

The Tea Dragon Society



K. O'Neill

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CHAPTER ONE

Spring



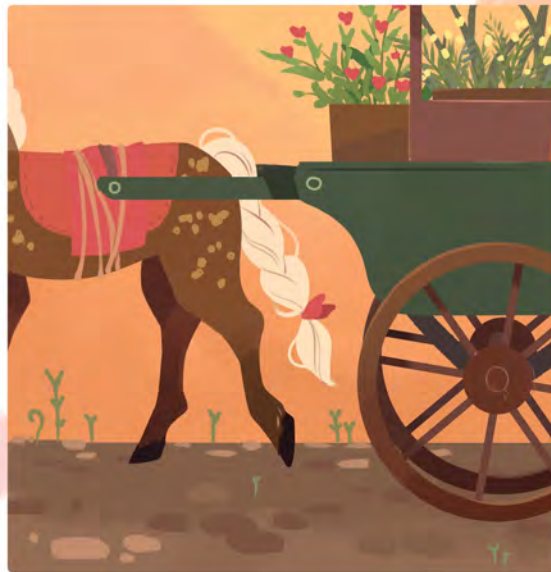


Once upon a time, blacksmiths
were as important as magicians.

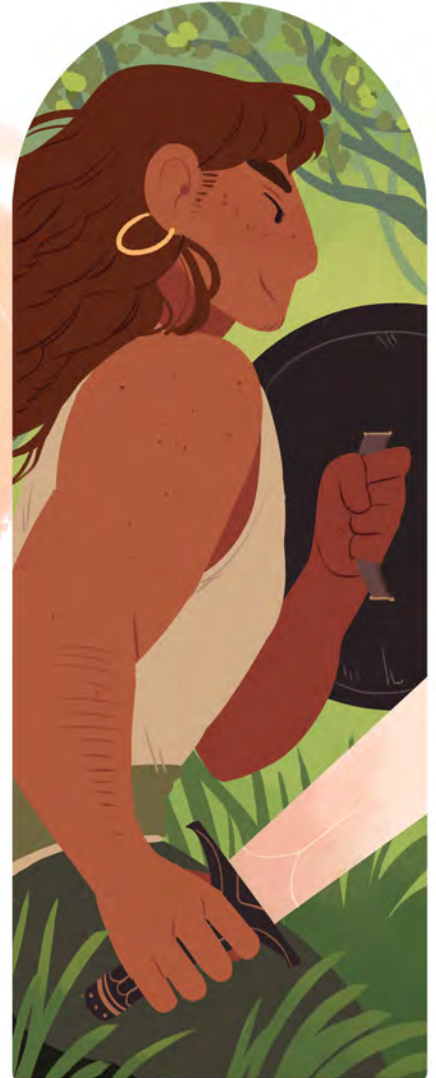
They made tools for
healers to cure the sick.



Shoes to shod the hooves
of working animals.



Swords for adventurers
to slay monsters.



The world was forged in iron... Once upon a time...

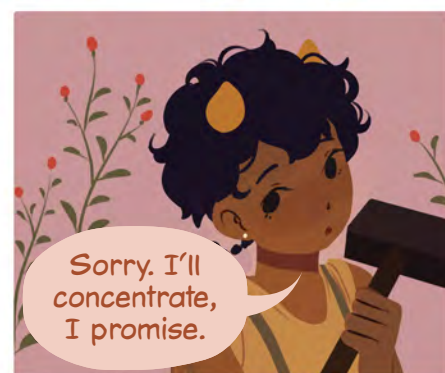
Greta!
Are you
listening?





Yes,
Mama!

Please pay
attention, shaping hot
swords is dangerous work
even for those of us with
goblin blood—as you
well know.



Sorry. I'll
concentrate,
I promise.

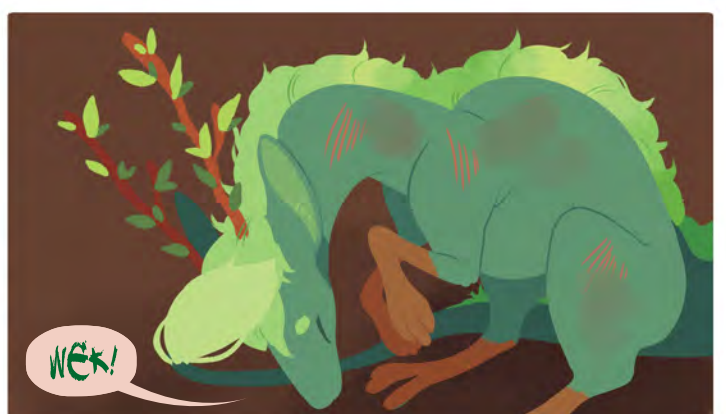
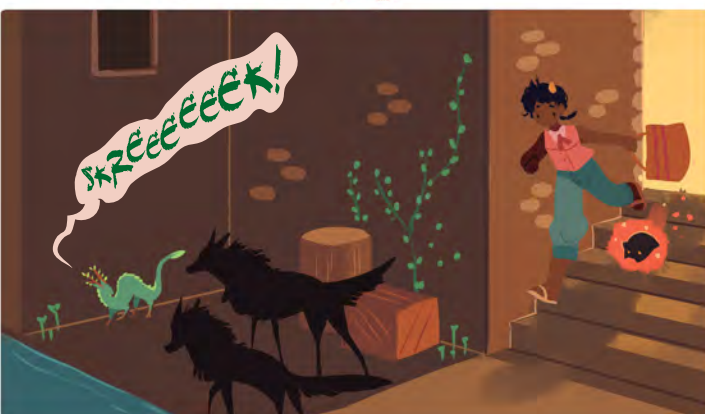


You must
wait for the exact
right color—do not let
it get too hot or the
sword will become
weak.

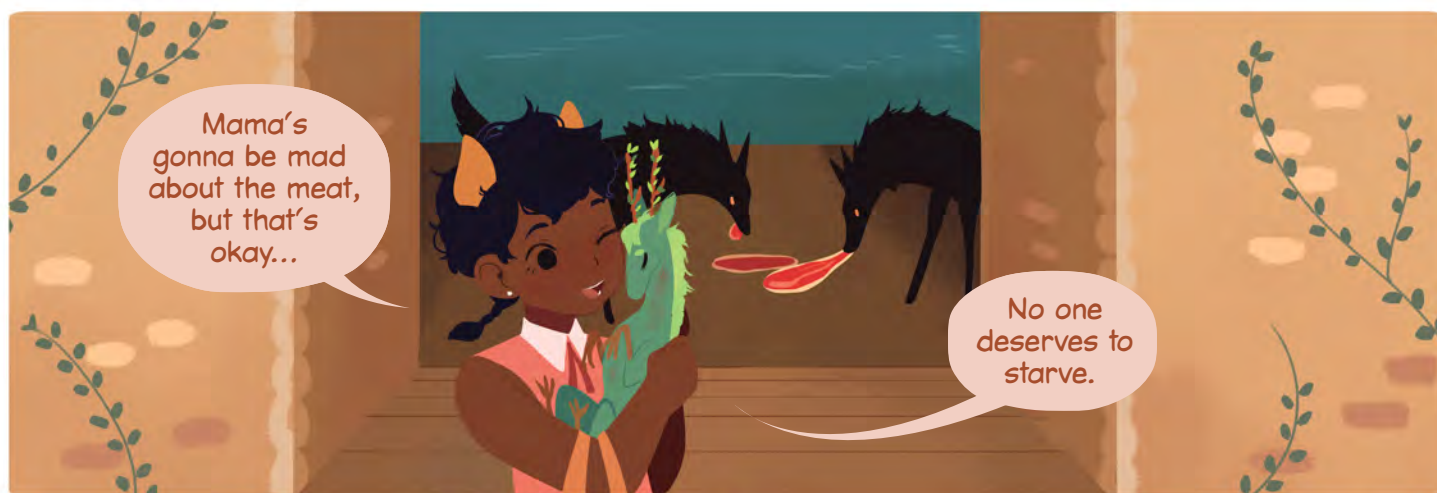
And
then... ...strike!!











Mama's gonna be mad about the meat, but that's okay...

No one deserves to starve.



