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"Story?: A Study in
Literature, Game
Design, and Improv
Theatre

A Div III Exploration
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Storytelling is a collaborative art. In order for a story to exist, it must be told, interpreted, and re-told. So much of what we focus on when talking about how we interact with stories is on the part of the audience. How did we react to the story, how would we retell the story to someone else, would we tell it to someone else? In a lot of the literature and theories that I’ve looked at surrounding storytelling, it’s been about the consumers. What I want to focus on, however, is what the process feels like for the creator. How you choose what to share when you interact with your audience, how that feels different depending on what kind of audience interaction you want to receive. Creation is something that is deeply personal but it often comes with the caveat that you’re creating something to share. When I think about collaborative storytelling, I think about blurring the line between creator and consumer. That includes whether you’re directly involving someone else in the creation process, or if you want the audience’s experience to be less restrictive.

Thank you to Dr. Bajorek and Dr. Bradonjic; you both saw me through Div II and into Div III and I know for a fact I would not be able to accomplish nearly what I could have without you. Thank you for your continued support and belief in me, especially when I didn’t have it in myself.

What follows is a collection of documents and images that encompass what I’ve accomplished in my Div III. All take place in the same fictional universe of Thicketdown Forest and center around the characters of Cassava Mouse and Pyro the dragon. The three projects—further described in the retrospective essay—are an anthology of short stories, a video game, and a table-top one-shot. Included herein are the first three of the short stories that establish the world and the characters. Next are a series of game-building documents taken from my work archives in ‘The Recipe Book’ section. Last is an overview of the one-shot, titled ‘The Harvest Moon Festival,’ including character creation and an explanation of the mechanics.
Want to see all of my Div? Scan here to go to my website!
Retrospective Essay

When I first began thinking about my Div III, I was captivated by something I had stumbled upon during my Div II: the idea of participatory culture. It had come up during a class on fandom studies, talking about how the act of engaging with the source material—regardless of the form it took—is generative within itself. In turn, whatever you produced by interacting with the media you consumed could be built upon, creating a feedback loop where things could be sampled, remixed, and mashed together. As an active member of fandoms myself, I was well-versed in the ‘gift economy’ where work was traded back and forth to engage each other in a shared love for these worlds, these characters, these stories. Humans are primarily creative, storytelling beings, and communities form around stories that can be told, shared, and retold. The blurring of the line between author and audience is fascinating to me; we all bring our own subtext to the media we consume which in turn influence what we choose to create.

When I write fanfiction, it is first and foremost a representation of how I engage with the source material. I take the parts that mean the most to me, or the parts that leave me with the most questions, and I turn them into a story of their own to share with my community. At this point, I know how others will interact with my work; they read it, if I’m lucky they’ll leave a comment, if I’m extra lucky they’ll create something of their own based on the work I’ve done. But we’re all on even footing, we all have an equal sway over the source material—that is, not much at all as the canon doesn’t originate with us. Armed with the knowledge of how I interact with stories as a fan, I wanted to explore what it felt like to create something as the author. I was not interested in pitting original content against fan content, but rather creation with the expectation or hope of engagement versus creation as engagement. With that in mind, I wanted to explore different types of media creation with different gateways for the audience to interact.

I chose to write an anthology of short stories, a choose-your-own-adventure video game, and a table-top one-shot. My selection was based on my participation in fandom communities for all three types of media, and that each holds a very different line between creator and consumer. In a traditional anthology, the line is immovable. The author pens a series of stories, they are printed, and the audience reads them. They have little to no interaction with each other. For the video game, while it is true that the audience cannot change the text or nature of what the author had created, it is the author’s responsibility to create a big enough world with enough options for the audience—or player, in this case—to dictate their own experiences. By definition, there is a base level of engagement necessary on the audience’s part to get the full story. A table-top one-shot,
then, is a total act of collaboration between author and audience to the point where the roles become shared between parties. The author—in this case, the Game Master—is incapable of telling the story without the audience of their players, and the audience decides where and how the story of the one-shot will go.

When I first began work, I was obsessed with the idea of interactivity. How people would engage with my work, how they would take it and do something with it, how it would come back to me in some way, shape, or form. But as I began to work, I realized that in order to truly explore what that meant, I would need to build in time for people to interact with what I was doing and reflect on it. As I started to consider this possibility, I realized that I wasn’t really interested in the science or data-gathering aspect of my storytelling. I didn’t want to view people interacting with my work as points of data, or a chart or graph that I could present at the end. I wanted to celebrate it. I realized that I was still looking at this as though it were a fandom community, something where we were all on equal footing and were familiar with how to engage with each other, but that wasn’t what my Div was about, so I slowly divorced myself from the lure of interactivity to focus on the creator side. I began to focus more on the line between creator and consumer and how that informed my creation process. That isn’t to say there aren’t parallels between interactivity and participatory creation, but what spoke the loudest to me as I worked and created was how much I wanted to engage my audience, not how they would engage with my work and with me.

I tackled the three projects in order of what I considered to be learning curve difficulty. The prospect of creating a video game from scratch was extremely daunting, despite my prior experience in coding and game design, and so I started with learning how to use the software, Twine, and how to code for it. I created a few test games just to see how it worked, and then moved on to creating what would become The Recipe Book. I decided to incentivize replaying the game by including optional unlockable content that was only available if you played a certain route in a certain order, as that’s something I enjoy in the games I play. It was here, however, that I first encountered the notion that I had to trust my player to want to replay the game. No matter how many incentives I offered I had to trust that they would be intrigued enough by the crumbs I’d laid out to keep following them. I had some level of confidence, as people who choose to play a game like this go in with the expectation that they’ll need to make choices and choose to keep going, but it was an interesting thing I hadn’t built into my process.

This became more evident when I moved on to the one-shot. I had already decided on who my players would be; I’ve been playing table-top role-playing games with my group of friends since my first year at Hampshire and we were all familiar with each other’s play styles and boundaries. This time, however, would be my first time as the Game Master and we’d be using a system that was new to all of us. I decided against the more familiar systems we’d used in the past because of their technical and complicated mechanics. This campaign was supposed to be short, one session, instead of the year-long campaigns we’d done in the past and prioritize the narrative between the characters as opposed to their abilities. I was confident in my ability to learn the system and tell a story but because of the nature of this game, I had to rely on their ability to do the same. We had built that trust with our previous games, but it was the first time I understood how much trust I had to place in them and how much trust they placed in me to guide them through it. The tangibility of it was fascinating to explore.
Out of all of the things I’ve created for this Div, I’m most proud of the anthology. Not to say I’m not proud of the others, but there is a vulnerability in those stories that isn’t present in the other two. The line between creator and consumer is firmly drawn and there is no way for me to affect or demand any sort of engagement once I’ve passed the stories on to someone else. At the same time, there are opportunities for me to show what I think of this world I’ve created and the characters within, to speak unfiltered to the reader and show them the parts that I think are most important. This brought me back to why I write and create in the first place, what sort of stories I want to tell.

