

Aj and the Cloud Castle Bakery





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To my baby king cat I love you with all my heart

- Love cherry cat





The Bridge to Cat Land



Once upon a time, there was a boy called Aj who never baked anything without drawing it first. He is nine years old, creative, clever and quick, and his leather journal is full of cakes with arrows, pies with labels and biscuits with tiny numbers beside every crumb.

This morning, the journal is tucked under his arm, because Aj is going somewhere very special.

His mum, Cherry cat, walks beside him. She is a round, fluffy pink cat with a cherry-red face, cherry-red paws and two little bunches of cherries growing on top of her head. A long time ago, before Aj was born, she grew up in Cat Land, the floating realm high above the clouds. Today, for the first time, she is taking him home.

The marble bridge appears at dawn, stretching up from a cloud like a white ribbon. Step by step, they climb. The air turns cool and sweet. And then Aj sees it: a castle made of pale stone and soft mist, with a tall celestial spire shining at its centre.

“Welcome to Cat Land,” says Cherry cat, and her whiskers tremble with joy.

Today is the Sky Festival.





The Recipe in the Journal

The vaulted terrace smells of warm stone and vanilla. Beneath its high arches stands a row of round brick ovens, already glowing, and a long marble worktop dusted with silver flour.

“This was my favourite place when I was a kitten,” says Cherry cat. She rolls up nothing at all, because cats have no sleeves, and plunges her cherry-red paws into a bowl of mist-dough. The dough is pale and light, and it puffs gently every time she presses it.

Aj climbs onto a stool and opens his leather journal. His pencil is already moving.

“If there’s a festival,” he says, “there should be a festival tart.”

He draws a perfect circle. Inside it, he sketches a smooth layer of golden custard. On top, he adds a spiral of star-berries, round and glowing, from the edge right to the centre. He writes the measurements in neat little numbers: three canisters of cloud cream, one basket of star-berries, one sheet of mist-dough, rolled very thin.

“The Golden Spiral Tart,” he announces.

“It looks wonderful,” says Cherry cat. “It also looks very precise.”

“That’s the point,” says Aj. “If you follow the drawing exactly, it comes out exactly right.”

Something white flickers at the edge of the terrace. On a velvet cushion by the warmest oven lies a small cat, as white as fresh milk, with feathery mist-wings folded along her shoulders. Her pale silver paws twitch. Her eyes are fixed on Aj’s wooden rolling pin, which lies on the worktop beside the dough.

“That’s Protein Milk,” whispers Cherry cat. “She’s the bounciest cat in the castle.”

“Hello, Protein Milk,” says Aj.

Protein Milk does not say hello. She wiggles her bottom, very slowly, the way cats do just before they pounce.

Cherry cat gently slides the rolling pin a little further from the edge. “Not now, sweetheart,” she murmurs.

Protein Milk sighs, rolls onto her back and pretends she was never interested at all.

Aj smiles and goes back to his drawing. He adds one last detail: a little flag on top of the tart, with the word “FESTIVAL” in capital letters.

Above them, from the very top of the celestial spire, a silver bell begins to ring.



The Bell and the Volunteer

Aj and Cherry cat hurry out into the Courtyard of Bells. Cats are arriving from everywhere: tabby cats and spotted cats, cats with wings and without, gliding down from balconies and padding across the soft white flagstones.

High on the misty battlement above them stands a large, plush, deep brown cat with broad downy wings. He holds the rope of the silver bell in his teeth. When the last echo fades, he lets go and lifts his chin.

“Citizens of Cat Land,” he declares. “By order of tradition, a midday feast will be held for the Sky Festival. When the bells ring at noon, the centrepiece must be on the table.”

The cats murmur happily.

“However,” the brown cat continues, “the centrepiece has no baker.”

The murmur stops. The cats look at their paws. Paws, it turns out, are very good at tasting and very bad at whisking.

Aj’s hand shoots up before he has finished thinking.

“I’ll do it!” he calls. “My team and I will bake the centrepiece!”

Cherry cat blinks at him. “Your team?”

“You,” whispers Aj. “And... some cats. I’ll find some cats.”