You'll be fine. I think your pride got hurt more than anything, huh?



Greta! I saw blood on the doormat—are you all right?



I'm fine, Papa! The blood was from this little thing. She's doing better now.

I don't know who she belongs to, though. She seems like she wouldn't survive on her own.



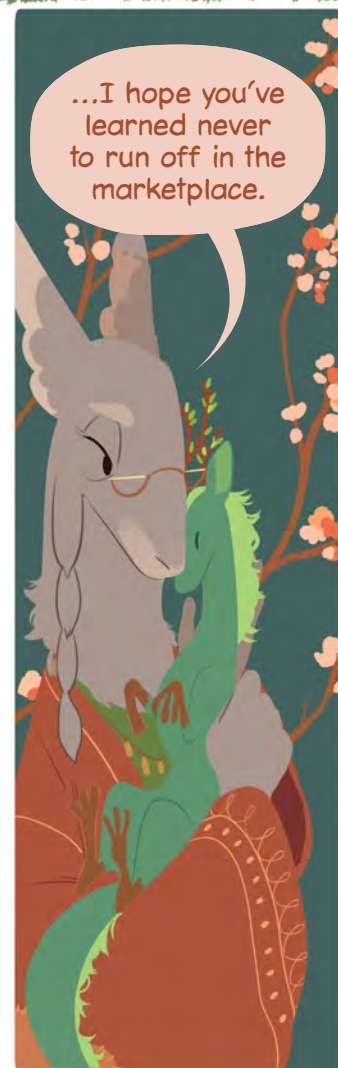
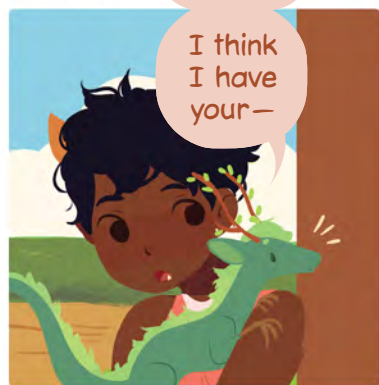
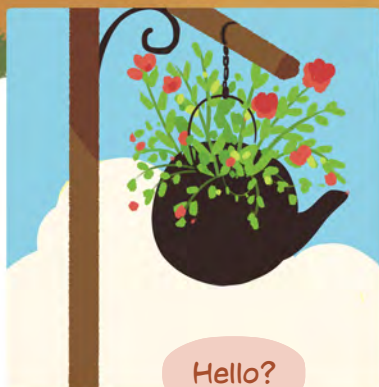
Oh, I know her owner.

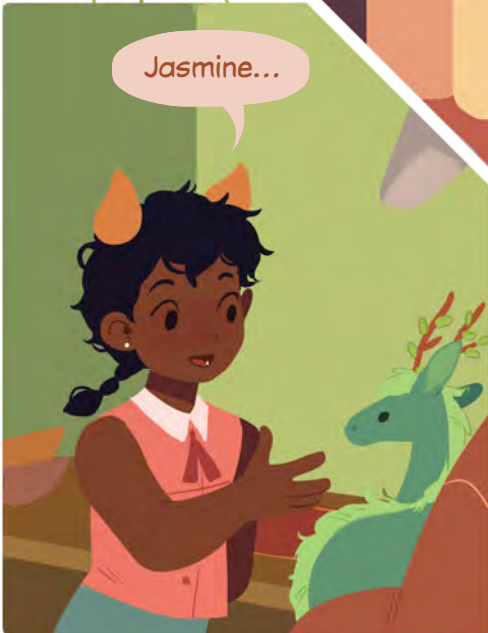
You do?

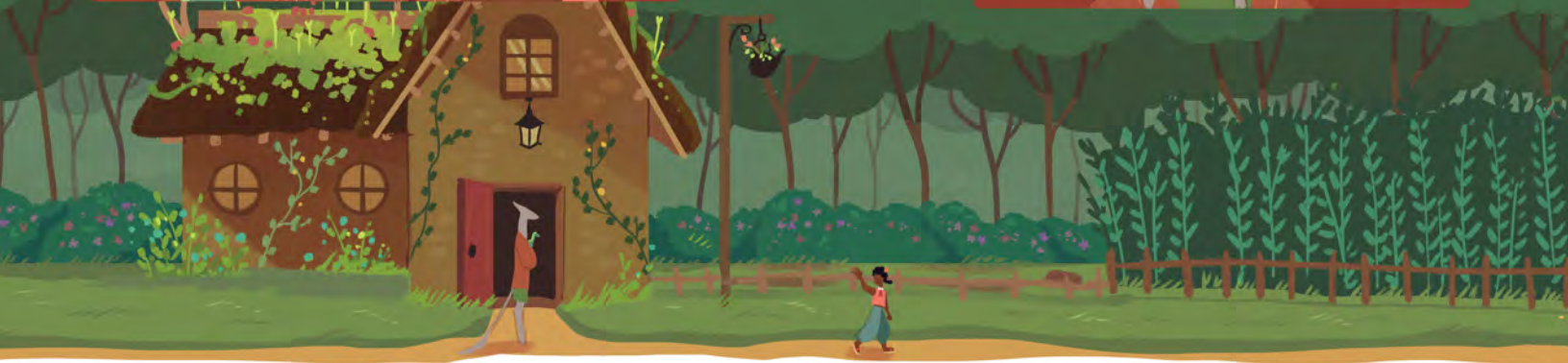


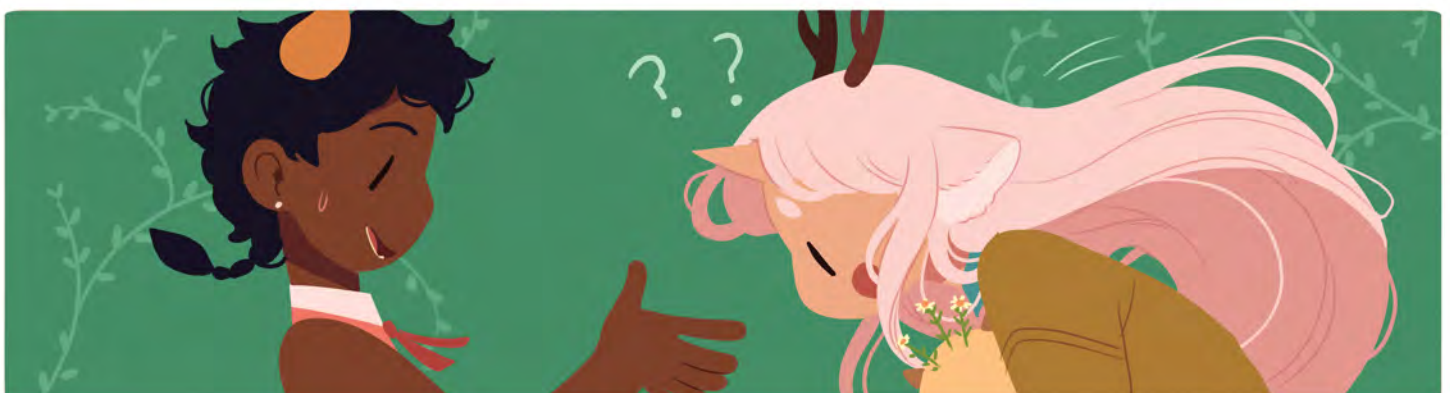
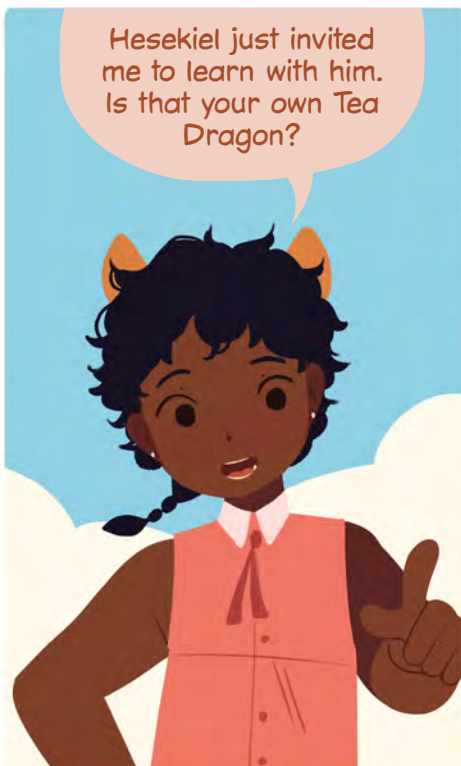
I sell him tea leaves from time to time—he only buys the very best.