To the many people who asked me why I made my Div what I did, I gave the same answer; I wanted the excuse to drown myself in tenderness. To lightly have things happen and to lightly cope with them. To make a world where things would happen, and problems may occur but only with the assurance that things would be okay. To have the catharsis of getting hurt and knowing that you would be comforted, that someone would see you at your worst and choose to stay, to help you. And that the comfort would not be a burden, that it was something people who cared for you would undertake willingly as they chose to be in your life; that you are worth the work it takes to love you. I wrote the type of stories that I need, my ideas about friendship and work and doing the work. It’s not a value that I want the characters to have, I show them building it within themselves and with each other. In turn, then, I extend the same offering to the reader. If you choose to care, if you put the emotional work into getting invested, going on this journey, the tenderness will envelop you too. If you decide to read it lightly and that’s all, then you won’t. My hope is that you enjoy it regardless.
Most people today live in big cities. Big, bustling areas with lots of concrete and people living on top of each other. And everybody knows how to get around and everybody says hi to their neighbors.

Some people live in smaller towns. Smaller, not quite as bustling areas with fewer buildings and people live a little farther apart. But everybody knows how to get around and everybody says hi to their neighbors.

Almost no one lives in the middle of nowhere. One minuscule area with one building and only one person living miles away from everyone else. But usually, they know how to get around and would still say hi to their neighbors if they had them.

But no one lives in the Thicketdown Forest. There are no buildings and no people. Nobody really knows how to get around and there are no neighbors to say hi to.

Most people who wander in to Thicketdown Forest stay for a while, walk around, then go back to their homes. Some stay a little longer and set up temporary places to stay but know very little about how to get around. They normally know by the trees.

There is a large tree in the middle of the Thicketdown Forest, close to the Draymack River. In the mornings, when the sun is still hidden behind the bushes, the cool breeze makes the water from the river rise into the air and a thin layer of fog comes to swirl around the tree’s branches. Lots of moss plants, who like the fog, grow all over the branches, making the tree look like it is dripping with plants. This is what gives the tree its name: the Fogmoss Tree.

When the sun pokes its face over the bushes and trees, the fog falls back to the ground and flows into the river, at least until the next morning. The ground under the roots is nice and soft because of the water that flows by and some of the roots have little knots in them that open up inside because of how old the wood is; being warmed by the sun and worn down by the snow makes the wood spongy and smooth. This is where Cassava Mouse lives.
Every morning, when the fog swirls around the Fogmoss Tree, Cassava scurries outside to the knots on her root. She has built little cups out of acorn tops and set them up in the nooks and crannies of the wood that faces towards the Draymack River. Cassava peers into her little acorn cups.

Water sparkles inside and she is quick to cover the acorns with the leaf lids and scurry them back to the burrow. Water is best when it comes from the Fogmoss Tree, you know.

When she is back inside, she puts the acorn with the leaf lids in the part of her burrow attached to the main root that leads back to the Fogmoss Tree. Back there it is nice and cool, so the water stays cold. She likes it back there too, especially during the summers when the sun makes it really hot outside, or during the winters because the wind cannot reach her.

Once she grabs her water, she scurries back to her stores in another section of the root to check how much food she has gathered. She needs to have food at least three-whiskers deep before the winters arrive. She is only one-whisker deep so far.

The sun is peeking over the bushes when she scurries back outside. She sniffs the air and the ground. The summer is ending. She is better off putting on her coat first. Scurrying back inside to the little roots by the entrance, she fetches the woven grass coat her grand-mouse had given her three winters ago. The sun has made it slightly browner than the grass around her burrow, which is fine because then when she accidentally leaves it outside, she can find it pretty easily.

Her favorite foraging patch is a few bunny jumps away from Fogmoss Tree, in the bushes. That is also where most of her friends live, so she can see them when she goes to gather food. Normally Theodore Urtle is sleeping on the large rock bed, or Tessa Bunny is sniffing around the clover field, or Christian Magpie has flown in for a little bit and is talking about all of the fantastic things he has seen on his journeys. He’s quite the chirper.

There is a blueberry patch next to a rose bush where she can find enough of both to make her blueberry-rose jam. It is excellent with acorn stew and a capful of moss tea. She likes to make it when she has her grand-mouse over, or when the swallow twins, Thyme and Tassel Swallow, come to visit. They came two suns ago, so they will not be back until the winter is gone. But sometimes she just likes to have it in the burrow. She enjoys it too.

The bush’s branches grow very close to the ground, creating little tunnels with vaulted ceilings where the branches grow so close and so thick that they weave together. That leaves just enough room for Cassava to scurry through, climbing the branches to reach the very top of the bush. The best blueberries grow at the top of the bush, you know. She gathers them up, taking care to test each one for juiciness with a prod of her paws before carefully nibbling the stem away and carrying it back to her burrow. She can only carry about three at once; she is only a little mouse after all.

She can carry the little nuts and berries from the other bushes in her cheeks at the same time. She fills her mouth and holds the blueberries in one of her front paws while she scurries. When she was still no bigger than a baby maple leaf, she would often tumble over the roots and her food would scatter. Now that she is bigger, she has had time to work on her balance.
She has to make sure to pack the blueberries into her stores last, because otherwise the juice will get out all over her patchwork quilt. So she puts the little berries and nuts in first, leaves the roses out by the stove so she can make her jam, and then carefully balances the blueberries on top.

Then after all of that, she has normally made quite a mess. Forests are not normally known for their cleanliness, after all.

Cassava’s grand-mouse was always a stickler for cleanliness, said it was a mouse’s duty to keep the burrow clean so one’s whiskers didn’t shrivel. Cassava is not sure if she believes that. There is not a speck of dust in her grand-mouse’s house, and she has never seen a more shriveled pair of whiskers. But she does like her burrow clean, so she takes care.

The Fogmoss Tree’s branches are really big, so there are enough sticks around for Cassava to make a broom handle out of one and attach a dandelion bloom to one end. It is small enough and light enough for her to stand on her hind legs and sweep. It’s very handy.

She starts at the back and works her way forward. It’s more efficient that way. The back burrow, near the stores, has her patchwork quilt and a bed of moss with a thistle for her pillow. She sweeps around the bed for any moss that may have fallen out of the branch frame and straightens the quilt. The path to the stores is often a little dirtier than the rest of the burrow because there’s enough food to overflow a little bit when she stores it properly. But that is okay. Cassava would rather have too much food than too little. She sweeps what food is outside back in, then moves on to the kitchen area. When the sun comes up, it heats the little ledge outside her curtain so she can bake her acorn bread and the little berry pies she loves to have with her moss tea. The ledge does not normally get too dirty because the fog cleans it every night. Although, sometimes she will forget a cup of moss tea or a pie on the ledge and it will be ruined. So she does have to clean that up.

Between the ledge and the back burrow, there is a little nook in the bend of the root, and that is where her furniture is. Christian Magpie dropped off this big golden coin that she balanced atop a bump in the root floor to use as her table. There are two leaf chairs on either side, made out of two leaves each, that get nice and toasty in the winters. She has to repair them every so often so the leaves do not fall over. She sweeps for any extra crumbs before sweeping the pile of dirt out the door.