Two cats are already sitting beside him, as if they had been waiting.

One is sleek and dark chocolate-brown, with a cream-coloured band around his chest. The other is caramel-coloured, sprinkled with little dark speckles, like a biscuit full of chocolate chips.

“Oreo,” says the sleek one. “Fast.”

“Cookie Dough,” says the speckled one. “I like counting things. Steps, mostly.”

Protein Milk bounces up behind them. “Me too! Me too!”

The big brown cat glides down from the battlement and lands in front of Aj with great dignity. He places a small carved ivory token in Aj’s hand. On it is a picture of a whisk crossed with a cat’s tail.

“The baker’s token,” he says. “And I shall be your fourth cat. My name is Chocolate Fudge Brownie.”

“Thank you, Brownie,” says Aj.

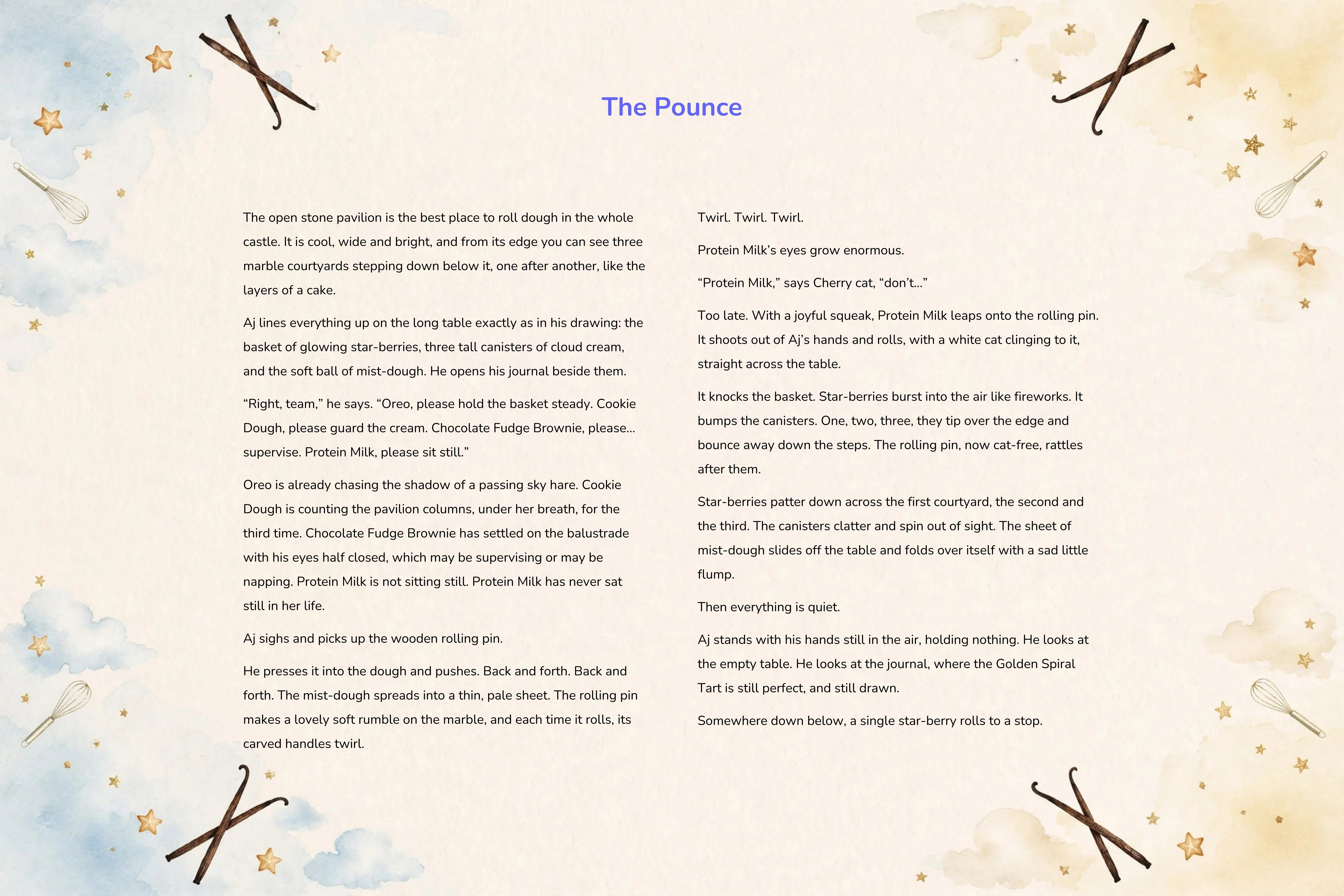
The big cat closes his eyes for a long moment. “Chocolate Fudge Brownie,” he repeats. “In full, please. It is a very important name.”

