

The air is crisp and fresh as you walk, scented like rain from last night's downpour. You're in no hurry as the sluggish breeze flows through your fur. The sun shines brightly, but not harshly like it may come summer. Indeed, the spring's sun is full of warmth.

The dirt road which cuts through your village is bustling with others going about their day, many of whom are neighbors you know well. It's cozy. What a wonderful day for errands.

You make your way down the road, passing by others who greet you as you go, and you greet them in kind. Your steps take you slowly out of town, the buildings round you thinning out until you finally pass the town's inn, the last structure marking the very edge of the settlement. About three hundred yards past that, the edge of the woods takes over the clearing. That last stretch of distance before hitting the woods properly is simple to traverse, as simple as following the road into the trees. You think as you walk, reflecting on your list for this excursion.

For one, you need to check on your secret project, a little experiment out in the woods to see if you can cultivate Emborels when their season comes around. Second, you'll need to get some Riddlecaps. That'll be easy, you reckon, since you saw a small growth of them on the path to your experimental Emborel patch. Lastly, you'll need to be on the lookout for anything good enough to barter for your other ingredients once you get back into town.

You pass the threshold into the woods proper as you file away your thoughts. In the shade of the trees, the air smells quintessentially like spring; it's full of life and humidity, just as the foliage is at its greenest for the year; it's a time of regrowth. Small animals chatter in the trees above you, alert to your presence, and the mating calls of tens of different kinds of birds echo throughout the canopy.

There's a spring in your step as you go down the road, invigorated by the outdoors after a harsh winter. Your thoughts drift again. You smirk a little as you think of how surprised your husband will be at you being able to get his favorites on the table so soon after the snow's melted. Even as you make your way out into the woods, he's seeding the fields that he co-tends and jointly owns with his brother. Come summer, the Aurogold grain will be standing as tall as the ones who tend it, ready to be taken to the mills. Little did he know when the winter set in, that you had hidden a little bit of the flour just for this occasion. Indeed, you've been planning on surprising him the evening after planting day since this time last year.

You pass by the sign-less signpost that marks your turn off the main road. Stretching into the woods to your right is a game trail, one which you know leads toward the river. You step onto the trail and begin walking. The path twists and turns, losing line of sight on the main trail fairly quickly.

You begin thinking on the other ingredients you'll need. One will be milk from Mr. Granger, the local dairy farmer. You know that his Mistshanks drop Mistlings about this time of year, and that means milk. True to that pattern, they did just last week. Additionally, you reckon you'll call in the favor he owes you for the bread you baked him last year. A storm had blown over a tree, crushing the bakery and stopping the flow of bread into people's homes for a month.

You pass another landmark, a cairn of assorted river stones taken from a creek nearby, which marks the halfway point to your destination.

You've decided that you'll trade that favor for some of his cheese. He'd taken up cheese-making after being duped into buying a few heads of Virelith only to find that, to his dismay, the milk of the animal is borderline undrinkable. To his fortune, the milk makes a delectable cheese, and he's made good money selling it to the traders that come through every now and again.

Before you know it, the path opens up to a clearing a hundred feet wide, dotted with the burnt hulls of dead-standing trees all congregated around the corpse of a once-great oak tree. The brush is especially lush here, with a thick carpet of grass over the dirt, and various knee-high shrubs, ferns, and bushes. All of it is colored a deep emerald green that can normally only be gotten with good fertilizers; and that would be the trick.

You'd found this place the year before last, while foraging for ingredients. A storm had evidently blown through, and lightning had struck the tallest tree present. It must've gone up in flames,

and lit the surrounding underbrush on fire, only to be put out by the rain before it could become a forest fire. There-within, you had found a bounty of Emborel mushrooms, nearly five pounds of them all-in-all.

See, one thing you know is that when the elusive mushrooms do decide to pop up for all of two weeks in the beginning of spring, they thrive the best at the sites of large fires. So, you'd had the idea to save up a winter's worth of ashes from not just your own stove, but also the stoves of a couple of close conspirators, and spread them here last year.