After all of that, she is hungry. And she left the roses out by the stove. She can make leaf-and-rose-petal salad and still have enough left over for rose and blueberry jam.

She finishes eating and sets the caps of newly made jam on the root shelves and heads up to the top of her root. She likes to watch the water flowing in the stream. The babbling water as it goes over the rocks makes pretty patterns when the sun bounces its light onto the bark of the trees and the logs on the bank. Occasionally, a little piece of bark or a leaf will fall from the Fogmoss Tree and Cassava likes to watch as it drifts down the river, twisting and dipping until it’s out of sight. By then, it is normally dark, so she goes back inside to sleep. She enjoys the forest, but she likes her burrow better. It is nice and cozy.

One day, when she is foraging around for more acorns, she comes across a sunken part in the bushes. She scurries forward cautiously, reminded of the stories her grand-mouse used to tell her about falling into pits and not being able to scurry out. Her snout bumps into something rough and scaly.
For a second, she thinks Uelena Rattlesnake is back, but then a head pops up. It is definitely not Uelena Rattlesnake.

“Hello,” she chitters nervously, “my name is Cassava Mouse. What’s your name?”

The creature unfolds its body and turns to face Cassava. It looks a little bit like grand-mouse’s friend Mr. I. Guana, but this creature is skinnier and has two pieces of skin folded against its back. As it walks out of the bush, Cassava realizes they are wings, but not the feathery wings of Thyme and Tassel. These wings look more like bat wings, like Dr. Moonlight, even though this creature is much larger than Dr. Moonlight, almost the size of Tabby Cat. The creature bows its head, looking at Cassava with amber eyes that remind her of the golden-brown leaves when summer ends and the sun shines through them.

“Hello, Cassava Mouse.” The creature’s voice is...old. But not like her grand-mouse’s voice, which creaked and wheezed with the years. This creature’s voice has a rumble to it that sounds like the breeze when it blows through the branches of the Fogmoss Tree, or the rushing of the water in the Draymack River as it goes around the rocks. “My name is Pyro.”

“Hello, Pyro,” she says, “why have you come to Thicketdown?”

“Is that what this place is?” Pyro looks around, head swiveling from side to side. “It is...pleasant. And soft.”

“Soft?” Cassava’s nose wriggles. Little twigs and brambles cover the ground under the bush. It is nothing like her patchwork quilt or the spongy wood of the roots.

“Yes,” Pyro says, “where I come from everything is different. It is all rocks and sand. Not...this.” The creature bends its neck and noses at a twig that rolls towards Cassava. “What do you call these? They look like the tall green trees, but smaller.”

“These are twigs,” Cassava says as she picks it up and offers it to Pyro, “they fall from the bushes and the Fogmoss Tree when the wood breaks off.”

“I see...” Pyro looks around. “Is that your Fogmoss Tree?”

Cassava turns. Pyro’s nose points upwards at the branches of the tree. “Yes, but it’s not mine. I just live in it. In the roots.”

“Inside?”

“Yes, inside. It keeps me safe at night and when the rains come and the winds blow.”

“I had a cave once. It kept me safe when the winds blew.” Pyro sounds...sad?

Cassava chitters nervously. “What happened to your cave?”

The creature shakes its large head slowly back and forth. “I do not know. I was flying next to my cave and the winds blew. They blew too fast and I was lost to the skies. I do not know how to get back to my cave, so I hid under this bush.” Pyro shrinks back undercover. “The winds cannot get me here.”
Cassava’s little mouse heart races. She has heard Tassel and Thyme’s stories about what happens to birds who get caught in the wind. Pyro is bigger than the twins, so the wind that blew must have been really strong.

“And even if I knew how to find my cave, I could not go back.” Pyro nudges its left wing with its snout. “The winds were too strong for my wings, and now there is something wrong. I cannot fly properly.”

Cassava peeks her little head around to look. There is a part on Pyro’s wing that looks bent, like someone has taken a leaf and pulled until the stem twists the wrong way. In the creature’s effort to unfurl its wings, the wing twists back for a little while, then Pyro makes a groaning rumbling sound and the wings lower, bending back out of shape. It lowers its head, nose almost brushing the dirt.

“That is alright. I am not sure where my cave is, and even if I continue to miss it so dearly I will not know. So I will stay here.” It noses around the bush. “It is soft here, and dark, and there is food.” It shrinks back into itself, using its wings to shield its head. “And the winds cannot reach me.”

Pyro seems to shake itself and looks back up at Cassava. “But I do not wish to be rude. I have talked about myself for a long while. Would you like to describe your home for me, Cassava Mouse?”

She thinks. She does not know Pyro that well, and her grand-mouse always warned her about telling strangers too much. They could be dangerous, she remembers, especially if they are bigger than you. Then she looks at Pyro’s eyes again. They are warm, like the wood of her root when the sun rests its light on the Fogmoss Tree, and curious.

“My home is in a root a few bunny jumps away,” she starts, “and it’s warm too. When the sunlight reaches the Fogmoss Tree, the inside gets very warm. But the further back you go, it gets cooler, which is nice for storing my food and sleeping.”

“Storing your food?” Two ridges on Pyro’s head furrow like Helena Rattlesnake’s eyelids. “What do you mean?”

“Well, in the winters, when it gets cold, it’s not safe for me to go outside to get food. So I gather a lot of it at the end of the summers and then I won’t have to leave my burrow.”

“Burrow…” Pyro tests the word in its mouth. The rumble in the creature’s voice sounds like the forest itself is calling Cassava home. “Do you like your burrow, Cassava Mouse?”

“Oh, yes!” Cassava covers her mouth with her little paws. Sometimes she gets a little excited and squeaks. Her grand-mouse always told her it’s not polite to squeak in company.

“Why are you covering your mouth?” Pyro asks, head tilting to the side. “Is it uncommon to love one’s home in Thicketdown? Did you misspeak?”

Miss squeak is more like it, Cassava thinks. “No,” she says instead, “but it is rude to squeak loudly with company.”

“Am I your company?”

“Yes, of course.”
“Perhaps it is different in where I come from, but one normally determines what is polite or impolite by what bothers their guest. Your excitement about your burrow does not bother me, Cassava Mouse. In fact, it is quite the opposite. I will be happy to hear about your burrow.”

Happily, Cassava talks about the patchwork quilt on her bed, the leaf chairs in the little nook, the curtain, and the baking ledge outside, how she collects her water. Pyro listens and nods and rumbles as she chitters. Too soon, Cassava looks up and realizes the sun has almost touched the banks of the Draymack River. She hasn’t even gathered any food.

“Cassava Mouse?” Pyro rumbles, “is everything alright?”

“Yes,” she says, “but I have to go. It’ll be dark soon, and I have to get home.”

“Then may the winds be kind as you go home,” Pyro says, “and if you wish to talk with me again, I will be here.” With that, the creature settles itself in the bush.

