anywhere else. I only came along this time because Rinn mentioned they'd pass by you.



I'm glad you did! It's good to see you both.

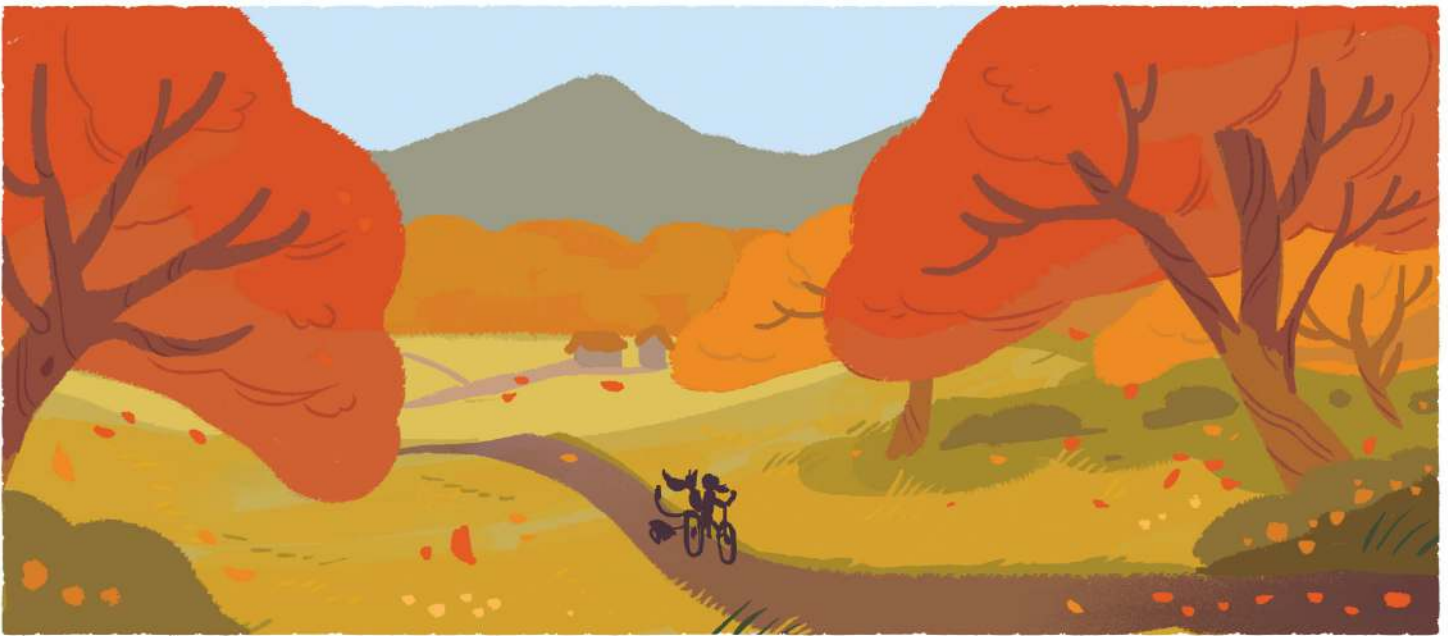
You'll be staying a while?

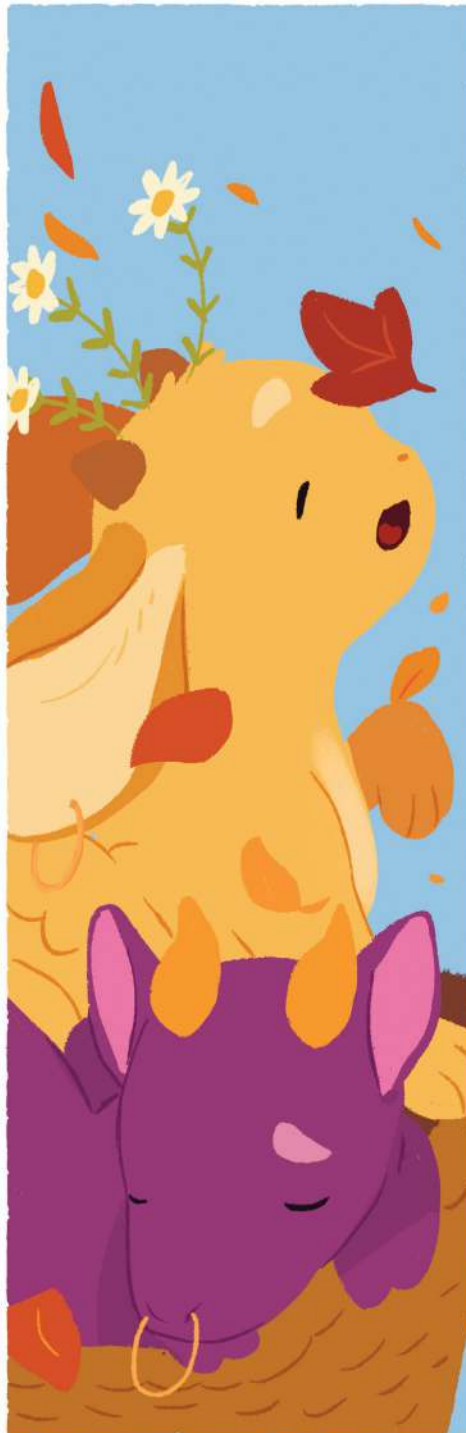


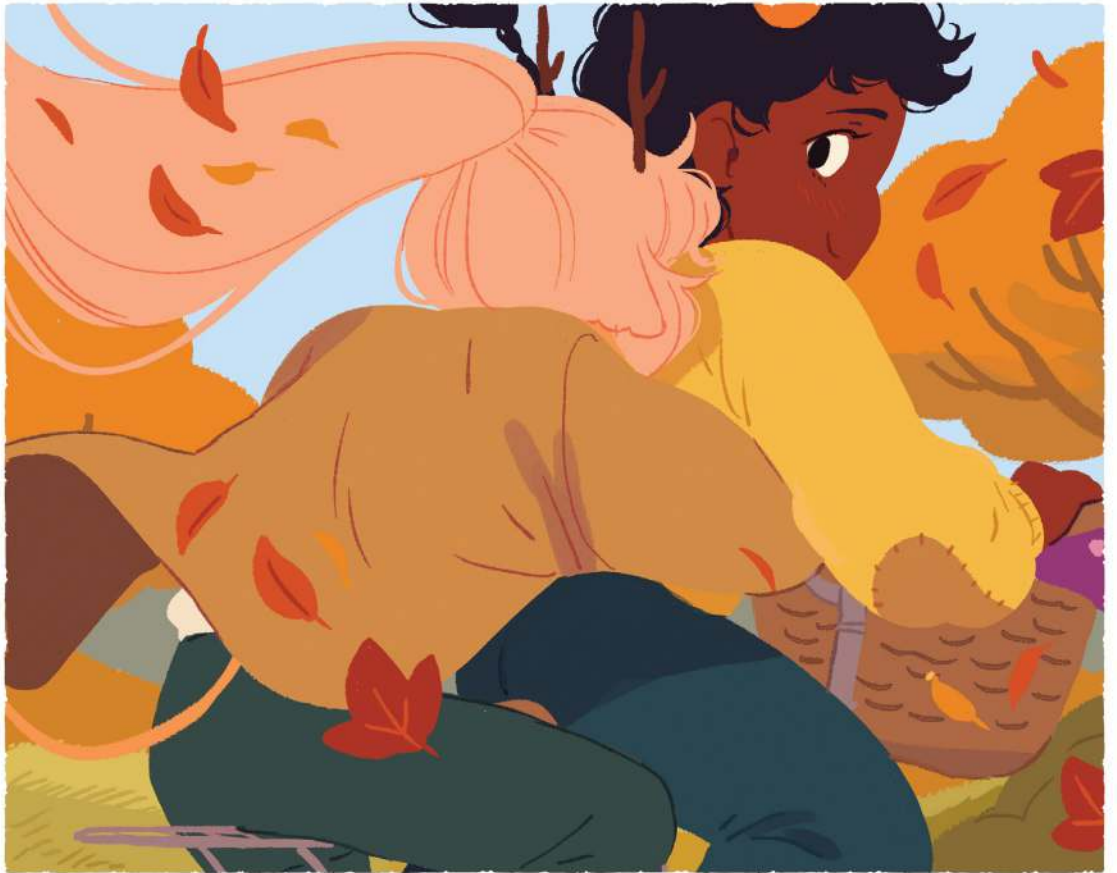
Only a few days, sadly, but I'll be sure to pass by again when I can.