He's a peculiar fellow, but I expect he'd be very grateful if you returned his dragon.









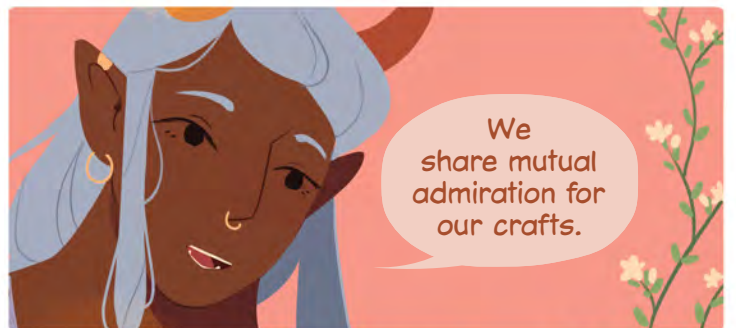
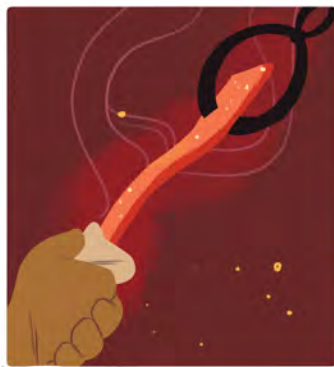


CHAPTER TWO

Summer



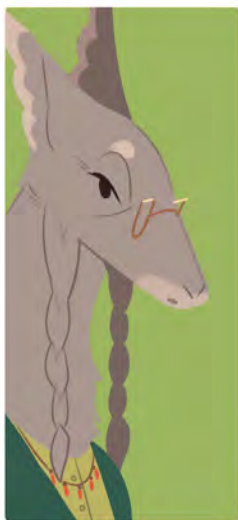




"Hesekiel is not like humans and goblins. He will live for more than twice our lifespan."

"And Hesekiel himself is one who values patience in all things. I think he would barely notice your hesitation."



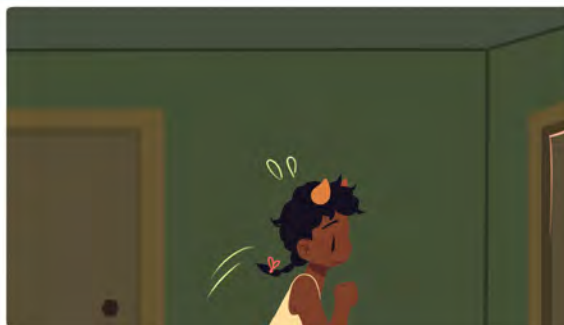


Hello. Please go through to the back, if you would like to meet the rest of the Tea Dragons.



I must work on filling these orders, but Erik will introduce you.

O-Okay!



So, you're the one who's keen on these ratbags! A brave soul, to be sure.

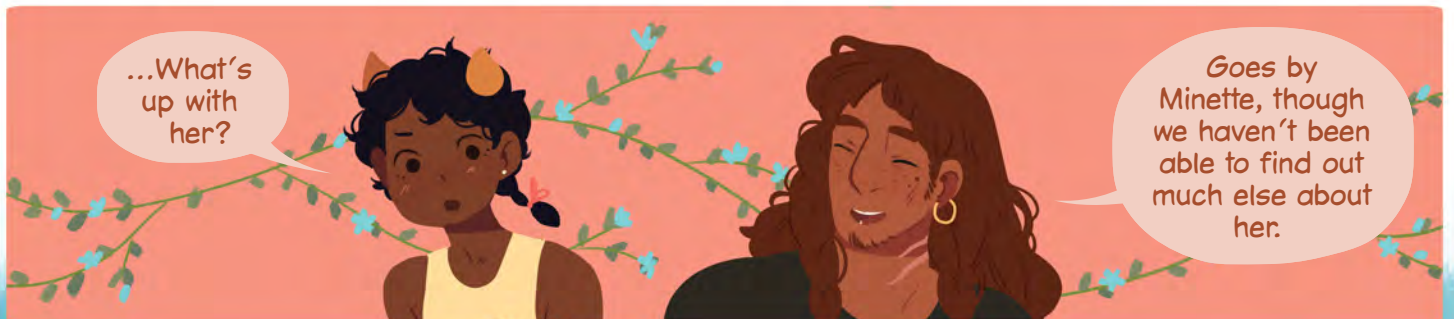


They seem sweet.

Aye. They can be, if they know it'll get them something. Manipulative little buggers.