Cassava takes one more look at the bush before scurrying home. As she sips her moss tea and nibbles her acorn loaf, she thinks about Pyro. She has never seen anyone like Pyro in Thicketdown Forest before, at least not in the area by the Fogmoss Tree, and she is not sure where else it could be from. She keeps thinking as she tidies away and gives her burrow one more sweep before snuggling under her patchwork quilt. She wonders about how strange and frightening for Pyro this must be; alone in a strange place with a broken wing and no way to get home.

As she falls asleep, she decides she is going to be Pyro’s friend.

As it turns out, this is easy. Pyro is eager to learn and happy to listen, and very good at helping Cassava reach the best berries and roses. She clambers up on top of its head and lets it lift her to the very tops of the bushes. Even if Pyro does eat some of the berries that fall to the ground. It makes Cassava laugh when the creature tries to hide behind its wing when she scolds it halfheartedly. In truth, Cassava thinks it is a little endearing. One day, she binds a twig to its broken wing with blades of grass to help it heal in place. Pyro nearly bowls her over in its effort to thank her. When they are not foraging, they talk. About home, about winters, summers, creatures they know. Apparently, Pyro has seen birds near its cave who look a lot like Christian Magpie.

One day, Cassava decides to bring Pyro something else to eat besides blueberries and roses. She loves blueberries and roses, but if that was all she ate, she would get tired of them. And she would run out. Bushes can only grow so fast, you know. So when she puts on her coat and makes to scurry outside, she takes her twig-and-grass basket and places a loaf of her acorn bread and a berry pie inside. She ties the basket shut and scurries to Pyro, whose head is poking out of the bush, eyes watching the sky as the white clouds drift across. The creature is harder to spot now; the leaves of all the trees have turned golden browns, reds, oranges, and yellows, and are falling to the ground. Pyro’s warm scales blend into the branches of the bush so that Cassava has to scurry closer before she can see its body.

“Hello, Cassava Mouse,” Pyro says, “there is a large clump of berries near the top of the bush. Would you like to share it with me?”

“Of course,” Cassava chitters, “and I’ve brought food to share too!”
“You have?” Pyro tilts its head to the side. “Thank you, Cassava Mouse. What have you brought?”

“Let’s get the berries first,” she says, scurrying over to where Pyro’s head is resting on the ground. She holds onto the two little ridges on the back as Pyro slowly raises her until she can see the blueberries.

They shine a deep blue, like the night sky, with a purple tint to the tops where the flesh has started to dye the leaves around it. When she prods them gently with a paw, the dew runs down onto the stems and their weight makes them shake in the bush. Pyro waits patiently as she nibbles through the stem and takes the clump in her paws. When she is lowered to the ground, she places the berries on the ground and unties her basket.

“What is this?” Pyro asks, lowering its snout to sniff the loaf and the pie. Cassava explains, recalling Pyro’s interest in her baking ledge. “You...made these? That is...incredible. We do not bake where I come from. We can warm things to eat and we can roast if necessary, but we do not mix them together.”

“If you like, I can show you!”

“I would very much enjoy that, Cassava Mouse. Shall we eat now?”

Eagerly, the pair tuck in. As Cassava nibbles, she watches Pyro carefully use one of its claws to break off a little piece of pie and lower its mouth to take a small bite. Its eyes go wide enough for Cassava to see the reflection of the clouds in the bright blue sky.

“This is the most delicious thing anyone ever gave me before this moment,” Pyro rumbles, “thank you, Cassava Mouse.”

Cassava’s little mouse heart jumps into her throat. The only other person who loved her baking like this was the old badger, Mr. Hornsworth, before he went to the forest bed. She meekly repeats that she would like to show Pyro how she bakes. “It might be a little difficult with winter coming, the sun won’t be as warm.”

“I may be able to help you,” Pyro says, “my fire should be warm enough.”

“Fire?” Cassava squeaks, “What do you mean ‘fire?’”

“Dragons can typically breathe fire, can they not?” Pyro looks at her curiously. “Does that frighten you?”

Fire. When the forest is thick and black and she cannot see and it hurts and she has to scurry to the Draymack River and hide on a stone in the water and hope her burrow does not burn.

Cassava looks at Pyro. It looks at her cautiously from under the bush branches. Its head cocks to the side and the twig lashed to its wing pokes out a little from its scales. Pyro is a dragon. It has fire breath.

And it is still far from home, injured, and still very much her friend.

“No, Pyro,” Cassava says finally, “you don’t frighten me.”

“That is good, Cassava Mouse,” Pyro rumbles quietly, “it would not do if I frightened my friend.”
“We’ll figure out how to bake,” Cassava promises, “I want to.” She looks back down at the rest of their meal. “I would also enjoy a cup of my moss tea with this. Or my blueberry tea.”

“Tea?”

“When you have something and mix it in hot water,” Cassava explains, “it’s called tea.”

“I would like to try it if you do not mind,” Pyro says, looking behind into the back of the bush. “I have been drinking from the dewdrop puddle in the center of the bush. It is much fresher and sweeter than the water from my cave, but it is still plain water.”

“Wait ’till you try the water from the Fogmoss Tree,” Cassava chitters, “it’s the best.”

“I very much look forward to it.”

They wait until the next day—Cassava assures Pyro this is a full-day affair—and Cassava takes her basket with her so she can bring home enough food for two loaves and four pies. The pies are a lot smaller than a loaf.

Pyro is waiting for her when she gets to the clearing. The dragon is looking around nervously—it is the first time Cassava has seen Pyro outside the bush, which is now more a collection of twigs than a bush now that winter is almost here—but looks quickly in her direction when she scurries up.

“You’re out of the bush!” Cassava takes the time to examine its wing. “And your wing’s looking much better.”

“Yes, it has almost healed.” Pyro bows its head. “Thank you, Cassava Mouse.”

Cassava does not really want to have a repeat of their previous discussion where she explained she is happy to help, so she says: “You’re welcome.” Like a polite mouse would. “Can you help me gather the things we’ll need to bake today?”

Pyro nods. She directs them to the cluster of nuts and smaller berries under the bigger trees around the clearing, using Pyro to scurry up to the little cracks in the bark to grab more. When she has packed her basket full and Pyro has been outside enough to feel a little more confident moving around, she hops down and begins the scurry back to her burrow. Pyro follows slowly; she is much faster on her little mouse legs. Pyro’s legs stick out to the side as opposed to right under its body, but they make it back to the root of the Fogmoss Tree without too much trouble. She can see her little acorn caps where she has set them out for her water and the little curtain pulled over the window to her kitchen. She is about to scurry inside when she notices Pyro’s still staring up at the Fogmoss Tree, the green reflecting in its amber eyes.

The dragon’s wings flop gently against the ground. Cassava scurries back to its side and looks up.

“What is it?”

“The branches...” Pyro rumbles, “they are covered in green. They are so...alive. And the air around them! It is like looking at something being created from nothing. It is incredible.”
They sit in the grass between the clearing and the Fogmoss Tree, watching the mist curl over the branches and the moss.