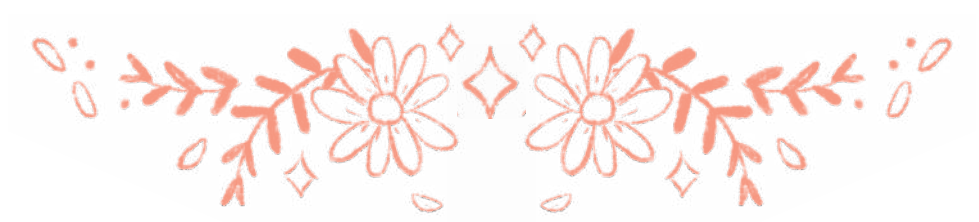








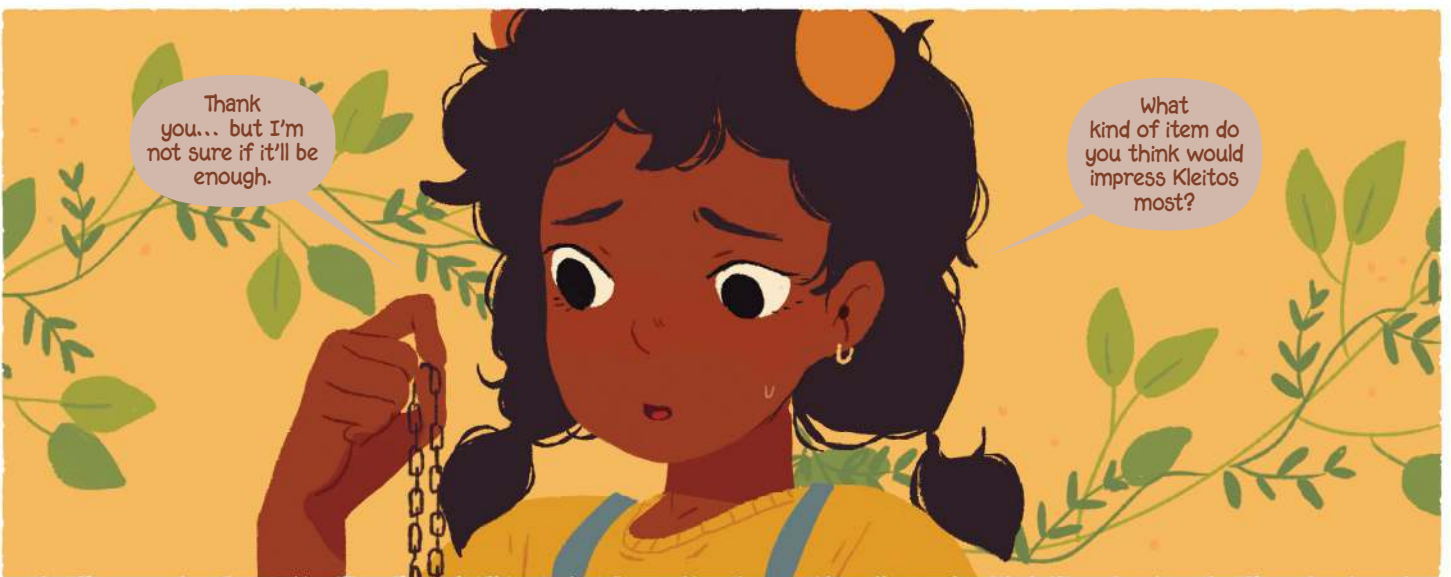




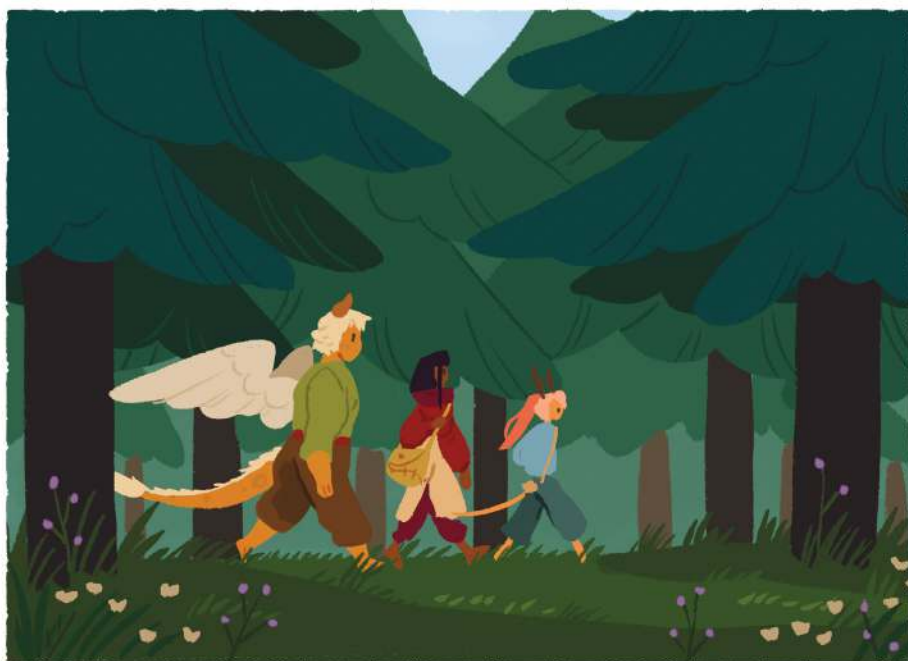
Chapter Five













Yes,
a golden larch...
I had heard there
was an especially fine
one growing here,
and late autumn is
just the right
time.

Time for
what?