And now, with the ground re-fortified with wood ash, you can already see them. You set your basket on the ground as you bend down, moving the shrubbery aside to seize your prize. The Emborels are fairly sizeable for such a short-lived mushroom; about the length of your hand, and an inch and a half across at the thickest point. The stalk is a light gray, almost white, leading up to a conical, deeply wrinkled cap nearly black in color. Within the crevices and pockets which the wrinkles form, is a brilliant orange coloration, lending the entire mushroom the appearance of a burning coal.

You pick the mushroom, careful to leave the roots so that it may come back next year. The stalk of it resists for a moment as you pull, before giving way with a crisp snap. Then, you go about picking the rest of the bountiful harvest that lays within arms' reach, more than plenty for dinner and to barter with.

As you rise, basket in hand, you look toward the rest of the field. Your basket is already nearly a quarter full, and you can still glimpse more around you without even moving the underbrush. You file away a mental note to tell your ash investors about the bountiful harvest ready to be taken.

As you exit the treeline, the afternoon sun is directly overhead. It bears down brightly, signaling that you may have spent a little longer foraging for mushrooms than you had first thought. You begin down the road into town, the crowd a little thinner than it was earlier. You have a specific destination in mind as you go, taking a turn to the left once you hit town to head towards the farmers' market.

The market itself is still surprisingly busy considering the time. The sounds of bustling activity show that the vendors are still selling, having not run out of stock, nor customers. The entire farmer's market is arrayed in rows of booths, with none quite as grand nor in as great a number as when the foreign merchants come through, but it's plenty. The air buzzes with conversation, sellers hawking their wares, and buyers haggling. The scents of fresh produce and baked goods waft through the air most predominantly, though your nose particularly can smell the undertones of herbs and fermented alcohols. You continue to sniff, until you finally catch the faint scent of milk. Your ears swivel atop your head as you slink through the crowd in pursuit of your goal, catching snippets of their conversations as they point every which way. It's almost funny how used to it you've become; in your first days in this village, the noise was deafening, so unbelievable loud was the market cacophony that it was crippling. Such is the plight of one of canine descent. But now, the noise is comforting.

You shake off your introspection as you approach the stall you're looking for. Eugene Granger sits in a rocking chair of rough-hewn wood behind his stand. The stand itself is little more than a quartet of poles holding up a cloth shade, with a simple table beneath. The badger's feet are kicked up on the table, and his wide brimmed hat rests down on his eyes. The only way you can tell he's awake is the steady puffs of the pipe balanced in his lips.

He lifts the brim of his hat from his eyes as the sound of your approach reaches him. He smiles wide, Sageshrub smoke billowing from the corners of his mouth as he does.

"Rowan!" The old badger exclaims, rising from his seat and placing a hand on the table. "What can I dae ya fer?"

The old badger's accent is an obvious indicator that he was once a foreigner like yourself; however, he's been around for as long as anyone you know can remember. Beyond becoming a naturalized native, he's an integral part of the community. Beyond that, he's a pillar of the community, always among the first to jump up and help when tragedy strikes.

“Afternoon, Mr. Granger.” You say. “Business been alright?” Mr. Granger chuckles.

“Busy is whit it's been, laddie. I almos' didnae even hae the time tae come sell at the market, not since mah mistshanks dropped calves.” He says, taking a drag from his pipe. “The only reason I could mak' it wis 'cause the missus made me tak' a break, telt me tae go tae the market an' she'd tend tae them fer a day.” He clears his throat. “But enuff aboot ma woes. Ye're lookin' fer milk an' cheese, arenae ye?” You nod. He leans beneath the table, and produces a single clay bottle of milk, and a wheel of cheese sealed in wax. “On the hoose. Least I could dae fer a good frien'.”

You carefully place the cheese and milk in an open spot in the basket. “I’ve something to barter if you’re interested, Mr. Granger.” You say, lifting the basket to show your haul of mushrooms.

“Emborels?” He asks. You nod. He scratches his chin, enticed by the rare delicacy that he’s been presented. “Ah have a trapper pal who's set tae start fer the season in a few weeks. He always trades meat fer some o' the milk from ma herd. A fistfu' o' Emborels fer five poonds o' meat sound fair?”