“Sorry. Thank you, Chocolate Fudge Brownie.”

“Much better.”

Aj holds the token tightly. He has a recipe, a team and a deadline. Somewhere deep inside his stomach, a tiny voice asks whether this was a good idea.





The Pounce

The open stone pavilion is the best place to roll dough in the whole castle. It is cool, wide and bright, and from its edge you can see three marble courtyards stepping down below it, one after another, like the layers of a cake.

Aj lines everything up on the long table exactly as in his drawing: the basket of glowing star-berries, three tall canisters of cloud cream, and the soft ball of mist-dough. He opens his journal beside them.

“Right, team,” he says. “Oreo, please hold the basket steady. Cookie Dough, please guard the cream. Chocolate Fudge Brownie, please... supervise. Protein Milk, please sit still.”

Oreo is already chasing the shadow of a passing sky hare. Cookie Dough is counting the pavilion columns, under her breath, for the third time. Chocolate Fudge Brownie has settled on the balustrade with his eyes half closed, which may be supervising or may be napping. Protein Milk is not sitting still. Protein Milk has never sat still in her life.

Aj sighs and picks up the wooden rolling pin.

He presses it into the dough and pushes. Back and forth. Back and forth. The mist-dough spreads into a thin, pale sheet. The rolling pin makes a lovely soft rumble on the marble, and each time it rolls, its carved handles twirl.

Twirl. Twirl. Twirl.

Protein Milk’s eyes grow enormous.

“Protein Milk,” says Cherry cat, “don’t...”

Too late. With a joyful squeak, Protein Milk leaps onto the rolling pin. It shoots out of Aj’s hands and rolls, with a white cat clinging to it, straight across the table.

It knocks the basket. Star-berries burst into the air like fireworks. It bumps the canisters. One, two, three, they tip over the edge and bounce away down the steps. The rolling pin, now cat-free, rattles after them.

Star-berries patter down across the first courtyard, the second and the third. The canisters clatter and spin out of sight. The sheet of mist-dough slides off the table and folds over itself with a sad little flump.

Then everything is quiet.

Aj stands with his hands still in the air, holding nothing. He looks at the empty table. He looks at the journal, where the Golden Spiral Tart is still perfect, and still drawn.

Somewhere down below, a single star-berry rolls to a stop.





Under the Velvet Bench

Nobody speaks for a moment. Aj's cheeks feel hot. His perfect plan is scattered across three courtyards, and the sun is already climbing towards noon.

He turns round, ready to say something sharp. But Protein Milk is gone.

"Where is she?" he asks.

Cherry cat points with one cherry-red paw. Under a long velvet bench at the side of the pavilion, deep in the shadow, two round eyes are shining. The tip of a white tail is wrapped tightly around them.

"She is very sorry," says Cookie Dough quietly. "She always is, afterwards."