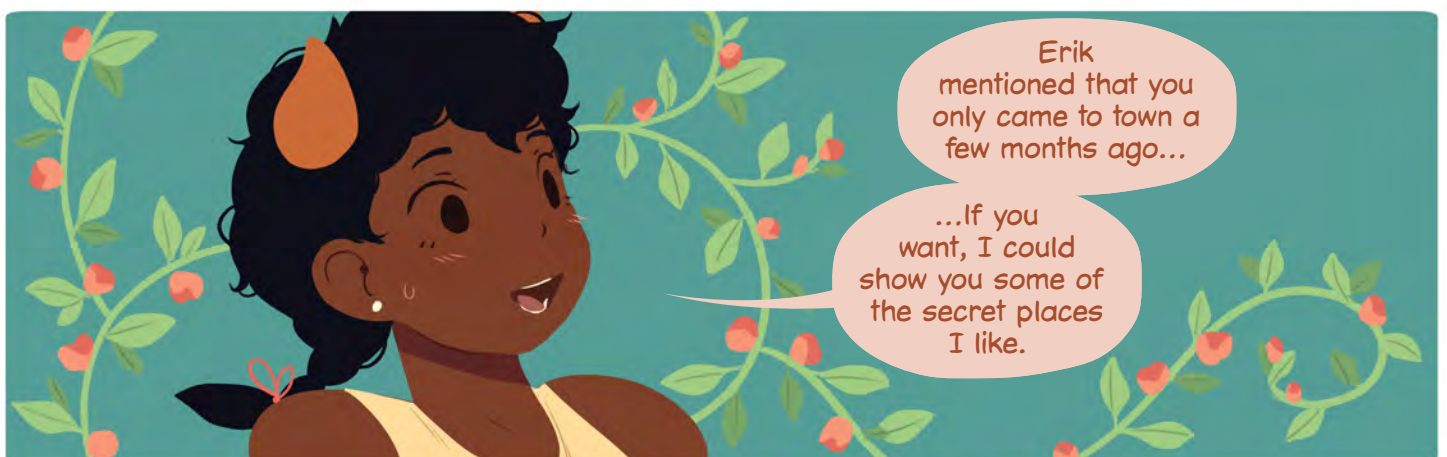




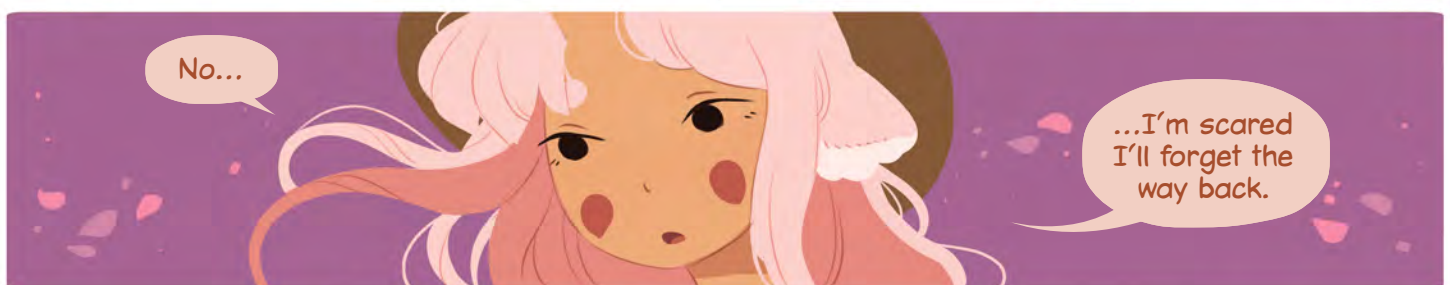


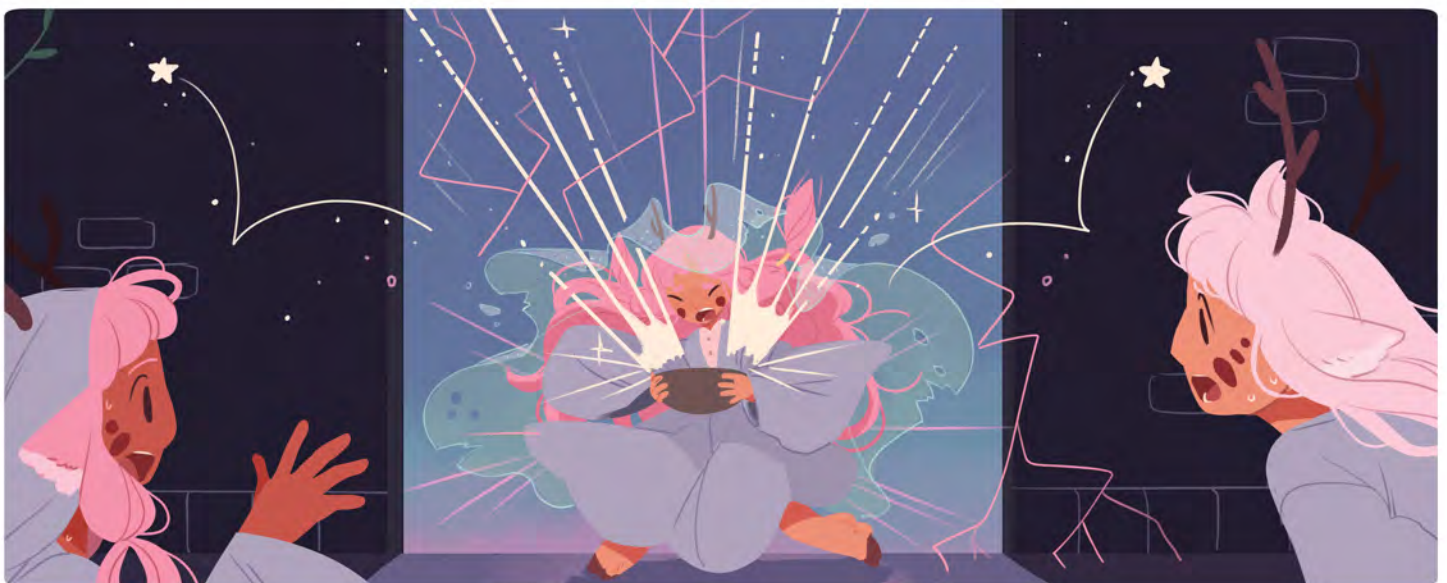
"Chamomile took such a liking to her that we offered her the tea house in the garden to nest up in."

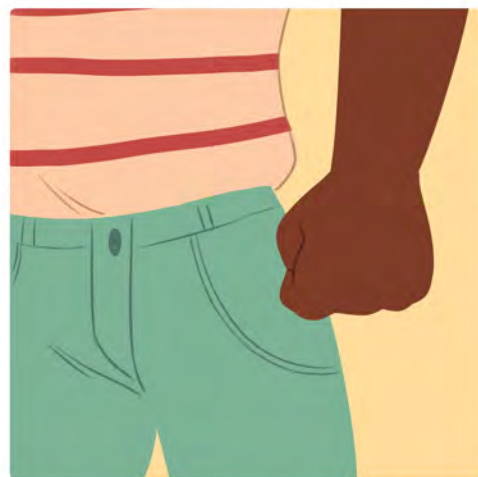
"She's been here for a month or two."









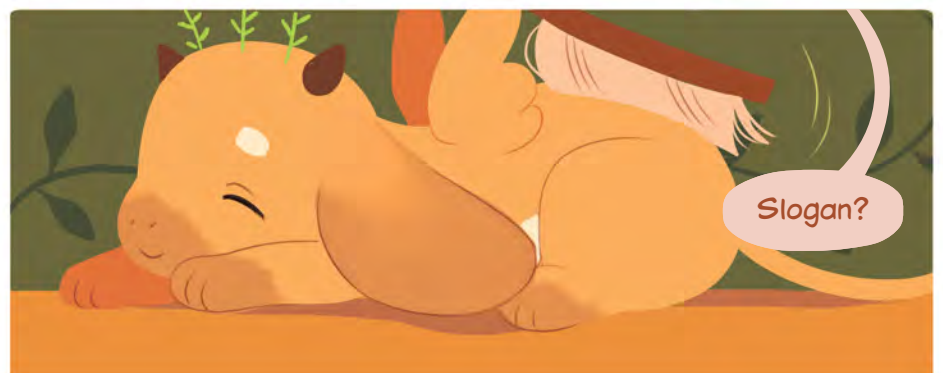


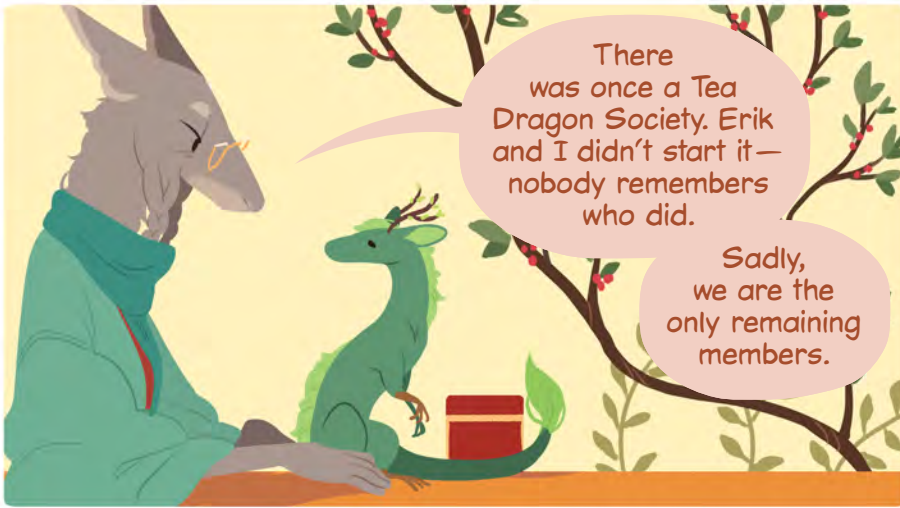
CHAPTER THREE

Autumn









There was once a Tea Dragon Society. Erik and I didn't start it — nobody remembers who did.

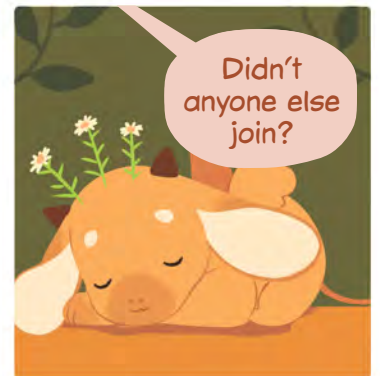
Sadly, we are the only remaining members.



We found each other through our Tea Dragons...



Everyone else in this photograph is either unable to care for them any longer, or has passed away.



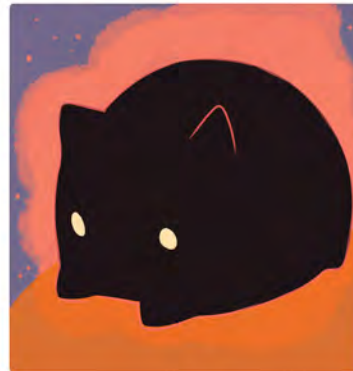
Didn't anyone else join?



People seem to live at a different pace, now. Tea Dragon tea is a wonderful thing, but it takes a long time to make.

Back when everything took longer to make, perhaps that didn't matter...

Sadly, the art is fading.