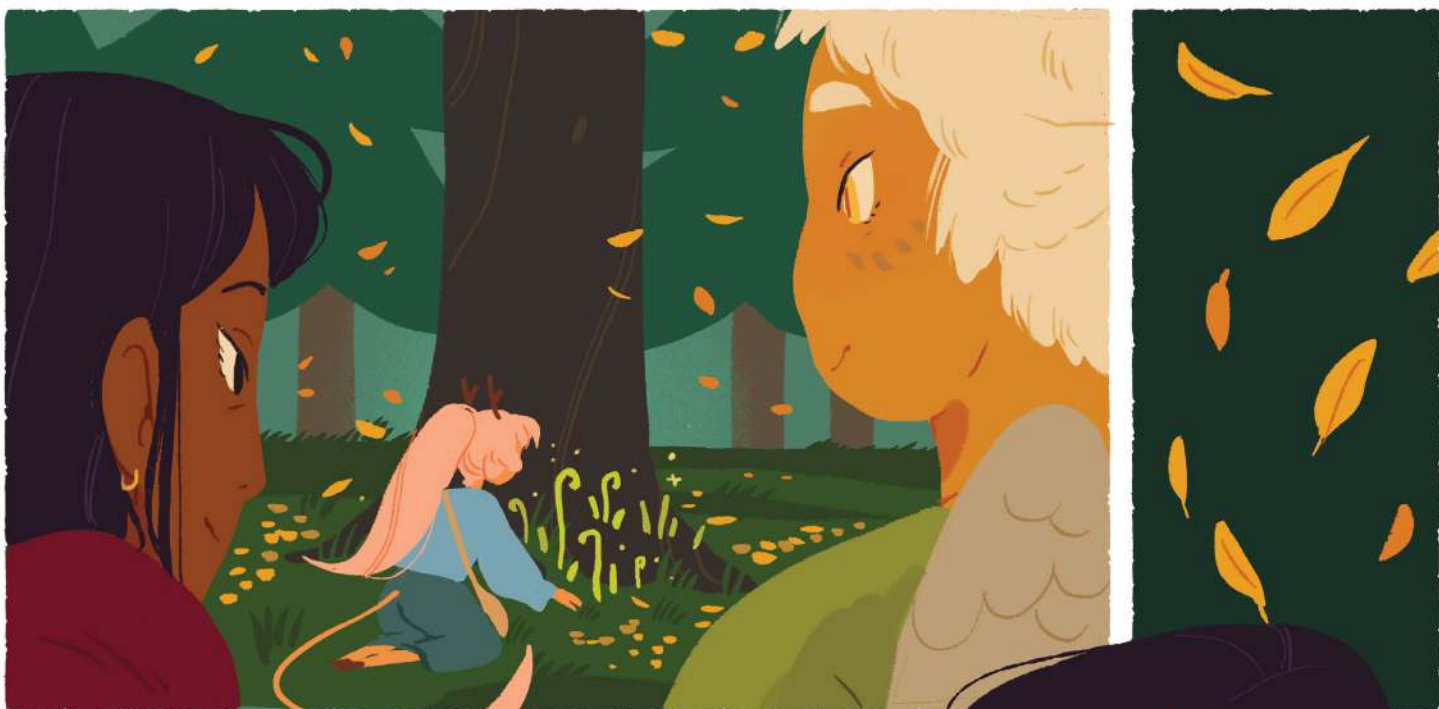


For
these to grow
beneath it.



They're sparrowfern
fronds--you can boil
them to make a broth
to help people with
arthritis.











There
you are,
Greta!

It's
freezing
outside, let's have
some milk and
honey--



Greta?
What's--



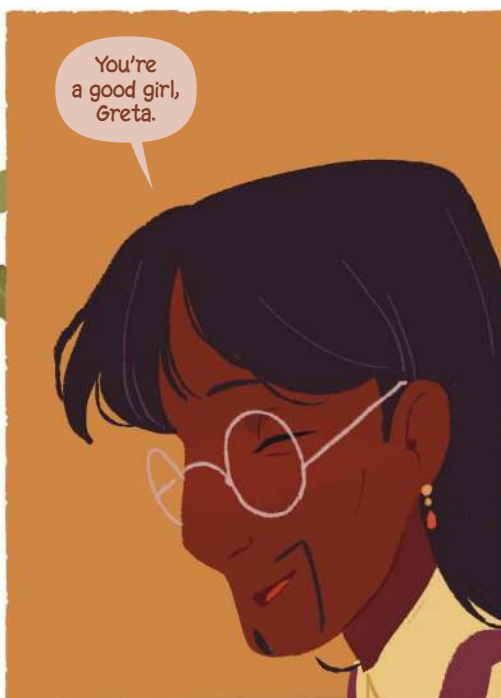
Ginseng
misses her
old owner--
so much!

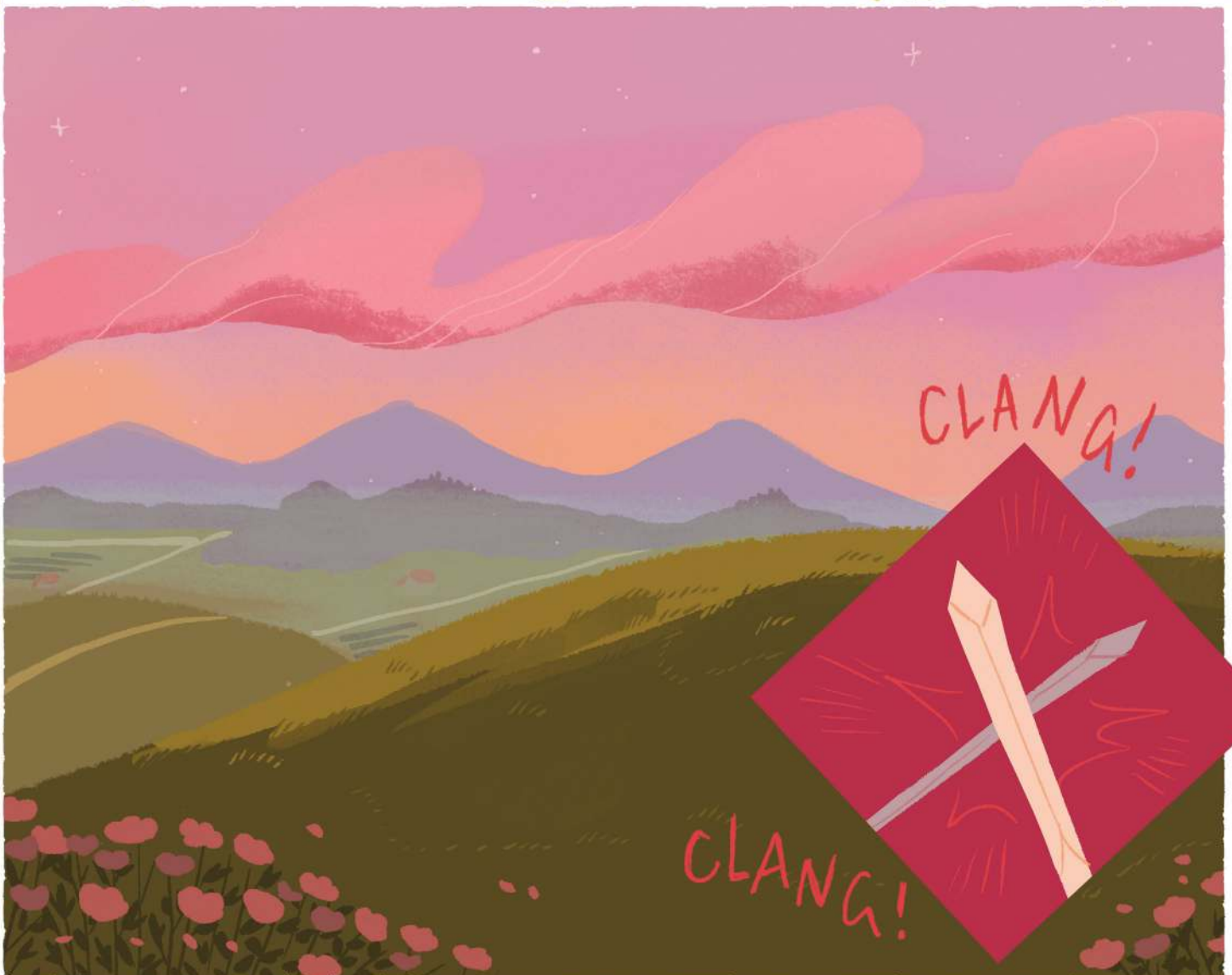
I'm scared
that I'll never be a
good enough caretaker to
make her happy. I just--
just want her to be
happy again!



My
dear, that
is something
you cannot
control.

When
someone is
grieving, the best
thing you can do
is let them heal on
their own, and show
them that you'll
be there for
them.