When the sun rises up high in the sky, the mist dissipates, and they go inside. Pyro holds its wings close to its body and stops in the space by the entrance. Cassava drops the basket near her kitchen and starts to pull out the leaves and acorns to mix everything together. She stops when she sees Pyro has not moved.

“You described your burrow in great detail to me,” it rumbles, “but you did not mention that it was so...safe.”

Cassava feels her little mouse heart race again. The fact that Pyro just arrived and it feels safe in here after the nights spent in the bush is...well, Cassava is not sure what to call it.

“Do you want to start baking now?”

“Yes, of course,” Pyro says. Joining her by the stove, careful of its wingspan, the dragon watches eagerly as Cassava dices the nuts and mashes the berries into a filling she pours into the acorns.

When she has finished separating the mixture, she selects one of them and turns to Pyro. She holds it between her paws. “Will you help me finish it now, please?”

Pyro nods. “It will be best if we go outside; I do not wish to damage anything of yours.”

She scurries to follow the dragon out. It motions for her to set the pie in a small pile of dirt. She does so.

“Please, stay out of the way. I do not wish to harm you either.” Pyro lowers its neck so she can crawl into the nestle of its back. She clutches the little spines the run along the length of its body and waits. A low thwoompth sound followed by a rush of warmth along Pyro’s body lasts for a few seconds, then everything is still again.

“As I am not experienced in the art of pie baking, I am not sure if this is satisfactory,” Pyro muses as it lowers her to the ground, “however, I have tried to replicate the state of the one you so kindly brought me yesterday.”

Cassava scurries forwards. It is perfect: the berry-and-nut filling is bubbling slightly, the acorn is toasted to a firm crisp, and the pie is browned at the edges.

“This is amazing!” She squeaks, holding it up for Pyro to see. “Thank you!”

“Of course, Cassava Mouse,” Pyro says, “my pleasure. Shall we continue with the next ones?”

They quickly make the rest of the pies and the acorn loaves. Cassava suggests making a leaf pot of moss tea but Pyro points out the fire would cook the acorn mug too — they are better off using the sun’s warmth for that. So Cassava scurries onto Pyro’s back and the two of them climb the Fogmoss Tree to pick some of the moss on the lower branches. She mixes it into the leaf pouches and places them in acorn caps of water and sets them out on the ledge to steep.

“Cassava Mouse? Cassava Mouse!” Pyro’s scared voice makes her scurry back.
What’s wrong? She looks around. Has a branch fallen? Is something wrong with Pyro’s wing again?

“I…” the dragon bows its head, embarrassed, “I could not see you. I feared you had fallen, or you had gone away. I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you.”

“Oh,” Cassava chitters, “it’s okay! I used to play a game with my grand-mouse like that, I would hide and she would come and find me. She used to pretend she was scared, but she wasn’t. I’m sorry about that!”

“Do not apologize,” Pyro says, “your game does sound interesting.”

“Would you like to play?”

“Alright.”

“Okay, close your eyes and count to ten.”

Pyro does as bid, tucking its head under its wing and counting. Cassava scurries back up into the roots, poking her head between two of them to watch Pyro straighten and begin looking around. The dragon walks towards the banks of the Draymack River, sniffs around, before turning and looking back at the roots of the tree. Cassava squeaks when a claw nudges her.

“Found you,” Pyro says, looking down at the little mouse, “you were correct. This is a fun game.”

“Your turn to hide now!” Cassava covers her eyes with her paws and counts.

“One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten!”

She opens her eyes and looks around. She cannot see Pyro in the roots, and she cannot see anything by the banks of the Draymack River. Then she looks up.

“Found you!”

Pyro lay across one of the branches, head and body pressing against the moss. “Forgive me,” the dragon rumbles, “I was trying to climb up into the branches, but this moss is so soft that I did not want to move.” It stretches lazily. “I shall count now.”

They keep playing, Cassava hiding in the leaf piles and roots, Pyro sitting next to larger rocks and under roots, until one time, Cassava cannot find Pyro anywhere. She checks her burrow, she scurries up the Fogmoss Tree, the dragon is not anywhere. Slightly worried, she scurries to the Draymack River.

“Pyro! I can’t find you, where are you?” She calls for her friend, her little mouse voice carrying down the water and across the forest. Then bubbles appear in the water below her.

She squeaks and tumbles away from the bank. When she looks up again, it is Pyro, looking at her with those amber eyes and its head tilted to the side.

“Hello, Cassava Mouse.”
“Pyro!”

The dragon clambers out of the water and shakes itself off. The problem is, it shakes a little too hard and it is sent tumbling across the muddy bank, right into Cassava. They roll through the grass back towards the burrow. They end up in a heap next to the entrance, below the ledge where their cups of tea sit waiting patiently.

“That was fun!”

“Yes,” Pyro agrees, “though I do believe I am now quite thirsty.”

“You were just underwater!”

“Yes, but I was hiding, not drinking.”

They laugh and go inside, Pyro curling up as Cassava hands out the mugs. They drink in quiet, listening to the breeze as it ruffles the leaves of the Fogmoss Tree and the water as it flows over the rocks in the Draymack River. When the sun dips below the riverbanks, Pyro sets down the mug and stands.

“Thank you for today, Cassava Mouse. I will not soon forget it, but I am afraid I must go now. I must find somewhere else to sleep now that the winters are coming.”

“Wait!” Cassava chitters as the dragon goes to leave. “You can stay here!”

Pyro turns back. “What?”

“If you need someplace to stay, my burrow is large enough for both of us,” Cassava explains, “and it would be nice to have someone to share the winters with.”

As she talks, she realizes how true it is. She likes her burrow, but in the winters, when the nights are long and it is cold and she does not go outside, she misses the warmth. And when Pyro said it felt safe in her burrow, it was warm.

She wants Pyro to stay.

“Are you sure, Cassava Mouse?” Pyro asks.

“Yes,” Cassava says, “please stay.”

“Alright,” Pyro rumbles softly, “I will stay. Thank you.”

And when the winters come, and Cassava is curled under her patchwork quilt, Pyro settles in next to her, lifting a wing to cuddle her against its side. And she feels safe, tucked up against this thrumming warmth that wraps around her.

Here, the wind cannot get either of them.

One day, when Cassava wakes up, her nose twitches in the air. Spring.

“Pyro!” Cassava squeaks, nudging the dragon awake, “it’s spring!”
“How do you know, Cassava Mouse?” Pyro asks, voice even more gravelly from sleep.

“I can smell it. Come on!” They hurry to the entrance of the burrow and look out.

The Fogmoss Tree is covered in new moss, growing in the crevices of the bark. The river is flowing swiftly around the rocks amidst the rocks and bare mud. And everywhere is the sweet, sharp smell of frost and growing leaves.

Pyro flexes its wings and the old twig, grown dry over the long winter, snaps. They watch as the wood splinters.

“My wings…” Pyro tests them. “They are healed. I can…”

The dragon steps away from the burrow and flaps. A gust of wind sends the little seedlings tumbling across the dirt as Pyro rises into the air.

“I can fly again!”

“You can fly again!”