“More than fair, Mr. Granger.” You say. You each shake on it, and he takes his fistful of mushrooms, taking off his hat and carefully placing them in the crown in the hat like a bowl. “You take care!” You say as you leave, waving back at him.

“Will do laddie!” He calls as he waves back.

Your next stop is the bakery, with a pep in your step as you approach. Despite being but a single story, the building towers over those surrounding it, a rectangular structure of cobbled stones. You open the door, which stretches up nearly twice over the height of a normal door, to be practically assaulted by the scents of butter, raw wheat, and fresh bread. The interior of the building is warm, nearly enough to make one sweat just standing therewithin.

Stood behind the counter of this bakery, his back to it as he stands hunched over the dough table, is the town’s baker. The towering moose’s name is Magnus Thornwood. He stands there, intently focused as he kneads a normal size loaf of bread dough, though the dough lump is comically small in his dinner-plate hands. With deft precision, he rolls it over the floured surface of the table, drawing it back and turning it a half turn, then tucking the edges back under and rolling it again, his calloused hands moving with smooth deliberation. The motion is practiced, seemingly as easy for him as breathing. He stops for a moment, to poke the surface with a finger. His finger leaves a slight indent in the dough, before it slowly pushes back out. He picks it up, fingers splayed beneath; when it retains its shape rather than trying to slip between his fingers, he places it back on the table, satisfied that it’s ready to bake. Only then, does he turn back to you.

“Busy today?” Magnus asks, gesturing to the basket.

“Errands, and a couple of things I needed to look after.” You reply. You take an Emborel from the basket and hold it up, waving it slightly. “I’ve got some extra if you want to barter.” Magnus looks at the mushroom, weighing its value for a moment.

“What’ll it be today?” He asks you.

“I’m looking for baton loaves today” You answer, gesturing to a neat stack of long, hand-width loaves on the front counter.

“Two of them for a handful.” Magnus says. There’s a pause, before he speaks again. “Your size handful, of course.” He holds up his own hand, wagging his flour-dusted fingers to draw emphasis to the sheer scale of them.

“Deal.” You say as you reach into your basket, producing a generous handful of the mushrooms and setting them down on the counter. You grab two loaves of bread, and put them into the basket, where you’re sure the milk won’t roll over them. You extend your hand to Magnus, and exchange a handshake before you turn to leave. “See you around, Mr. Thornwood.” You say as you open the door.

“You as well. Farewell.” He replies, before he turns back to his prep table. And with that, you can finally head home.

You set the basket down on the floor as you set assess what needs done, looking over the dimly lit kitchen space of your home. The counter, sat in one of the corners of the space, is already clean, ready to be worked with. You shoveled the ashes from the stove, opposite to the counter, yesterday, specifically so it wouldn't need done today. There's already firewood and kindling in the rack next to the stove, so no wood needs to be split today. Your pans and utensils are already accounted for.

You begin by handing a lantern from a hook affixed to the rafters, just over the counter and stove. With a little doing from a fire steel, the room is bathed in soft orange light. You bend down to the level of the shelf beneath the counter, and take a bag of flour from there. Then, from a straw-filled box on the shelf above the counter, four eggs. You scoop some flour from the bag with your hand, carefully heaping it onto the countertop. Once you've gotten an appreciable mound of it, you gently press an indent into the mound, forming it more into a bowl. The powder itself is slightly gritty in texture, but not necessarily coarse in consistency. Although, annoyingly, it does always get everywhere.

You next begin to add your eggs to the flour bowl. One by one, they're cracked on the edge of the counter, then opened fully by forcing your fingers into the crack, and separating in two with a crackling sound. The whites are slimy and cold, but that's something you've gotten used to; it'll be worth it in the end. One, two, three, four eggs. Before continuing, you add just a splash of melted butter. With your eggs in place, now you just need to whip them.