Oh, soot—
we have no
seals for the
jars.

I'll go
get some!
From the
market.



Are
you sure,
Min?



I'm pretty
sure I remember
the way.

And if not,
you'll come find
me, right?





Greta,
you have been
working very
hard with the
Dragons.

We both feel
your presence
brightens this
house.



We think
it's time you see
what makes Tea
Dragon tea
special.



If
you'd
like to.

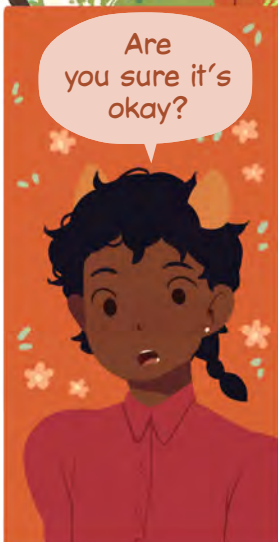
I'd
love
to!



Very well.
This is a
special blend,
brewed from
Jasmine and
Rooibos.

The Dragons
Erik and I have
had for many
decades.

If you clear
your mind and
concentrate, you may
experience some of
the memories the
Dragons have
shared with
us.

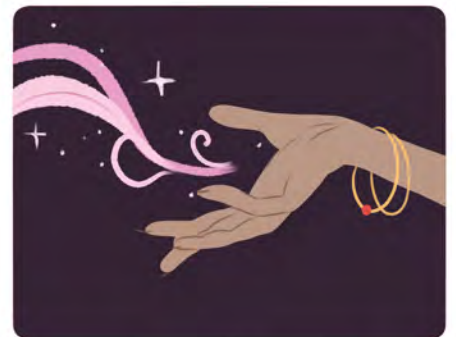
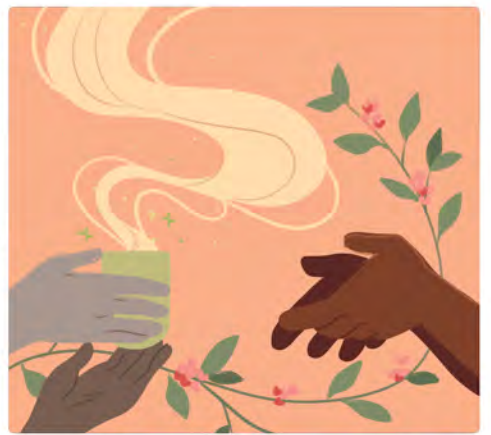


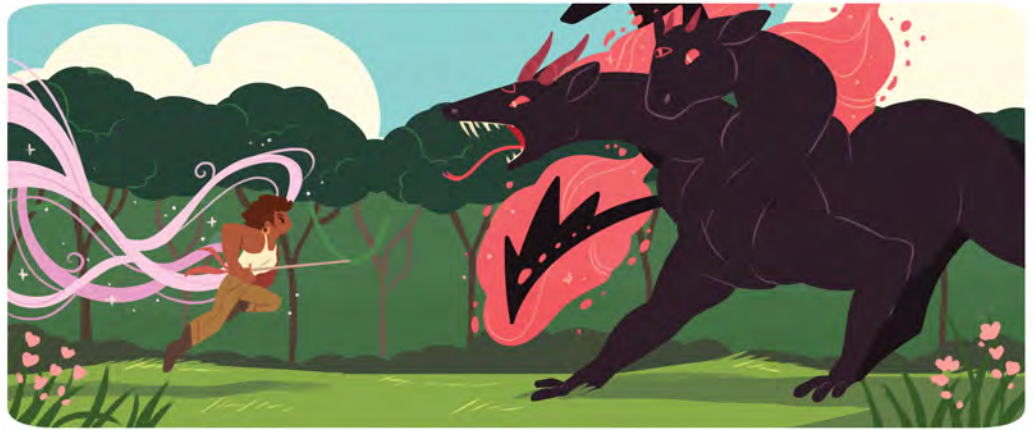
Are
you sure it's
okay?



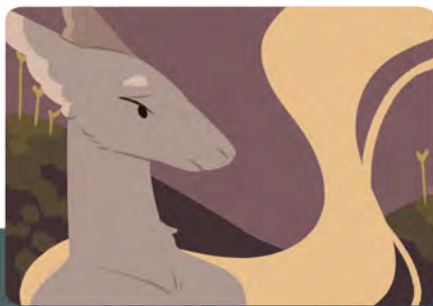
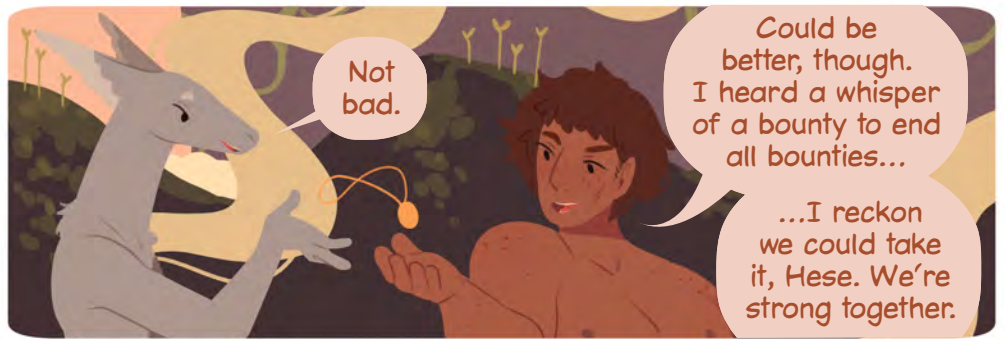
We
trust you,
Greta.

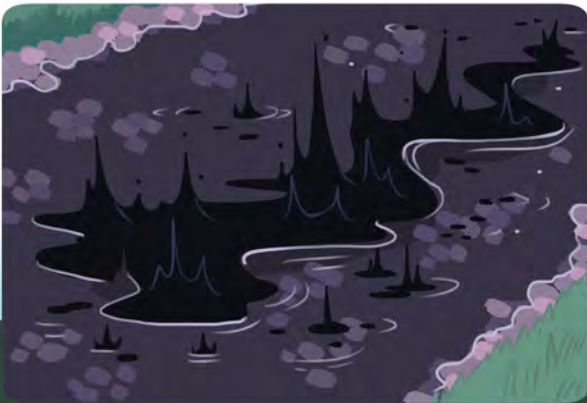
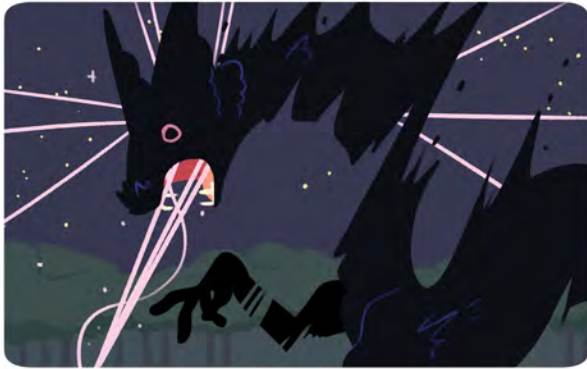