They laugh excitedly and Pyro swoops in joy. Cassava claps her paws together. “Come on, I’ll make you some blueberry-rose tea.”

Every day, Pyro builds its strength, flying for longer and longer. It is fine with Cassava; she likes to watch the dragon fly. And it helps her gather more food and carry greater amounts. In the evenings, they bake together and enjoy a cup of tea. Pyro takes to sleeping on one of the moss-covered branches outside—it gets warm in the spring next to a dragon, you know.

But one day, when Cassava scurries outside to fetch her water, Pyro is not there. She looks in the burrow. Not there. She scurries to the clearing and peers under the bushes. Not there. She even looks up and down the Draymack River. Not there.

She knew Pyro wanted to go home, but she thought at least it’d say goodbye first.

“Cassava Mouse?”

Pyro! She looks up as the dragon lands next to her, dropping the roses and blueberries from its mouth. It looks at her curiously.

“Are you alright?”

“Pyro!” She cannot say anything other than the dragon’s name, scurrying forward and wrapping her tiny forelegs around its neck. Pyro rests its head against her and shelters them with its wings.

“What is wrong? Did something happen?”

“I thought you went home,” Cassava confesses, squeaking sadly, “back to your cave.”

“Without saying goodbye?”

She nods. Pyro shakes its head firmly.
“I would never do that to you. I woke earlier than you and decided to go see if the bushes had sprouted any fruit yet. I found a few that I wanted to bring back.” Pyro bows to indicate the gifts dropped at Cassava’s feet. “And to thank you for letting me stay.”

Cassava does not speak. Her little mouse throat is too overwhelmed so she gathers the things in her paws and makes to go back inside.

“Cassava Mouse?”

She looks back. Pyro is staring puzzled at the ground.

“Is it not customary, when one lives in a certain place for a while, to call that place one’s home?”

“Yes.”

“And one can share a home with another, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” Pyro rumbles quietly as its head inclines toward Cassava, “is my home not here with you?”

*Home.*

“Yes,” Cassava Mouse says, resting her paw on Pyro’s front claw, “this is your home."

And now, in the mornings, when the fog swirls around the Fogmoss Tree, Cassava Mouse scurries out to fetch the acorn caps filled with the dew of the branches, and to see Pyro stretching in the sun. She fetches the water and goes inside to store it away, and then she goes back outside and climbs on Pyro’s back.

They fly to their favorite foraging patch and gather nuts, berries, and flower petals to make their tea, jam, and pies. They have discovered lilac-and-bark jam is almost as good as blueberry-rose jam, if not better. They also fly high up into the Fogmoss Tree and the trees around the clearing to gather acorns. They are much better when you get them straight from the branches.

When they have finished gathering food and baking what they need for the days ahead, they clean the burrow. Cassava uses her broom to sweep all the branches and twigs and dirt to the entrance, and Pyro blows it away with a flap of its wings. Cassava also uses Pyro’s tail to pick up her pieces of furniture to get the dirt out from under them. Pyro likes polishing the coin she uses as her table. Sometimes she will catch the dragon staring at its reflection in the metal or cuddling it protectively.

In the afternoons, they like to play hide-and-seek. Pyro’s favorite spot is to hide under a bush or a root and fold its wings over its head so it looks like part of the tree or boulder. Cassava’s favorite spot is to scurry into a hollowed root or bury herself in a leaf pile.

Then when the sun is lower in the sky, Cassava scurries up to the top of her root, and Pyro lands beside her. They watch the leaves fall down into the Draymack River, keeping an eye on them as they drift down until they are out of sight. Sometimes, if it is especially hot, Pyro will swim down the river too, pretending to be a leaf. Cassava rides on its back and the two of them follow a twig down the river.
And in the winters, when it is cold and the winds blow hard, they curl up in the burrow under the patchwork quilt and dream of spring.

- [Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.]
Tales from Thicketdown Forest: Spring

There is an old description of plants as ‘animals that don’t move.’ They move, my dear, but simply slower. Much, much slower. A year to a little mouse is a minute for a bush. A season to a little dragon is breath to a tree. And none know this as well as the Fogmoss Tree.

The Fogmoss Tree is very old. It’s been there for over a hundred summers and winters, and its trunk is very thick. Its roots are thick too and they twist across the clearing, making little bridges for water to flow into the Draymack River. The river is an old friend; it has flowed for longer than even the trees can remember, before the mountains in the great distance rose and fell. Before the first ice, the river wore patiently at the rocks and the earth, carving out just the slightest path for itself. The Fogmoss Tree remembers taking root here and growing, nourished by the waters lapping gently against its soil.

But now, now that it towers above the Draymack River, the Fogmoss Tree has learned how to care for others as the river cared for it. It knows how to broaden its branches so that birds may land and shelter. It knows how to curl the wisps of mist about the ferns that live near its leaves. It knows when to drop its acorns to feed the scurriers about its base.

And most importantly, it knows how to shelter those that cannot weather the seasons with the wisdom of an old tree.

If you were to look near the base of the Fogmoss Tree, amidst the melting snow, you would see that some of the roots have little knots in them that open up inside, exposing spongy, soft wood. If you were to look closer, you would spot one of the openings with a thin woven curtain of reeds just to one side.

Looking in further would reveal two leaf chairs around a golden coin, balanced on a bump in the root to form a table. One of the chairs is angled up towards a leaf curtain, drawn over the window to keep the breeze from blowing over the broomstick, the one with the dandelion bloom at the end. If a particularly sharp breeze hits the curtain, the broom will shiver loose one of the dandelion fluffs, and you would see it drift further into the burrow.

You must be very, very quiet back here, especially during these winters.
If you are quiet, you will see a patchwork quilt, covering a bed of moss, still springy from the moist autumn. The rich smell of petrichor and the slight tart of the thistle pillow lingers here, far away from the cold bite of winter, broken only by the rumbling purr of the ones that sleep, tucked up, out of the cold. A dragon, about the size of a large pinecone, with a little mouse tucked up under its wing.

For this is the burrow of Cassava Mouse and Pyro, you see, and here they stay, dreaming of spring. At least until a pesky dandelion fluff lands on the end of a little mouse nose.

The warmth of the burrow settles around Cassava’s little nest as Pyro shifts its wing. A cold breeze threatens to snatch Cassava’s whiskers from their place under the patchwork quilt. Why is she awake? It’s not proper for a mouse to be awake during winters—and certainly not one no bigger than a fresh maple leaf—there’s never any food and too many hungry winds.

Then she hears it.

Thump.

The sound shakes the trunk of the Fogmoss Tree. Cassava’s little mouse heart begins to race. Is the tree falling? Are there branches that will crush the burrow? What will happen?

“Cassava Mouse?”

“P-Pyro?”

The dragon shifts slightly, pulling its wing back and turning its head to look at her.

“You are shaking, my friend. Are you alright?”

“Did you hear the noise?”

Thump.

“Did you hear that?” Cassava clutches the patchwork quilt.

“Yes, Cassava Mouse, I did. It is alright, it is nothing to worry about.” Pyro’s wing resettles around Cassava, shielding her from the cold winds. “It is just the snow falling from the tree as it melts. It cannot hurt you.”