You take a wooden fork from one of the utensil cups on the counter, lined up against the wall. Carefully holding it firmly in your fingers, you begin to whip the eggs into something homogenous, careful to avoid disturbing the flour. It's first slow-going, but happens fairly quickly once the yolks themselves pop. At this point, you add just a couple pinches of salt. Before long, the yellow bleeds into the transparent whites, and the whipping is complete.

Next, you begin to slowly incorporate flour as you mix. The egg mixture immediately begins to thicken, first from a slime to a slurry, then from a slurry to a slop. After a few minutes, once you've used nearly all the flour you began with, a dough emerges. The mass is mostly solid, only sagging a little at the bottom, and half-formed strands of gluten visible on the surface.

Now comes the strenuous part. You gather your dough, tucking it into as neat a lump as you can at this stage. The dough itself is sticky in some spots, but dry in the places where it's dusted with flour, with a consistency like clay. You place the doughball onto the countertop, and begin to knead.

It's a repetitive thing; push and roll with both palms and all of your weight, then turn it, tuck the ends under, and repeat. Again and again you roll the dough, carefully watching for the signs to stop. Slowly but surely, those stands of gluten upon the surface disappear. The consistency firms up, and the dough loses its sticky texture. After about ten minutes all in all, you deem the dough ready. You carefully roll it out thin with a wooden rolling pin, and cut it into individual ribbons about a quarter inch wide.

You leave the pasta to set as you open the door of the stove, taking a couple of pieces and some kindling from the rack. Before long, you have a healthy fire started.

You then take a cast iron pot from beneath the counter, and fill it with water from the pail in the kitchen. You salt the water generously, about half a fistful all in all, and add just a skim of melted butter on the top of it. Then you set the pot on the stove, near the back where it won't get in your way as it comes to a boil.

Next, you take a couple of skillets from the cabinet, straining under the weight of them as you heft them up onto the stove. They slam into place with a heavy clank, and once they're settled, you're diving under the cabinet again for ingredients. You root around for a moment, moving aside various pans and jars, until you find your quarry.

You rise from the cabinet with a jar of riddlecap mushrooms in your hands. You set them on the counter, and pop open the lid to inspect your ingredients. The mushrooms therewithin are a silvery gray, with a network of maze-like wrinkles embedded into the cap. You take one from the jar, and sniff it. It smells slightly earthy, first and foremost. The next layer of scent is of salt, no doubt from the brine

they had been canned in. The real bulk of the scent is like herbs and with just a barely noticeable undercurrent of savory scent, almost like grilled meat. Satisfied that the sour-scent that would indicate that they had gone bad in the brine is absent, you take some more from the jar.

You take a knife from one of the cups, and cut the riddlecaps into vertical slices, stem and all. The mushrooms give easily under the blade, revealing vast expanses of delicate white meat, which very quickly begins to brown at the edges with exposure to the open air. Moving quickly, you add just a little bit of butter to the bottom of both of your skillets, enough to coat one of them as it melts, and enough in the other to fill it with melted butter. Once the butter begins to pop, you throw your sliced mushrooms into the skimmed skillet. They immediately begin to sizzle upon contact with the hot grease, steam billowing out as the water meets the oil. With a wooden spatula from your utensil cup, you begin to agitate them, stirring gently so that no one of them stays still long enough to burn. The scents from before begin to shift in intensity; the savory and herbal elements of the mushrooms take on a new level on intensity, as the earthiness slowly turns into a nuttiness. The salt becomes less pronounced as the others intensify. This is your signal that they are done cooking.

You scoop the mushrooms out into a bowl, and immediately set about preparing the next component. From the cupboard, you produce two bulbs of Stonewort. The roots are brown in color, odd-shaped, about the size of a small stone, and papery in appearance. The smell of it is somehow sour, savory, and spicy all at the same time, but not one of these aspects are out of balance with the others.

Quickly, you unwrap the papery exterior, then crush them against the counter. The smell immediately explodes, almost strongly enough to make your eyes water. Quickly, you throw them into the butter. They almost immediately begin to reduce down, the sheer scale of their scent begins to fade.