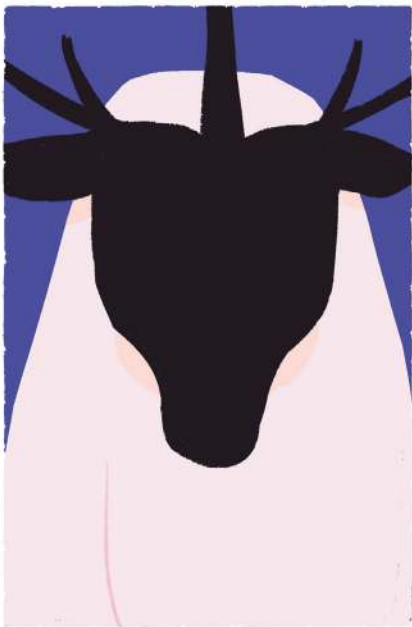












I thought I was going to live in the monastery forever...

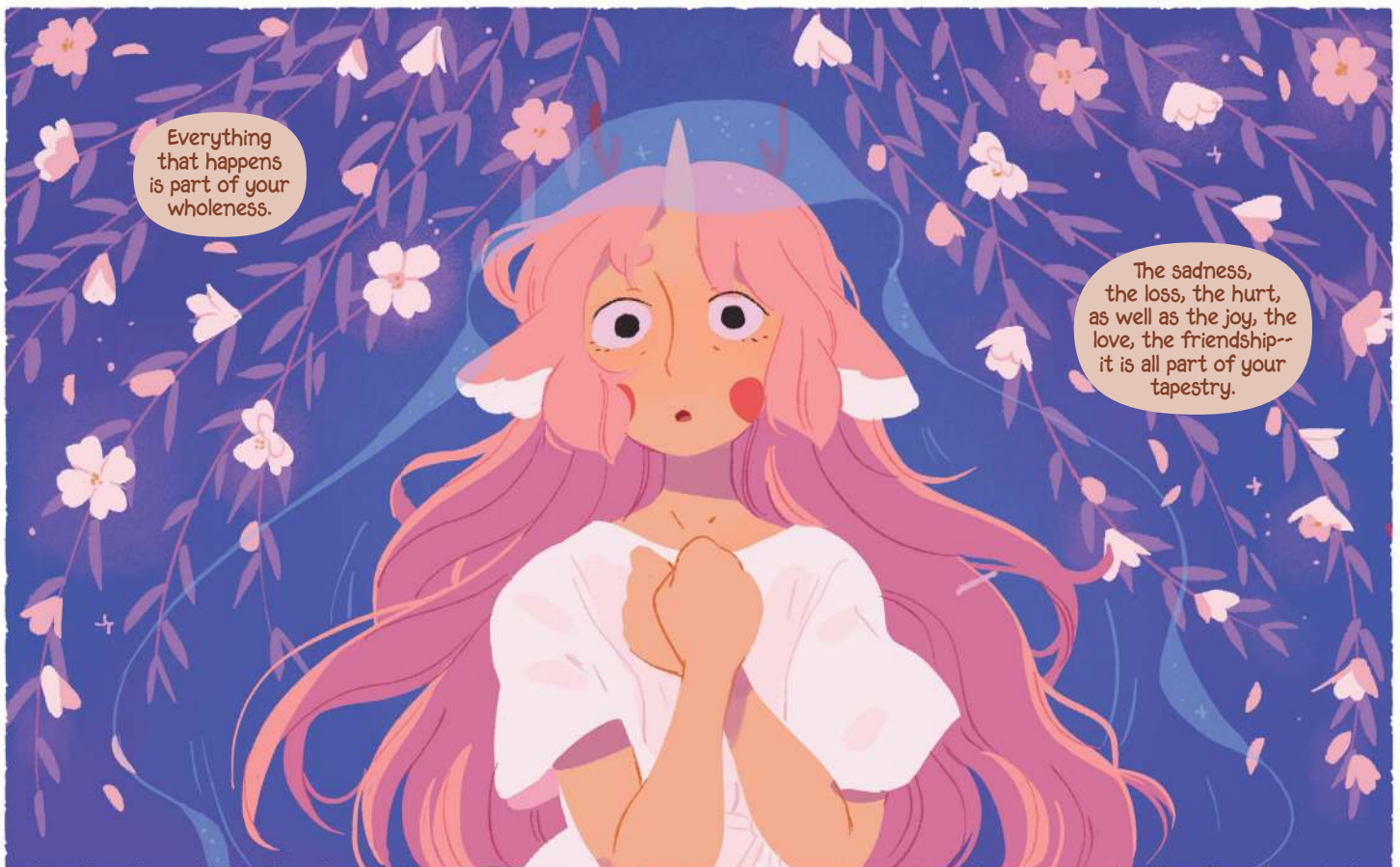
There are many things I'm grateful for in my life now, but there's still a part of me that can't seem to understand... who I'm meant to be anymore.



...Little one, you are the person you are meant to be.

The years you worked diligently at the monastery will always be part of you. As will the years after, when you felt lost and afraid.

And so will all the years yet to come, when the seeds you have been planting with your kindness and friendship will come into bloom.

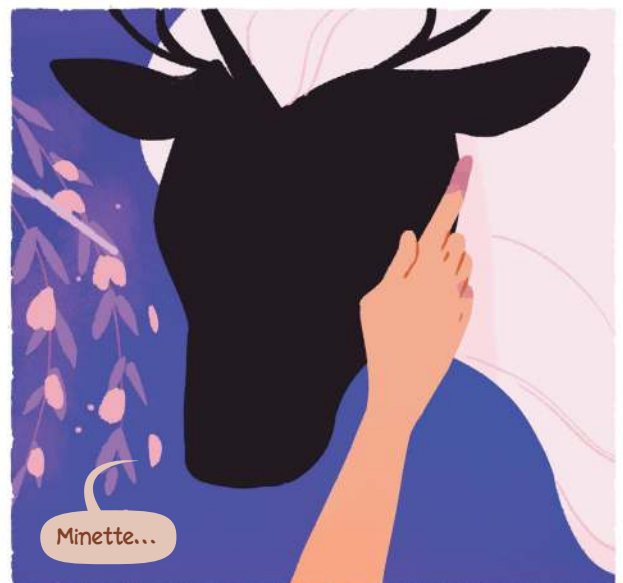


Everything that happens is part of your wholeness.

The sadness, the loss, the hurt, as well as the joy, the love, the friendship-- it is all part of your tapestry.



Thank you, Ancestor.



Minette...



... remember, that you are already whole.

Chapter Six









The first frost of the year... definitely deserves a hot drink in its honour!

Almost feels like back home in the mountains!



Speaking of... I've been meaning to give this to you, Uncle.

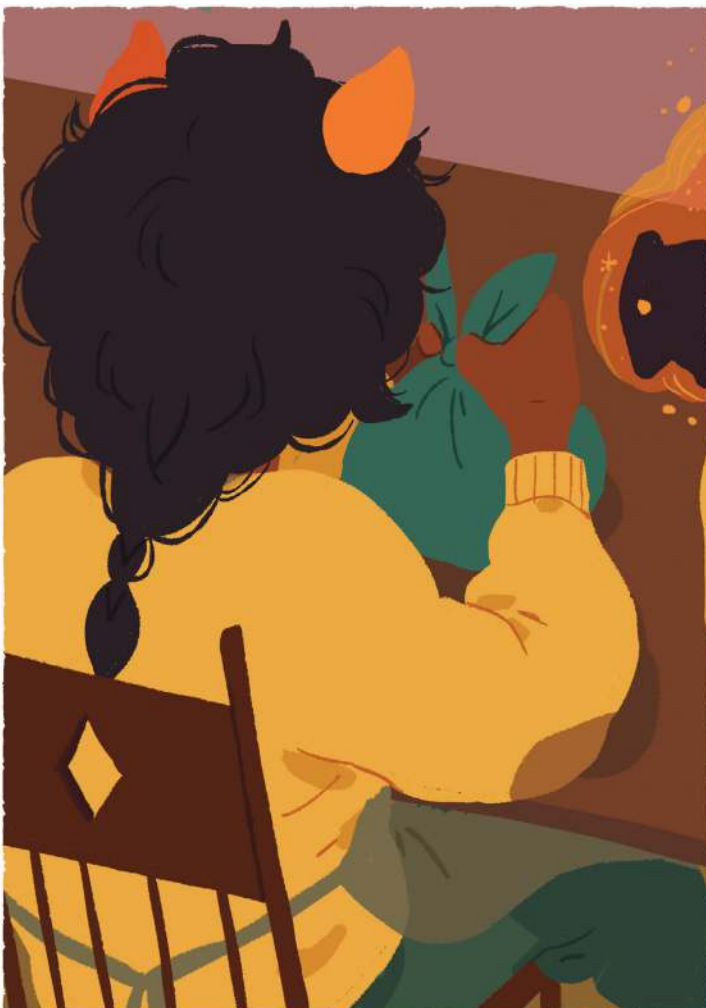


It's a collection of tea leaves from all of the village Dragons, so you can experience some of the things you've missed while you're away.