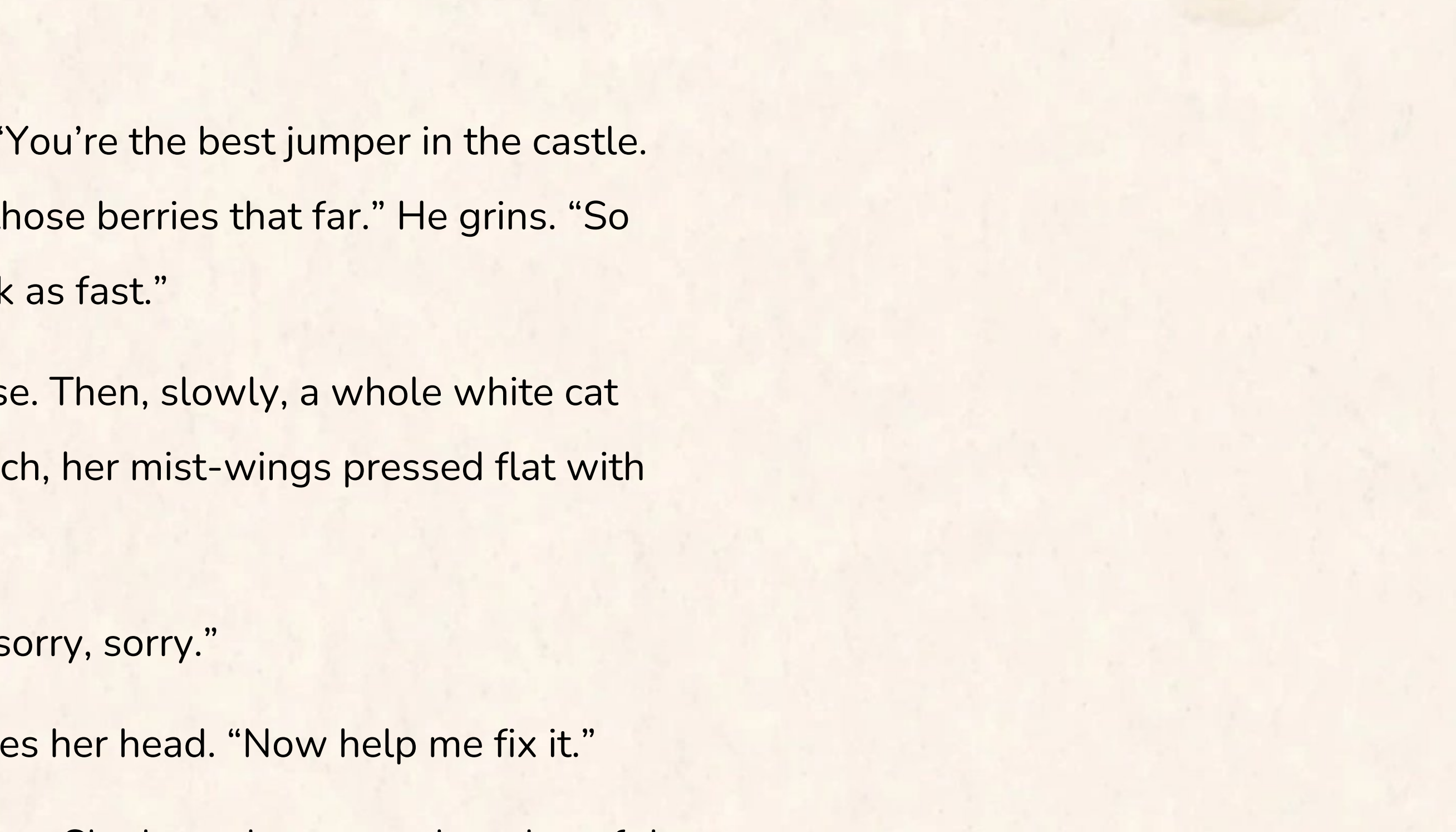
Aj looks at the hiding place. Then he looks at Cherry cat.

"What should I do?" he asks.

Cherry cat sits down and tucks her paws under her. "What do you see?" she asks.

It is the kind of question mums ask when they want you to find the answer yourself. Aj looks again.

He sees a small cat who wanted to play. He sees a team that never really agreed to be a team. He sees a boy who made a plan for himself and then gave everyone else orders.



He takes a breath. Then he lies down on the cool marble, flat on his tummy, so that his face is level with the shadow under the bench.

"Protein Milk," he says softly. "I'm not cross." He thinks about it. "I was cross. For about four seconds. Now I'm not."

The round eyes blink.