You take the bread from your basket, setting it on the counter and grabbing a knife with serrations from one of the cups. Taking your time, you begin to slice the loaves into thick cross-sections. The exterior crust crunches and crackles as you saw through it, while the soft and tender interior crumb provides some resistance; the hallmark signs of a perfect loaf of bread. You don't anticipate any less from such a talented baker as Mr. Thornwood.

Careful not to splash yourself, you lay your slices in the grease. It pops angrily as they're dropped in, and you quickly pull your hand back as to not burn yourself. Before long, you can see the edges of the grease-side begin to crisp up. You flip them over one by one with the wooden spatula to reveal a golden brown crumb with a crispy crust, the spiced grease having worked its way in as bread toasted. You wait a little bit more for the other side to brown, before taking them out and placing them on a plate. You gently scrape the surface of one with a spatula, and the scraping sound and feel is all you need to tell you that they're perfect.

You take the cheese from the basket, and a grater from one of the cups. Quickly, while the bread is still piping hot, you grate a generous over one side of it. The delicate white cheese begins to melt quickly, the discrete ribbons of it congealing into a one thinly-spread sheet.

Next, you take the milk from the basket and pop the cork. You slowly pour the milk into the pan with the grease. At first, the grease's popping is violent, but as the temperature evens out it stops, the mixture now merely steaming. Quickly, while the milk and butter comes to a boil, you check on your water; it's up to a rolling boil now. You grab the lump of pasta ribbons from the counter, and drop them into the water.

And now, the sauce-to-be has begun to boil. You quickly begin to grate cheese into it, as fast as you can as to not allow the cheese to sit and burn. With the frantic pace of the block's rubbing against the grater, it's all in the pan in very short order. Now all that's left to do is keep it moving until it incorporates. You run your spatula in strips, scraping cheese from the bottom, and running it around the edges to keep it moving. At first, it's remains a solid lump of molten dairy, stubbornly refusing to turn into a cohesive sauce. On roughly the third minute of mixing however, it happens like magic; the thin mixture of milk and butter begins to thicken, and the lump of cheese begins to thin. The two separate elements have become one, and the sauce is complete. Quickly, you take it from the heat, and the pasta

too, while you're at it. You make sure to pour a cup of water from the bucket into the pot, to stop its boil, then dump the riddlecaps into the sauce and stir.

Now, for the last dish of the night; the one that you have been waiting all year to make. You take two bowls from the cabinet, and lay them out on your counter. Into one, you crack a few eggs, and make sure to beat them until the whites and yolks are homogenous. Into the other, you crumble some bread that you had allowed to stale, plus a helping of salt.

With reverence, you take your Emborels from the basket, handling them delicately. You slice each into halves, lengthwise, stem and all. First, each of them goes into the egg wash, and you slowly roll them around until coated. The eggs are slimy, and mat the fur of your fingers uncomfortably, but this will be worth it. Then, the breading; you roll each of them in the crumbs, trying to coat them entirely while not getting crumbs all over your egg-covered fingers. Slowly, a pile of ready to cook mushrooms begins to form on your countertop.

And finally, it's time. You carefully lower each into the grease of the remaining skillet, moving with speed and deliberation to avoid the popping. Immediately, the breading begins to brown, but you know to stay your hand in taking them from the grease for a few minutes. After a couple of minutes, you flip them to ensure that they cook evenly. The now exposed side of the breading is perfectly, delectably, golden brown. You repeat this again, for three batches all in all.

And now, you wait. The sun has been down for a while now, so he's sure to be home soon. The pot of pasta is on the table, the pan of sauce next to it. The bread is piled on a plate, as are the fried Emborels. You sit in a chair at the dinner table, eyes closed as you wait. The fire you set in the fireplace crackles and spits, the wood still being a little wet. The bugs outside call to one another. A distant animal's calls echo out from the woods.

The crunch of gravel under a boot. You perk up, opening your eyes and facing the door. The latch clicks, and the door swings open. Into the room, steps a wolf man, a head taller than you and a shoulder wider. His eyelids hang low, his posture slumped. He's exhausted.