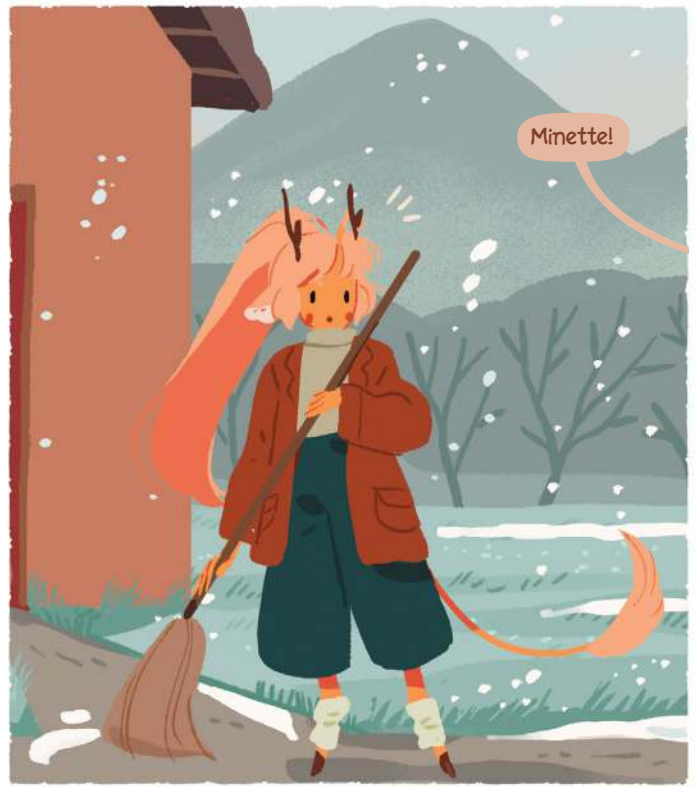
Even with the path we've cleared, I know it's not as easy to get to Silverleaf as it used to be.

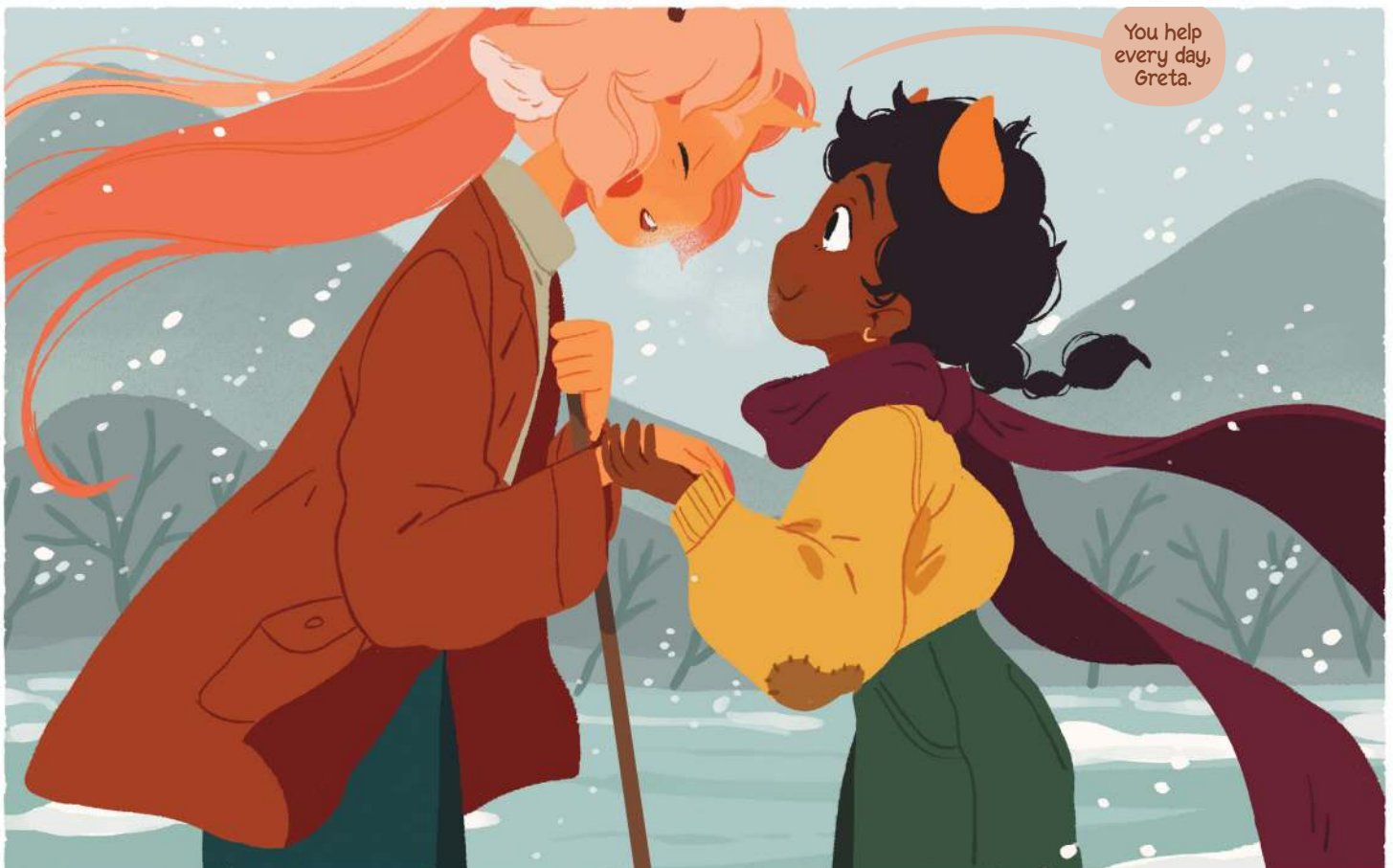
We all wanted to share them with you.

Thank you, Rinn... It's been a while since I've had a taste of home.