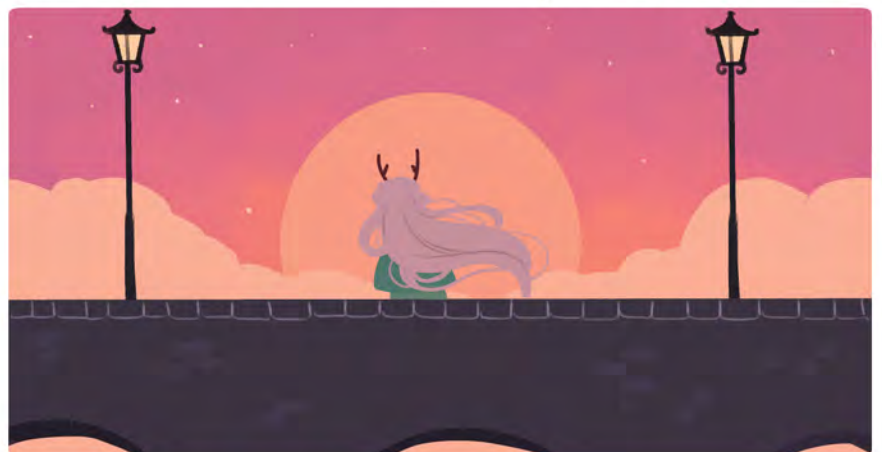
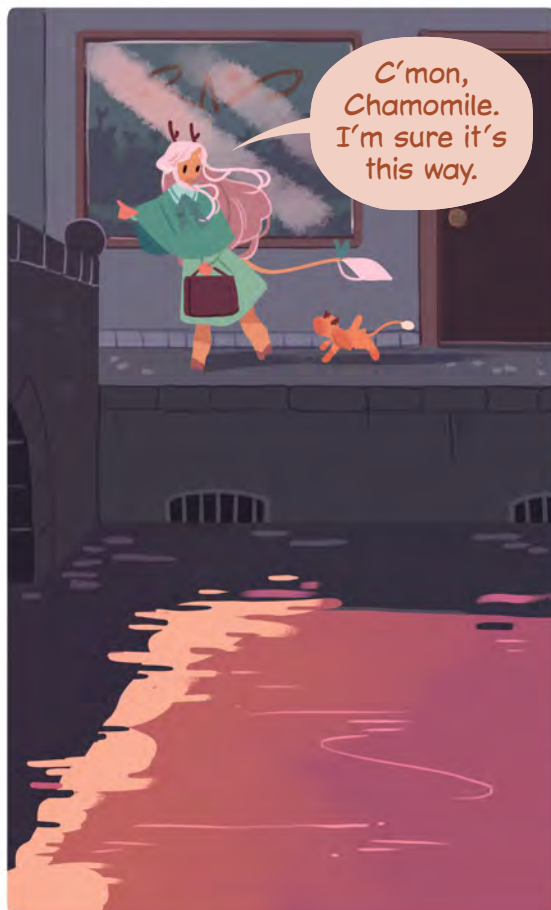














CHAPTER FOUR

Winter







Dear Mama and Papa,

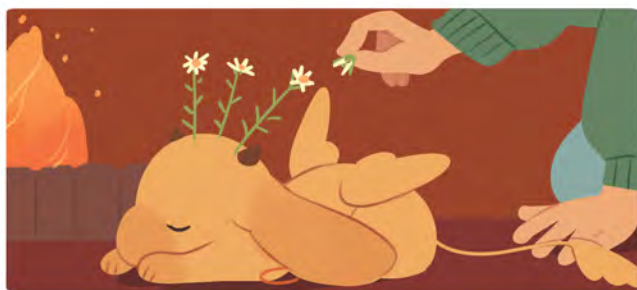
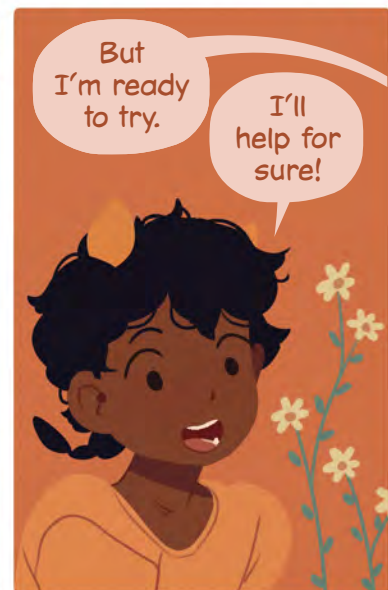
I'm sorry for taking so long to write to you after I ran away from the monastery. I want to find out who am when I don't have my gift anymore, and what I want to do. I can only do this by myself, but I'm not alone. I have many good people looking after me, and will be home as soon as I'm ready.

Love,
Your Minette

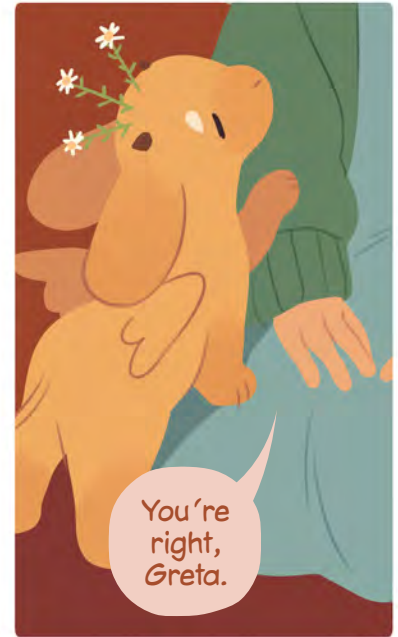
It feels weird to write a letter to people I barely remember...

...I know that they love me, though.













Beautifully done, my love.

I am happy you seem to be excited to use the forge again.



I don't want blacksmithing to be forgotten...

...I want to keep making objects for people to love and give them a story.

Maybe one day, someone'll think about who gave it to them or where they bought it.

Or who they shared it with.

Or who owned it long ago.

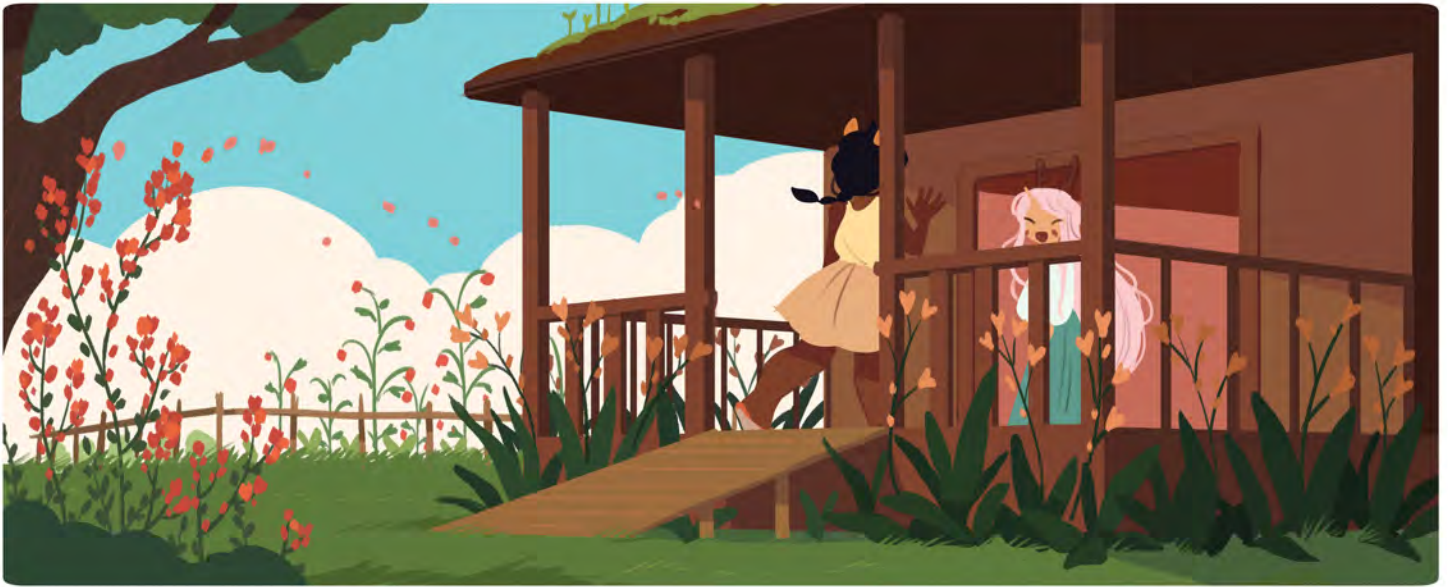
...That's a kind of magic, isn't it?