Cassava’s grand-mouse sometimes speaks of the snows, but she always describes it as little white fluffy things that settle on the ground softly, not these big scary thumps.

“Would you like to see?”

“S-see?” Cassava chitters.

Pyro nods its head. “I can take you to the edge of your burrow so you may see the snow, then you will not be afraid.”

“Mice aren’t supposed to be outside during the winters,” Cassava says, trying to hide in Pyro’s wing, “it’s not proper.”
“What is ‘proper?’”

“You know...” Cassava scrambles for something grand-mouse would say, ”...to keep our ears on straight.”

Pyro tilts its head to the side and nudges her ear. “I do not believe your ears can be removed, Cassava Mouse.”

“I just can’t go outside during the winters!” Cassava tugs her quilt back over her body.

“Are you afraid, Cassava Mouse?”

She feels her whiskers shrivel in embarrassment.

“There is nothing wrong with being afraid, Cassava Mouse,” Pyro rumbles, “and I will not make you do something you are very afraid of. I...understand a little bit about being afraid of the winds, but I promise I will not let the winter hurt you.”

”...okay. I...I’ll come with you.”

Pyro nods and begins to shift. As soon as its wings move away from Cassava, it pauses, noticing the shaking quilt, before taking it in its mouth and gently tugging it out to lay flat on the root-wood floor. Cassava’s mouse self is too cold and too afraid to do anything other than curl up into a ball. Then she feels a nudge. Then another. Then another.

Pyro uses its nose to nudge the little ball of Cassava until she’s fully covered with just her snout peeking out the end.

“Are you warm, Cassava Mouse?”

“Yes!”

“Would you still like to see the snow?”

She nods as much as she can. Pyro uses a combination of its wings, head, and legs to maneuver the Cassava-bundle onto its back and shuffle through the burrow to the entrance. The combination of the warmth from the quilt and Pyro’s rocking gait is almost enough to lull Cassava back to sleep.

*Thump.*

Her ears twitch.

“Look, Cassava Mouse, do you see the white piles of snow?”

The ground outside the burrow is still the brownish dead grass from the fall, but as Pyro says, there are white piles of snow dotted around. The winter sun sparkles across the edges of the ice, making them look like still figures shimmering in the mist. As they watch, another pile falls to the ground with a *thump.*

“That is all it is, my friend,” Pyro rumbles, “just snow falling.”

Cassava doesn’t hear her friend, she’s already fast asleep.
Pyro huffs softly, turning around to start making its way back towards the safety of the burrow. As it goes, another thump of snow ruffles the leaf curtain. It furrows its eyes as a dandelion fluff lands on the bridge of its snout.

“Enough,” it rumbles, blowing it away and shuffling its wings, “you will not wake us again, not until the last of the snow thaws.”

Another thump, quieter this time, further away. The two of them snuggle back under the patchwork quilt as the root glistens with the last of the winter ice. The wood curves about them, much like it does when the birds come to make their nests, sheltering the sleepy creatures within the safety of the root. A single gust of wind blows through the burrow and there come the slightest cracks from the two leaf chairs. The air is warming.

The Fogmoss Tree stirs, its bark creaking slightly as it turns to face the winter sun. It spreads its arms wide to welcome the light. *Come, old friend, there are little ones we must tend to.* The sun responds in kind, reaching careful fingers through the clouds that hover just over the river to gently brush the roots at the base of the tree.

As the sunlight dances across the damp wood, the air *breathes* for the first time in many moons. The Draymack River begins to burble again. Water from the river rises into the air and a thin layer of fog comes to swirl around the branches, beginning to coax the first of the moss plants out of their winter’s sleep.

So you see, the Fogmoss Tree has learned. How to keep the little ones safe during the harsh winters, and how to gently let them know when Spring is here.
‘To miss the forest for the trees,’ a common saying meant to imply that one is too focused on the minutiae of something—the details—that they cannot focus on the big picture. Certainly, sound advice in some circumstances, and it never does you well to stare so deeply at a tree that you forget the ones surrounding it. They will get jealous, after all.

To appreciate how a forest works together is a truly impressive thing. To understand how the river flows around the twists and turns of the earth, nourishing the plants that line its shores. To understand how the squirrels and river-going creature-folk run back and forth between the shores and their homes, bringing the plants with them. To understand how the trees grow big and tall, stretching up to the sky and out beneath the soil as still points, saying here I am, there you are, won’t you come home?

Ah, yes, there are few things so delightful as a community working together.

But let us not get lost in the beauty of the big picture that we neglect to see the details, too. Just as an entire forest must rely on the turn of the earth, the return of the sun, the change of the seasons, so too must a single dandelion rely on the richness of the earth, the warmth of the sun, the slightest touch of a cool breeze.

Dandelions are not found throughout Thicketdown Forest; they grow atop the hills that line the banks of the Draymack River. A few trees have gathered close together, creating a perfect nook for the flowers to take root and reach for the sky. A single dandelion will spend its life drinking in the warm light, sheltered under the broad trees, waiting for the time when its seeds take flight. It can be maddening, you see, to spend your entire existence rooted to the spot, only able to explore when the breeze extends a hand to guide you.

Up from the forest floor, out through the trees, twisting into the brilliant sky. Down to the banks of the river, over the sparkling water, to return to the crest of the hill and settle, having flown for precious moments. To finally have that curiosity sated, to exchange a lifetime of patience for boundless joy.
For some, it is the feeling of finally lifting into the air, for others, the sudden rush of warmth from being closer to the sun than ever before. For others still, the novelty itself is enough. Joy is joy, regardless of the tendrils of experience that mold it. It would not do to miss the joy for the details.

A single dandelion grows in the shadows of the trees atop Crescent Hill, reaching its yellow face toward the sun. It listens to the rustle of the grass as Tessa Bunny scurries along the hill, chasing leaves that drift in the breeze. It feels the soft swoop of Aliyah Hoot’s wings as the owl lands in the grass, her beak gently pruning the overgrown leaves. It waits, taking pleasure in the little moments to learn what it means to feel joy.

The dandelion drifts, rooted though it may be, through the pieces of joy the creature-folk let linger in the air. It is exhilaration, then, that spurs the bunny to run faster and faster, as she chases a leaf she will surely never catch? Is it contentment, then, that leaves the owl’s beak as she hums, walking leisurely among the grass? The dandelion sways in the breeze, pondering.

A bunny, an owl, a dragon, a mouse.

The dragon and the mouse are an interesting pair. They could not be more different; one of soft brown fur, the other iridescent scales. One of the dragon’s preferred habits is to lie on its back, wings spread, in the middle of the clearing by the blueberry bush, soaking up the sun. The mouse prefers scurrying around, looking for flowers for her tea, but she always remains close to the dragon. The dragon moves through the forest with carefully cultivated politeness. The mouse wanders freely about her home. The dragon speaks with an old voice, as immovable as the rocks at the base of Twilight Hollow. The mouse’s voice dips and soars with the uncontrollable ripples of the Draymack River.