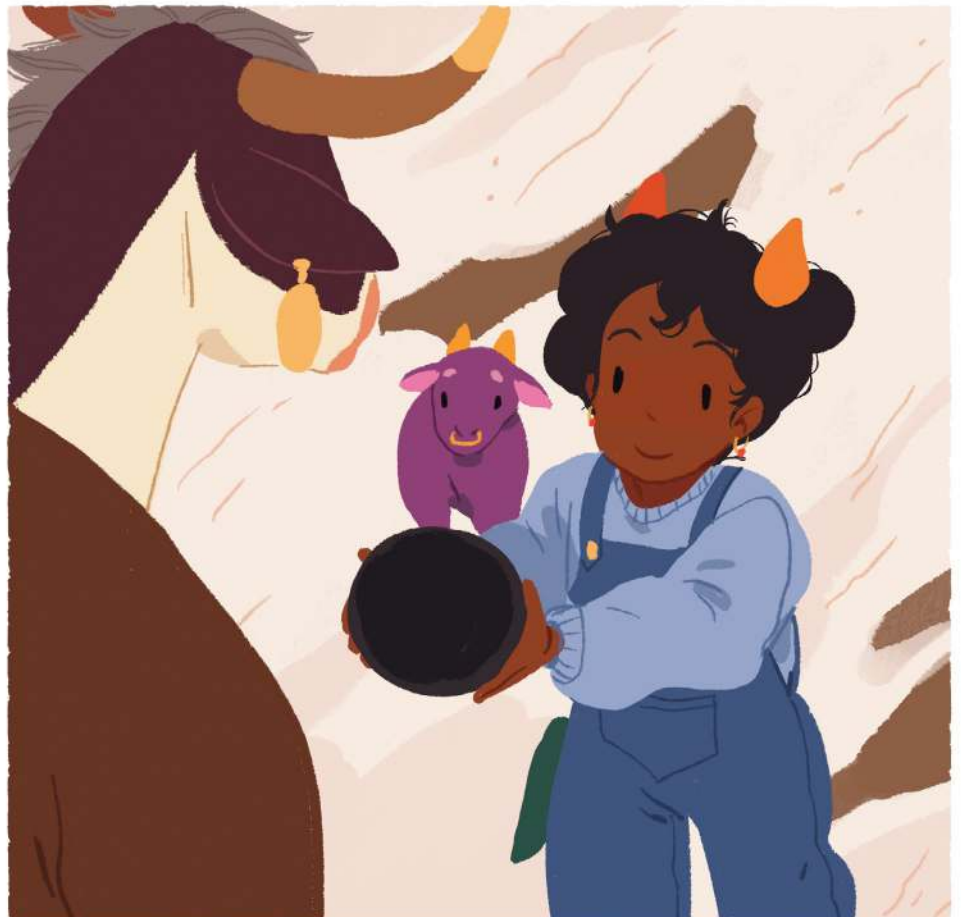




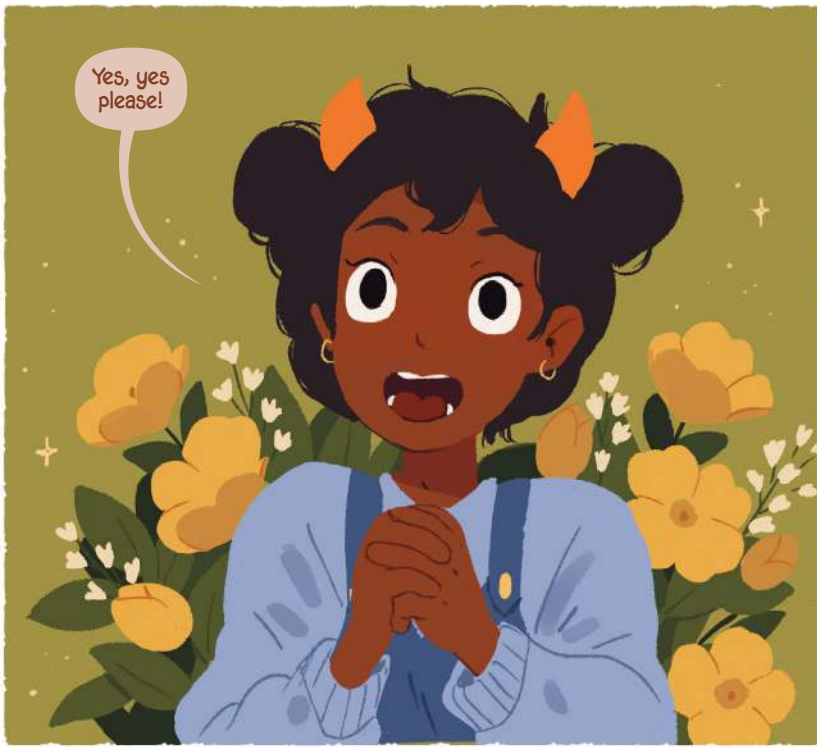


This is just for you, Ginseng, your own special bowl. You don't have to use it now, but whenever you're ready, it will be here.

You've been through so much, and I want you to know that you will always have a place at the hearth with me and Brick.



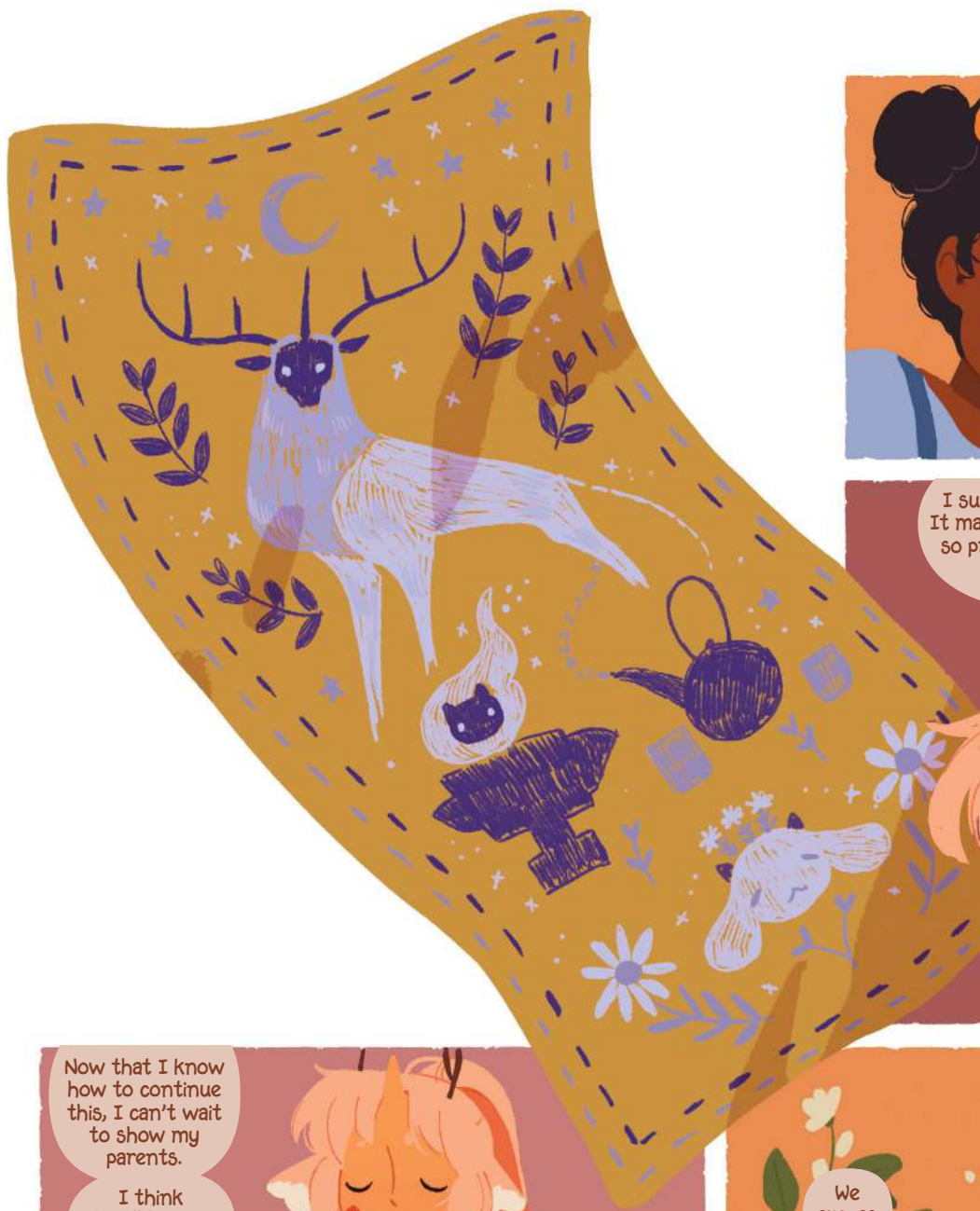












It's beautiful, Minette!