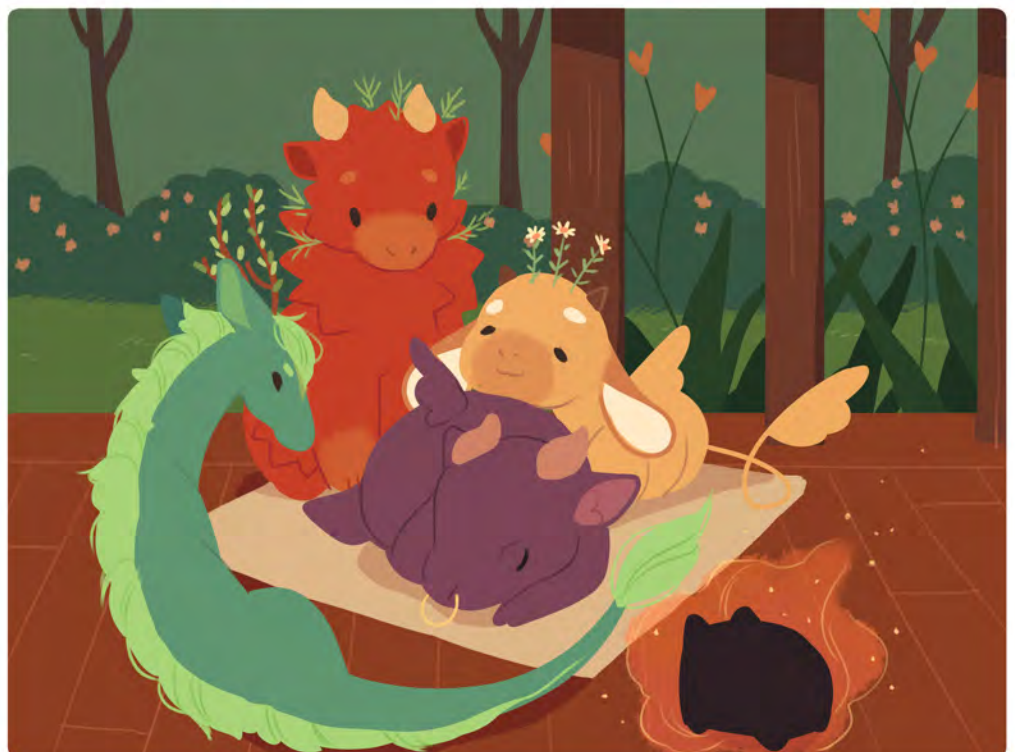
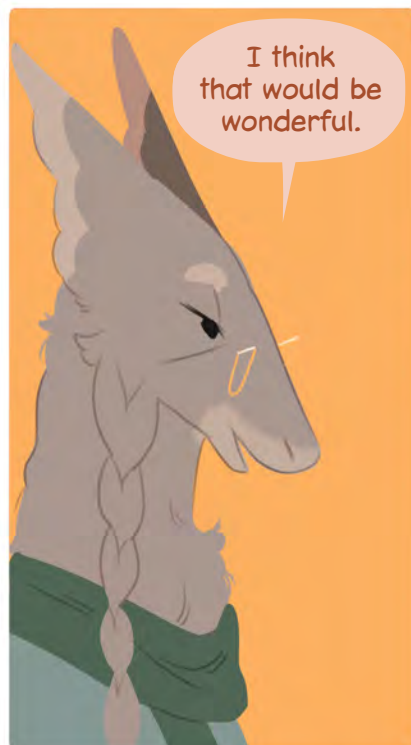
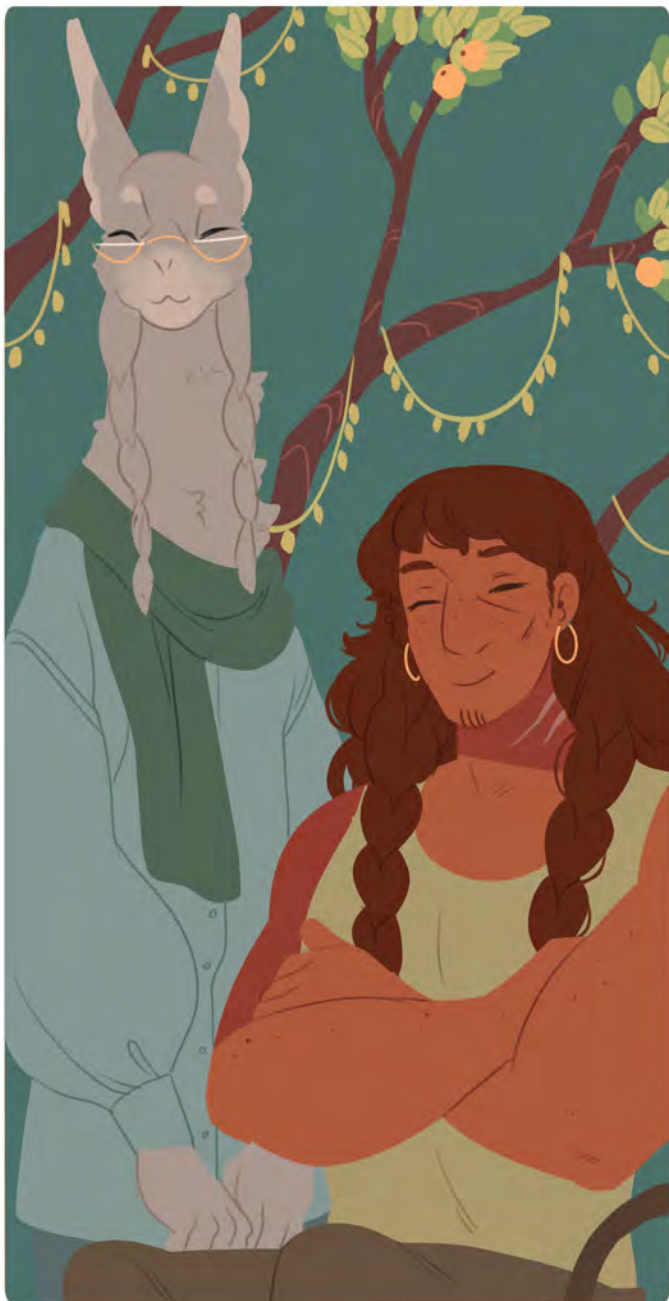
I believe it is.

Epilogue















EXTRACTS FROM THE

Tea Dragon Handbook



Welcome to the ancient and noble art of Tea Dragon husbandry...



Raising Tea Dragons is a highly rewarding and satisfying practice, though it requires a great deal of time and dedication. This book merely scratches the surface of knowledge that has been handed down across thousands of years, from one owner to another. It is advised that you read all of the content before deciding whether to raise a Tea Dragon or not, as it is a large commitment and not to be made lightly. For those who do choose this path, you will find a loving and loyal companion your whole life long.

ABOUT TEA DRAGONS

Tea Dragons are a small, highly domesticated breed of dragon that grow tea leaves out of their horns and antlers. The type of tea depends on the Dragon, and although mixed-tea varieties are possible, it is generally considered better practice to grow pure strains of tea and then mix as desired later. The Dragons retain the haughtiness and pride of their much larger ancestors; however, they lack any survival capabilities whatsoever. This makes them have high expectations of care and attention, and they become very nervous and worried if they are separated from their primary caregiver.



They have very specific requirements for grooming and care, such as daily brushing and rubbing with oils. Most Tea Dragons have short fur, though for some it is so short as to be more like a soft leather. They enjoy luxurious scented oils from almonds, olives and flowers, and the grooming process is a chance for the owner to bond with them. It can take a while to figure out the exact preferred brushing and polishing methods of each Dragon, so to begin with leather gloves is advised to protect from angry nips.

The tea leaves grown from their horns and antlers produce a very high quality tea that, when brewed correctly, has magical properties. Through their close bond and constant companionship, Tea Dragons naturally absorb and remember the various experiences they share with their owners. They are watchful creatures, and store these memories in their magical horns. The images are then imbued into the tea leaves, and so when brewed provide a taste of what was experienced. In this way they are able to give back to their owners for all the diligent and careful care they receive.



Tea Dragons are a very long-lived species, and well cared-for Dragons can live for over a thousand years. Sadly, this means they will outlive a number of owners. Due to their close bond, when an owner passes away, the dragon will shed its tea leaves in mourning and no longer produce any leaves that contain memories of that person. Therefore if others wish to preserve the memories, they will need to be careful to collect those fallen leaves. It takes a while—usually several years—before they begin to bond with a new caregiver. Once they trust a new owner, however, their adoration and dependence will be as strong as ever.