"Aldric." You say. Sluggishly, he turns his attention to you. It's as though he didn't even realize you were there when he entered. Immediately upon recognizing you, his features lift a little as a smile paints his face. You rise from the chair and approach, as he approaches you. You wrap your arms around his chest as he wraps his around yours. The embrace lasts for a few seconds before you separate, but not before you sneak in a quick peck upon his lips. He closes his eyes, before stopping in his tracks for a moment. He takes a long inhale through the nose. His eyes shoot open with surprise.

"You didn't." He says, stunned. You simply return a smile as you lead him by the arm to the dinner table. Already there's a plate in front of either chair, waiting to be dished with dinner. You heap a generous helping of pasta onto each plate as he sits down, then you pour on the sauce. You place two slices of toasted bread onto either, and finally, a handful of fried emborels.

As you place the plate in front of Aldric, he picks up one of the delectable fried mushrooms, turning it over and inspecting every inch.

"Where'd you get emborels this early into spring, Rowan?" He asks. You put take one from your own plate and take a bite. The breading crunches beautifully as you bite down, the buttery grease exploding out from the meat of the mushroom as pressure is applied. Just as the breading crunches, the skin of the mushroom snaps beneath your teeth, and a taste more savory than most meats explodes out as you chew. You chew the bite slowly, as to enjoy the rare seasonal treat as much as it deserves, before swallowing.

"Trade secret." You reply with a smirk. He takes a bit from his own, eyes rolling up into his head as he savors the bite. You pop the rest of it into your mouth, then go for a slice of the toasted bread.

The bread is like a slice of heaven. The shell formed by frying it in the butter is crunchy, and the already crisp crust of it crumbles as you chew. It's bursting with that signature Stonewort flavor, equal

parts spicy, earthy, and a little sweet after being cooked. These flavors are strong, but tempered to perfection by the perfect oiliness of the butter that soaked underneath the fried exterior.

You go for your pasta next, as Aldric goes for another Emborel; predictable, considering his special love for them. You stick your fork into the mound of pasta and sauce upon your plate, gently twirling the utensil to wind some of those strands around it. The noodles pull into the fork, untangling and steadily forming a tight coil of pasta. Once the morsel hits critical bite-size, you raise the still-steaming food to your mouth, engulfing the fork and closing your eyes.

Truth be told, the pasta is the dish that you love the most among dinner tonight. Some of your earliest memories were of a very similar white-sauce noodle dish that your mother used to make; despite their fuzziness, owing to age, you can still pick vivid details about that food from those gold-tinged memories.

The bite that you presently savor is so, so similar to that dish from those far flung days... the pasta is tender and slightly chewy, with a flavor all of its own that's separate from the sauce. It's almost buttery, with a slight tinge of egg.

The sauce is similar to what you remember, but different in some key places. It's creamy and smooth, but thick. The milk adds a richness to the dish that you don't remember, likely owing to it coming from a different animal. The cheese, that's the biggest departure. It's tangy and sharp, bold and slightly fruity. The way it mingles with the Stonewart in the sauce is heavenly, the two flavor profiles playing together such that it's liable to make you melt into your seat. Any annoyance at the process of assembling your ingredients washes away instantly.

The night goes on. The food slowly disappears between bouts of conversation, loose and comfortable chit-chat that soothes the soul. The fireplace burns down bit by bit, the stars and moon rotate overhead. At some point in the night, Aldric asks you to close your eyes while he gets something from the one spot he's discovered in the house where you won't find the things he intends on surprising you with, a spot that's gone undiscovered for nearly three years running. It ends up being a bottle of sangrivative wine, much to your delight. The tartness of it always made it your go-to for any kind of drinking, and the low proof of the drink made it pleasant to drink in any way other than shots.

The night wore away a little faster after the wine came out. Conversation turned to joking and banter, the two of you exchanging those little in-jokes that only a couple would be in on. Eventually, as the moon hung directly overhead, the two of you called it a night, tucking into bed and exchanging one last kiss before slipping under the surface of consciousness.

What a way to spend a Planter's Day night.