I never knew you could do this!



I suppose I didn't want to think about it. It made me sad to feel like I lost something so precious to me... But it was there the whole time, waiting for me to be ready once again.



Now that I know how to continue this, I can't wait to show my parents.

I think they'll be very happy for me.



We are, as well!

Here's to you and Greta, and the wonderful journey ahead of you both.



Hear, hear!





The End



Epilogue





There was once a time when I worried about what would happen to the art of Tea Dragon husbandry in the future.

The people Erik and I once learned it from had passed away over the years, and each time I felt not only the grief of parting, but a sense of responsibility—for their Dragons, and for the knowledge they had passed on to me.



As the years went on, I found it increasingly difficult to find anyone to share it with in turn, and my worry grew.



When I received Ginseng from a very dear friend, I knew it was a crucial moment. I had no more contemporaries who could take another Dragon to care for, yet she needed a home.

Minette came to look after Chamomile something by chance, and thankfully they formed an easy bond. But when I offered Ginseng to Greta, I knew it would be a heavy choice.

It had been a long time since anyone so young had shown such an interest in the Dragons, yet a part of me feared she would shy from the burden-- and understandably so.



In that moment, when she took Ginseng into her arms and pledged to care for her all life long, I knew I no longer had anything to fear about losing the knowledge of Tea Dragons to time.















EXTRACTS FROM

The Illustrated History of Tea Dragons



THE FIRST TEA DRAGON

For a long time, the origins of Tea Dragons were something of a mystery, with only oral traditions and folklore to guide us. However, in recent decades, an incredible discovery was made—an ancient Sylke journal written by the very person who encountered what became the first Tea Dragon. Despite being written in an almost extinct language, Sylke anthropologists have managed to translate and summarise the notes that reveal to us the origin of our beloved Tea Dragons.

The ancient book begins by describing a small species of wild dragon that grew little herbs on its horns, about the size of a bantam hen. One day, thousands upon thousands of years ago, a young Sylke biologist was observing these dragons. She and her fellow scientists had climbed for days through dense mountain forest to reach the small patch of grassland where the herb-growing dragons tended their young. While one of the nests was unguarded, she hastily worked away at sketching a clutch of eggs.

She was so absorbed in her work, she didn't notice a crack beginning to appear in one of the eggs. Suddenly she heard a cry as the baby dragon hatched right before her eyes! To her shock and dismay, the little one bonded to her as its guardian and refused to be left with the rest of the clutch. The biologist felt very conflicted, as the team had never intended to disturb the dragons from their native habitat. But they could see no other option, as it showed no sign of understanding that it was, in fact, a dragon. She reluctantly took it with her, vowing to do her best to nurture the creature. From then on it followed her everywhere, and they became inseparable, though the little dragon needed lots of care and looking after.





The Sylke and her dragon continued exploring the world and making notes about the new species and habitats that she came across. Wherever she went, she would bring some tea leaves from her home village—tea is very important to Sylkes, as they value good hospitality above all else.

In their many journeys together, she and the dragon shared a lot of tea, and made a lot of memories. She had by now learned that this species of little dragon lived for several hundreds of years, and knowing that she would have this creature by her side throughout her life made her feel a strange tenderness and peace that she had never felt before.

One day, the Sylke noticed the leaves that naturally grew from her dragon's horns looked different than before. She gave them a sniff, and to her surprise, found that they had become tea leaves!

Brewing this tea produced an amazing aroma, and when she took a sip, the memories of all her experiences with the little dragon came flooding back to her, as if she were reliving them again. She had never experienced anything so incredible in all her life.

She made excited notes about this remarkable discovery. Many who read them thought of it as a folktale, but a few tea-lovers believed the truth in her words. They wrote to her explaining that they would

be honoured to have a little tea-bearing dragon of their own. The Sylke sought out other folks throughout the world caring for small domesticated dragons. She explained to them the amazing transformation that had occurred in her dragon, and brewed them some of the tea so they could experience the sensation of the memories for themselves. Some weren't particularly moved, but others were enchanted by the magical bond and wanted to feel that too. They learned about the culture of tea from the Sylke, sharing it with their dragons and those around them in their lives.

These became the very first Tea Dragons, the ancestors from which all other Tea Dragons are descended. The group of people who shared their knowledge, friendship, and passion for tea to produce them became the very first Tea Dragon Society.

The original species of herb-growing dragon that the Sylke accidentally befriended is now very rare in the wild, and babies are protected so that they cannot be taken from their home. It was quickly decided that it would be better to breed from existing Tea Dragons rather than trying to hatch new ones. Not only would this protect the wild populations, but it allowed the Dragons to be carefully bred and to grow into their new cultures, climates, and homes.





TEA DRAGON BIOLOGY

Each species of Tea Dragon is very different. Certain physical and emotional traits are best suited for growing certain types of tea, and these characteristics have strengthened over time through careful breeding, as well as influence from environmental factors. Tea Dragons that produce flowers or fruit on their horns need to be a lot sturdier and stockier than those that produce only leaves. The largest Tea Dragon is Hibiscus, as it needs to be able to hold up its huge flowers. The smallest is Peppermint, and the tiniest specimen ever recorded could sit in an adult human's palm and grew just a few leaves at a time.

One reason caregivers go to such lengths to look after their Tea Dragon (besides being hopelessly besotted) is that happy, healthy Tea Dragons produce much more vibrant and delicious tea. Tea Dragons store sad memories in their leaves along with the joyful ones, but as a natural part of a rich and varied life, these form the slight bitter notes that many tea drinkers appreciate as part of a good brew. Thankfully, very few Tea Dragons are mistreated or neglected, but an unhealthy Dragon will produce fewer tea leaves, and the memories will be patchy and blurry.

Each species is very visually distinct from one another, while variations within the species are a bit more subtle. Chamomile Dragons, for instance, are almost always yellow, but it may vary from a light buttery colour to a warm gold. You can also tell them apart by the different number of leaves or flowers, horn shape or size, different coat patterns, or the jewelry the Dragon has chosen to wear. It is important to note that all accessories (particularly piercings) are selected by the Dragons themselves, not the owner. Though they tolerate ribbons and ceremonial jewelry for special occasions, most will not be persuaded to wear miniature clothing.



Sometimes mutations in Tea Dragons occur, due to the huge magical power stored in the dragon lineage. This can result in extreme growth in the horns and leaves, odd colours or coat patterns, wings where the species would not normally have them, and sometimes even infusing the tea with minor magical powers.

Tea Dragons live for roughly three hundred years, regardless of species. Once they're fully grown (which takes between thirty and fifty years), they look pretty much the same throughout the first two hundred years of their life. Over the last fifty or so years, they will start to produce fewer and fewer tea leaves, will sleep much more than usual, and may slowly lose their appetite. The memories stored in the leaves will become focused on the Dragon's favourite moments of their lives, with all the owners they may have had in the past. Gradually, they become less energetic, and when they finally shed all their leaves and do not grow any more, the owner knows it is soon time that they will go.





TEA DRAGON VARIETIES

Astute tea drinkers will notice that many Tea Dragons produce a brew that is not strictly a tea; teas must be derived from a particular type of leaf, rather than herbs or fruits which are called tisane. Most Tea Dragon caretakers will cheerfully admit that they condense the terms together for the sake of practicality—the importance is more in the bond between caretaker and Dragon, enjoying the brew, and of course experiencing the memories contained within.



Over the thousands of years since the very first Tea Dragon came into existence, Tea Dragons have changed a lot. Carried by dedicated tea lovers back to their homes throughout the world, they have adapted to suit new cultures and new environments. Some have become more energetic, more regal, grown more fur or become more velvety in texture, duller or brighter in colour, more sociable or more shy. In every region they produce tea and memories, though how these are collected and brewed also varies a great deal from place to place.