And yet, the two of them are so inseparable, the creature-folk call them together.

Cassava-Mouse-and-Pyro.

The dandelion sways gently in the breeze. What new pieces of joy shall the two bring next?

In the middle of summer, when the sun is high and the grass is greener than the Fogmoss Tree, Pyro flies up to the little hill down the banks of the Draymack River to roll down the hill into the clear water. It likes to make interesting shapes with its wings to see if it can get bigger splashes. They learned after the first few that Cassava must sit far away from the river to avoid getting soaked to her whiskers.

One day, when the sun is very high, Pyro flies up to the hill and they land on the top. The dandelion sways, watching as Pyro glances around and pauses, gesturing with its wing.

“Cassava Mouse, look! The dandelion flowers have begun to shed their fluffs!”

Cassava squeaks. Dandelion tea is her favorite summer tea. She jumps down from Pyro’s back and scurries to the dandelions to try and gather as much of the leaves as possible. She nibbles at the stalk of the plant until the leaves come free, scurrying from base to base to collect them. Then she hears something.

“Pyro? Are you alright?”
“Y-Yes, Cassava Mouse,” Pyro rumbles over that strange huffing noise, “I am alright. I am laughing.”

“O-oh!” That is good, that means her friend is okay. “I was worried. I’ve never heard you laugh before.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“What were you laughing at?”

Pyro bows its head towards Cassava. “You are absolutely covered in dandelion fluff, my friend. And it made me laugh.”

“I am not!” Cassava squeaks indignantly.

Pyro does not reply, simply gestures towards the Draymack River with its wing. Cassava scurries towards the water’s surface. And sure enough, there is her reflection, covered in white fluffy pieces much like Tessa Bunny’s fur. She looks back up the hill to see Pyro failing to stifle its laughter behind its wing.

Well, there is no reason she should be the only one covered in dandelion fluff.

Pyro’s laugh gets cut off with a surprised huff as Cassava uses herself to push Pyro gently down the hill. The dragon’s wings swirl out as its body tumbles over and over down the hill, landing awkwardly topsy-turvy over and over until it ends up in a sprawled ungainly heap at the bottom of the hill. After a second, it rolls upright and shakes its head, not unlike how it dries off after a swim.

Unlike the swim, the shake does absolutely nothing to dislodge the many white dandelion seeds sticking to every inch of its scales.

It gives another affronted huff when Cassava tumbles into its body when she loses her balance laughing.

The dandelion, now devoid of some of its seeds, simply sways. The seeds may never know what it is like to drift along on the breeze, carried through the forest on the currents of air. It may never share the joy that the others do, of knowing flight, of knowing that irrevocable freedom for precious moments.

But they have known the softness of Cassava Mouse’s fur, the warmth of Pyro’s scales. They have known the gentle roughness of tumbling down a hill, the affectionate shove of a friend. They have known joy, spilled unending into the air between the two, the seeds still clinging to them.

The dandelion sways atop its hill, satisfied. Joy is joy, and they will be glad a piece of it lingers a moment longer.
To read the full anthology, scan here!
The Recipe Book

This video game was made using the Twine software, an online open-sourced program that enables you to make text-based games. Included below are the finished game structure (fig. 1), the variable spreadsheets (fig. 2), and the in-game map of Thicketdown Forest (fig. 3).

Fig. 1: The finished game structure in Twine. Each white box is a 'screen' the player can see with text. Each line shows the connections between 'screens.' The green icon at the top indicates the starting screen.
Fig. 2: Part of an Excel spreadsheet with the variables used to make the game. Each color-coded section is for one possible route, with a key in the upper left-hand corner. These were used to keep track of the player's progress.
Fig. 3: The in-game map of the game's location, Thicketdown Forest. Created using the Inkarnate software.

To play the game, scan here!
THE HARVEST MOON FESTIVAL

This one-shot was run using a modified version of the Kids on Bikes system. Players built characters by assigning different dice to six different traits: Fight, Flight, Brains, Brawn, Charm, and Grit. Depending on a character’s proficiency with each trait, they assigned a ‘bigger’ die—or a die that can roll higher numbers, ranging from a d4 (four-sided die) to a d20 (twenty-sided die). Included below are the stats for each of the player characters (fig. 4) and the notes for their character descriptions (fig. 5 – fig. 7).

This one-shot was filmed and recorded over Zoom with the use of the owlbearrodeo software to provide an in-game map. The title sequence was created using Canva.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player/Character</th>
<th>Fight</th>
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<td>d6</td>
<td>d10 (+1)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinevere/Christian</td>
<td>d4</td>
<td>d20 (+1)</td>
<td>d10</td>
<td>d6</td>
<td>d12 (+1)</td>
<td>d8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tessa/Tessa</td>
<td>d6</td>
<td>d20 (+1)</td>
<td>d10</td>
<td>d8</td>
<td>d12 (+1)</td>
<td>d4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby/Spark</td>
<td>d6</td>
<td>d20 (+1)</td>
<td>d10 (+1)</td>
<td>d10</td>
<td>d12</td>
<td>d8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4: Part of an Excel spreadsheet with the die assignments to each of the six traits for the player characters. Each character has the option of adding a +1 bonus to two of their stats, indicated in the table.
Elizabeth:
- Name: Wisteria Rabbit
- Species: Bunny Rabbit
- Residence: Crescent Hill
- Favorite Food: Lemonade-like drink with wood sorrel (sorrel-ade), served in a little glass. It’s very good on hot days.
- Quote: “If in doubt, ask the moon. She has a way about these things.”
- Character traits:
  - Has a little garden, she likes to wear very simple outfits—quite a practical little lady.
  - 7 little sisters, 3 little brothers
  - Always wins the high jumping competitions, Azalea wins the long jumping ones
    - A very intense competition among the rabbit families atop Crescent Hill, being able to do both is the Thing™ and so far she has yet to prevail but it is a matter of time
  - The ‘friend’ part of the ‘frenemies’ is because Wisteria gets lost sometimes and Tessa always brings her back home

Theresa:
- Name: Derrick Squirrel
- Species: Squirrel
- Residence: Oak Tree Hole
- Favorite Food: Acorn Cap Stew
- Quote: “We all have to scurry sooner or later.”
- Character traits:
  - “I find some of the acorns I bury, and other people find the rest.”
  - Kingston Brown-esque
  - Community Man
  - Would wear fisherman sweaters if he could, doesn’t have a family of his own, but really cares about his community—quietly baked into how his habits form
  - Bit of a local history buff/gossip: knows the shit about the social world
  - He pays attention to how people work in a very chill vibe way
  - The guy who’s gonna point out that there are shenanigans afoot but will not stop them

Fig. 5: Notes on character creation for players Elizabeth and Theresa for characters Wisteria Rabbit and Derrick Squirrel. NOTE: Derrick’s name was later changed to Darren.
Fig. 6: Notes from character creation for players Abby, Tessa, and Guinevere for characters Spark, Tessa Bunny, and Christian Magpie.
To watch and/or download the one-shot, scan here!