In this way, passing Tea Dragons from one owner to the next, the tradition has been kept alive for thousands of years across many generations. It is hoped that people such as yourself, reader, will be part of keeping this chain going into the future, bringing the joy of Tea Dragons to new ages.

TEA DRAGON SOCIETIES

Due to the highly specialised nature of raising Tea Dragons, many groups have formed throughout the world to exchange knowledge, skills and advice. Long-time owners of Tea Dragons joke that these are “support groups.” As Tea Dragons are a lifelong commitment, these societies don't always meet very often—twice a year is common, in summer and winter. The meetings are always accompanied by lots of fresh fruit, cheese and baked goods, and of course cups of tea. It is a good chance for Tea Dragons to socialise with others of their kind—they usually are too haughty to play or groom one another, but it reminds them that they are in fact dragons and not very small people.



Friendships formed at these meetings prove to be very strong—even if members lose touch with one another for several years or even decades, when they finally meet it is as if no time has passed. Perhaps this is because Tea Dragons remind one of how a decade is not very much time at all when you live for centuries. Owners of Tea Dragons often report that they felt themselves becoming more relaxed and peaceful after obtaining their Dragon, despite the rigorousness of the care required for them.

These societies are also an excellent way of comparing and learning from different Dragon care methods from many different cultures. Tea Dragons are found throughout the world in many different varieties depending on the endemic tea species, and each region has its own ways of grooming, feeding and collecting Tea Dragon leaves. Owners who have difficulties with their Dragon may find a method developed in a different country works better for them.

TEA DRAGON DAILY LIFE

Tea Dragons eat a staple diet of root vegetables, insects and fruit. They can be fed herbs and vegetables flavoured with spices in order to enhance and accent the flavour of their tea. Each Tea Dragon has a different eating schedule, which can only be discovered through trial and error. They

must be fed at exactly the right time, or they will be affronted and refuse to eat at all that day.

Some Tea Dragon owners spoil their Dragon with sugary snacks. This is not advised, as it puts the Dragons into a very bad mood. For Tea Dragon treats, extra-ripe fruits and baked vegetables such as pumpkin or squash are the best choice. It should be noted that Tea Dragons are lactose intolerant.



Tea Dragons do not require play; they require entertainment. Tea Dragons are proud and will not actively engage themselves in activities unless tricked into it. The good news is that Tea Dragons are immensely curious and nosy, and following their owner around as they perform daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning or going to the market is usually sufficiently entertaining. For most owners, it becomes hard to imagine going about everyday life without a sniffing inquisitive nose poking into their business.

TEA DRAGON LEAVES



One of the most remarkable properties of Tea Dragon tea leaves is that they store the memories and experiences the Tea Dragon shares with the owner. When stored and brewed correctly, they can bring these memories back to life through a mixture of taste, smell and vision created by drinking the tea. Little is known about why these memories began to be imbued into the tea leaves by the Dragons, but it only occurs when the bond between Dragon and owner is strong. Only experiences between the two are kept, nothing that the Dragon would have experienced on their own.

In order to preserve the memories at full strength, the leaves must be harvested at full bloom, collected carefully, dried and stored. Brewing fresh tea leaves directly will still create an effect, but it will not be as strong or pronounced as the dried tea. To brew the tea, it is preferred to use a cast iron tea pot to infuse minerals into the water. Heat the water to just before boiling point—it is important not to let it scald the leaves or the memories will appear foggy and unclear. It should be allowed to steep for 4-5 minutes, then drunk immediately.

Leaves from two different Dragons that share a strong connection can be brewed together to unify their shared experiences with their owners. This is a rare occurrence, as it takes a long time for Tea Dragons to bond to one another—much longer than to a new owner. However they will eventually settle into an easy grace with each other, as long as they both feel they are receiving adequate attention from their respective caregivers.

When drinking someone else's tea, you will be able to sense and see the memories stored in the leaves; however, the effect is far stronger for whomever the Dragon is primarily bonded with. For an outsider it will be like reading or watching a story—for the owner, it will feel like living that day again.



Jasmine Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 50 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 5 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves

CARE NOTES: Toenails grow very fast and require frequent trimming. Makes guttural screech noises when scared or displeased.

Jasmine Tea Dragons have a great deal of poise and elegance, and are probably the most self-conscious out of all the Dragons. They are watchful and intelligent, though this doesn't translate to any extra survival capability. With keen beady eyes, they quickly understand and interpret what their owners are doing during their daily routine, which makes it much easier to interfere and be a pest.



Rooibos Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 35 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 10 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves, dried flowers

CARE NOTES: Enjoys rough and tumble sparring, but the Dragon must always be allowed to win or they'll stop wanting to play.

Rooibos Tea Dragons are stout and active little creatures, and are happy to follow their owner on any adventure. Tea Dragons don't normally enjoy play activities, but Rooibos are the exception. Unfortunately, they don't realise that other Dragons don't share this enthusiasm, and will gently butt their heads against their chosen playmate for hours, trying to raise a response.



Chamomile Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 40 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 8 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Dried flowers

CARE NOTES: Unbelievably relaxed and sleepy, owners may need to wake them up to remind them to eat.

Chamomile Tea Dragons are probably the easiest variety for new owners to care for, as they are so relaxed and easygoing that it is very hard to bother them. They do have specific dietary preferences, but rather than getting upset, they will simply not bother eating, which can make it difficult to know what exactly they want. They sleep for around 18 hours a day.



Ginseng Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 30 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 10 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves and berries

CARE NOTES: Curious and with a keen sense of smell, they are liable to follow a scent for hours and get lost.

Ginseng Tea Dragons have one of the strongest bonds with their owners, and constantly look for ways to be praised by them. One of their favourite methods is to find and bring foods they know their owner likes. Unfortunately, they have no concept of property ownership, so this often ends with their owner apologising to whoever's goods they have stolen.



Earl Grey Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 55 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 10 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves & bergamot oil

CARE NOTES: Only grows one bergamot on its horns each year, and without the oil from this, the tea will have no magical property.

Earl Grey Tea Dragons are affectionately referred to by enthusiasts as “Little Grandpas.” They have a very dignified and habitual manner, and require strict accordance to daily schedules. They are thoughtful and quiet, and prefer to watch and observe rather than poke their nose in their owner’s business. That said, if they think no one is watching, they can be caught in all manner of silly poses.



Hibiscus Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 40 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 12 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Flowers

CARE NOTES: Prefers a warm climate with high humidity, and becomes sluggish at cold temperatures.

Hibiscus Tea Dragons are second only to Chamomile Dragons in terms of easygoing nature. They love to eat, and especially to share food with their owners, and have more adventurous tastebuds than most other Dragons. They are also extremely sociable, and owners of Hibiscus Dragons often report that they find themselves more compelled to try new foods and talk to new people.



Ginger Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 40 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 8 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves & horn extract

CARE NOTES: The horn is similar in texture and density to a root, and a tiny shaving will give the tea its ginger taste.

Ginger Tea Dragons are cautious and sensitive, and very attuned to moods and emotions. They are less proud than other Dragons but often shy, and will openly display affection for their owner but only in private. It is said that they can sense illness in people, and will try to alert those around them if they think someone is unwell and needs attention.



Peppermint Tea Dragon

AVERAGE LENGTH: 30 cm

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 5 kg

TEA BREWED BY: Leaves

CARE NOTES: Hates to be left alone, and will begin crying immediately if it thinks it has been abandoned.

Peppermint Tea Dragons are cheerful and friendly, but extremely needy. Their feelings are hurt easily by lack of attention. They don't like to feel second-place to anyone, and need constant assurance and affection. They are, however, excellent Tea Dragons for owners with families, as they love young children and are extremely patient with them.





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

They are the author of *Princess Princess Ever After*, *The Tea Dragon Society*, and *Aquicorn Cove*, all from Oni Press. They mostly make gentle fantasy stories for younger readers, and are very interested in tea, creatures, things that grow, and the magic of everyday life.

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After discovering a lost Tea Dragon in the marketplace, Greta learns about the dying art form of Tea Dragon caretaking from the kind tea shop owners, Hesekiel and Erik. As she befriends them and their shy ward, Minette, Greta sees how the craft enriches their lives—and eventually her own.



The Tea Dragon Society



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