Tea Dragons commonly evolved towards whichever local tea leaves, fruits, or berries are most frequently drunk. It only takes two or three generations for a Tea Dragon line to shift completely towards producing a certain type of leaf, if it is consumed frequently enough by its predecessors. They are very adaptable creatures in this sense, which is probably also why they have completely lost their survival instincts within a relatively short span of time living in domesticated comfort.

While it is true that no wild Tea Dragons exist, there are a few small isolated populations that could almost be described as such. There are

known to be places—mostly ruined villages or infrequently used shrines—where a small population of Tea Dragons is able to get by without a primary owner. They aren't very adept at finding food, and rely on kindness from travellers, tourists, or a local priest or monk, but are overall cautious and wary of people. They have a stronger social bond with each other, and revert to many of the behaviours of wild dragons.

There are a few extinct varieties of Tea Dragon—types of ancient tea that no longer exist outside of the Dragons, who became so few in number that it was not possible to continue a healthy breeding line. And so they were mixed in with other more common kinds and eventually vanished. Others were kept by folks who simply had no interest in breeding them, and so they naturally died out.

A few carefully preserved tea leaves have been kept from some extinct Tea Dragon varieties, and are brewed on very special occasions. It is considered an honour to whoever raised the Dragons, and to the Dragons themselves, to continue to share their memories over time. After all, the aim of every Tea Dragon caretaker is to have lived a good and generous life with their Dragon. Having tea leaves to pass on is a sign of a life well lived.





LIVING WITH TEA DRAGONS

Tea Dragons get along with other pets better than one might expect, but they generally dislike boisterous animals. They can sometimes get a bit jealous of the attention given by their owner, but in the end they satisfy themselves by feeling smug that they know that they will live much longer than the other animals. All Tea Dragons love and respect chickens, who they see as a different, much more confident species of dragon.

Most Tea Dragons prefer a set routine, and will approach the same tasks with fresh interest and curiosity each day, no matter how many times they are repeated. Change can be difficult to cope with for Tea Dragons, causing them stress and anxiety. The best way to help them through change is to keep as many things the same as possible, such as food, mealtimes, grooming, and blankets. Though it can take quite a while, they always seem to adapt in the end.

Tea Dragons love being out and about with their owners throughout the day, and cannot be left at home alone for long periods of time or they will become depressed, or start making a nuisance of themselves. Most Tea Dragons are small enough to be easily portable on daily errands and tasks and have good stamina for snooping, but owners are advised to bring a “supply kit” of dried fruits and vegetables, warm blankets, and even a basket or bag in which the Dragon can sleep if it becomes tired from taking in all the different sights and sounds.

Even if they're drowsy, they can still be aware of their surroundings and pick up all sorts of memories throughout the day. Upon later drinking the tea collected from their Dragon, many owners will discover that their Tea Dragon noticed some small moment that they themselves missed that the Dragon thought was special and interesting enough to store as a memory. As a result, the owners often find themselves more attuned to noticing these little moments for themselves.

It can be tricky to figure out exactly what a particular Tea Dragon likes to eat, but luckily they are all herbivores (with the exception of enjoying a nice boiled chicken's egg), so it's usually a combination of fruit, seeds, nuts, grains, and cooked vegetables. They're quite picky about presentation, and can be put out if they think their owner's meal looks more delicious than theirs. They usually do best with small, frequent feedings throughout the day, as they will usually try to finish their plate out of a sense of pride. If they eat too much, they will be unable to move for several hours.





THE TEA DRAGON SOCIETY

The Tea Dragon Society was formed almost at the same time as the first Tea Dragons, in order to promote their wellbeing, as well as to exchange knowledge and ideas. Many cultures throughout the world have different rituals and practices regarding tea, and it was quickly realised how beneficial it is to learn about a range of different ways store, brew, and share tea in order to find the method that best suits a particular type of Dragon.

Each culture also grew to have their own stories and myths around Tea Dragons, and many Tea Dragon guardians make journeys to different countries to learn a different perspective on these beloved creatures. Along the way, they would stay with other Society members—the group was also a chance for people to come together with a common passion, and many friendships were formed that lasted a whole lifetime. Throughout the world in different countries, meetings are held every five years—a mixture of chit-chat and catching up, theory and demonstration, and of course, enjoying the tea.

Once, these societies were vibrant and active, but over time the numbers attending the meetings have dwindled. Fewer people have the time to make a long, meandering pilgrimage. In some regions, only one or two members of the society remain. What will the fate of Tea Dragons be if there is no community of guardians, sharing skills and teaching one another? This is why many of the older generation of Tea Dragon caregivers are excited for youngsters to learn the secrets, and to understand why the joys of raising Tea Dragons are worth the hardships.





Katie O'Neill is an illustrator & graphic novelist from New Zealand.

She is the author of *Princess Princess Ever After*, *Aquicorn Cove*, *Dewdrop*, *The Tea Dragon Society*, *The Tea Dragon Festival*, and *The Tea Dragon Tapestry*, all from Oni Press. She makes gentle fantasy stories for younger readers, and is very interested in tea, creatures, things that grow, and the magic of everyday life.

ALSO FROM KATIE O'NEILL



THE TEA DRAGON SOCIETY

The Eisner Award-winning gentle fantasy that follows the story of Greta, a blacksmith apprentice, and the people she meets as she becomes entwined in the enchanting world of Tea Dragons.



THE TEA DRAGON FESTIVAL

Rinn has grown up with the Tea Dragons that inhabit their village, but stumbling across a real dragon turns out to be a different matter entirely! A charming story about finding your purpose, and the community that helps you along the way.

THE TEA DRAGON SOCIETY CARD GAME

Create a bond between yourself and your Tea Dragon in this easy-to-learn card game based on the graphic novel!



AQUICORN COVE

Unable to rely on the adults in her storm-ravaged seaside town, a young girl named Lana must protect a colony of magical seahorse-like creatures she discovers in the coral reef.

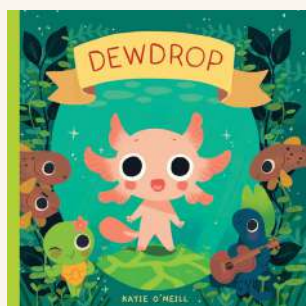


AQUICORN COVE BOARD GAME

Work with your friends to keep the reef healthy while taking care of your village in this cooperative board game based on the graphic novel!

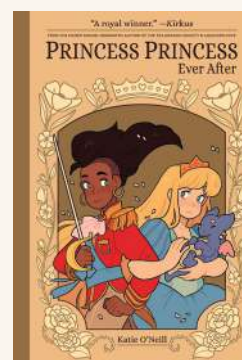
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Join Greta and Minette once more for the
heartwarming conclusion of the award-winning
Tea Dragon series!



Over a year since being entrusted with Ginseng's care, Greta still can't chase away the cloud of mourning that hangs over the timid Tea Dragon. As she struggles to create something spectacular enough to impress a master blacksmith in search of an apprentice, she questions the true meaning of crafting, and the true meaning of caring for someone in grief. Meanwhile, Minette receives a surprise package from the monastery where she was once training to be a prophetess. Thrown into confusion about her path in life, the shy and reserved Minette finds that the more she opens her heart to others, the more clearly she can see what was always inside.

Told with the same care and charm as the previous installments of the Tea Dragon series, *The Tea Dragon Tapestry* welcomes old friends and new into a heartfelt story of purpose, love, and growth.



"A joyful return to a world
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"Katie O'Neill once again gently
reminds us of the importance of
loving ourselves compassionately
through every step of our lives."

— MAI K. NGUYEN, *PILU OF THE WOODS*

"Leads you on a gentle, meandering
journey into the fragrant and rustic
lives of Greta, Minette, and their
society of warmth and comfort."

— RU XU, *NEWSPRINTS*



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