"And I need you," Aj goes on. "You're the best jumper in the castle. Nobody else could have sent those berries that far." He grins. "So nobody else can get them back as fast."

A whisker appears. Then a nose. Then, slowly, a whole white cat creeps out from under the bench, her mist-wings pressed flat with embarrassment.

"Sorry," she whispers. "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"I know," says Aj, and he strokes her head. "Now help me fix it."

Protein Milk's wings spring open. She bounds over to the edge of the pavilion and comes trotting back with the wooden rolling pin held proudly in her mouth.

"Well," says Chocolate Fudge Brownie, opening one eye on his balustrade. "That is a start."



Aj picks up the folded dough and dusts it off. It is torn in two places. He tucks it into a bowl anyway.



A Map for Four Cats

From the middle of the marble bridge, Aj can see the whole problem at once. Below him lie the three courtyards, with walkways, steps and balustrades weaving between them. Tiny specks of starlight glitter in the corners. Something tall and shiny gleams near a fountain.

“That’s a canister,” says Aj. “And those are berries. Lots of berries.”

“Too many places,” says Oreo, his tail twitching. “Which first?”

Aj opens his leather journal to a fresh page. This time he does not draw a tart. He draws a map.

He sketches the three courtyards from above, as a bird would see them. He adds the walkways, the steps and the long balustrades. Cherry cat hands him a little brass compass from her basket, and he marks north, where the celestial spire points up at the sky.

“I made a mistake before,” he says. “I gave everybody a job without asking what they’re good at. So I’m asking.”

The cats glance at one another, surprised. It is not every day that someone asks a cat what it is good at.

“Smelling,” says Oreo at once. “I can smell a star-berry three balconies away.”

“Then you take the berries,” says Aj, and he draws a tiny nose next to the balustrades.

“Counting,” says Cookie Dough. “Steps. Turns. Corners. Give me a

map with numbers and I never get lost.”

So Aj writes numbers along the marble steps: twelve down, turn left, seven across, by the fountain. Next to each number, he draws a little canister.

“Jumping!” cries Protein Milk.

“You help Oreo with the high places,” says Aj, “and you fetch anything that has rolled where nobody else can reach.”

Chocolate Fudge Brownie gazes at the map for a long time. “I shall watch from above,” he says at last. “And when the moment is right, I shall give the signal.”

“What signal?” asks Aj.

“You will know it,” says Chocolate Fudge Brownie, mysteriously.

Cherry cat fastens a woven cord harness around Cookie Dough’s shoulders, with two loops on each side, just the right size for canisters. Aj tears out the map and rolls it up inside the harness.

He looks at his team: one nose, one counter, one jumper, one mystery.

“Go,” he says.

And for the first time all morning, the four cats move in the same direction.





Oreo's Nose

The high balustrade runs along the edge of the inner gallery, narrow and white, decorated with carved stone cats sitting in a long row. Mist drifts across it in slow puffs.

Oreo leaps onto it lightly and stops. His nose quivers.

“Left,” he says, and trots off along the top of the stone, as calmly as if it were a pavement.

Aj follows on the walkway below, holding the empty berry basket. Cherry cat lends him her pocket spyglass, and he peers through the mist. A little glow here. Another one there, caught in the curl of a carved cat’s tail.

“There!” he says. “On the fourth statue!”

Oreo is already there. He picks up the star-berry delicately with his teeth and drops it into Aj’s basket. Then he sniffs again.

“Two more. Behind the urn. And one under that leaf.”

Protein Milk springs from the walkway to the top of a column and back again with a berry in her mouth. She is very fast. She is also very careful, now, which is new.

Little by little, the basket fills up. But as it fills, Aj’s face changes.

He picks up a berry and turns it in his fingers. It is squashed flat on

one side, and its juice has made a sticky purple smear on his thumb. He picks up another. That one is split. A third has turned soft and jammy from rolling across the warm marble.

“They’re ruined,” he says quietly. “Half of them. You can’t make a perfect spiral with squashed berries. They won’t even sit in a line.”

Oreo jumps down and sits beside the basket. He sniffs it for a long time.

“Smells better squashed,” he says.

“That’s not the point,” says Aj.

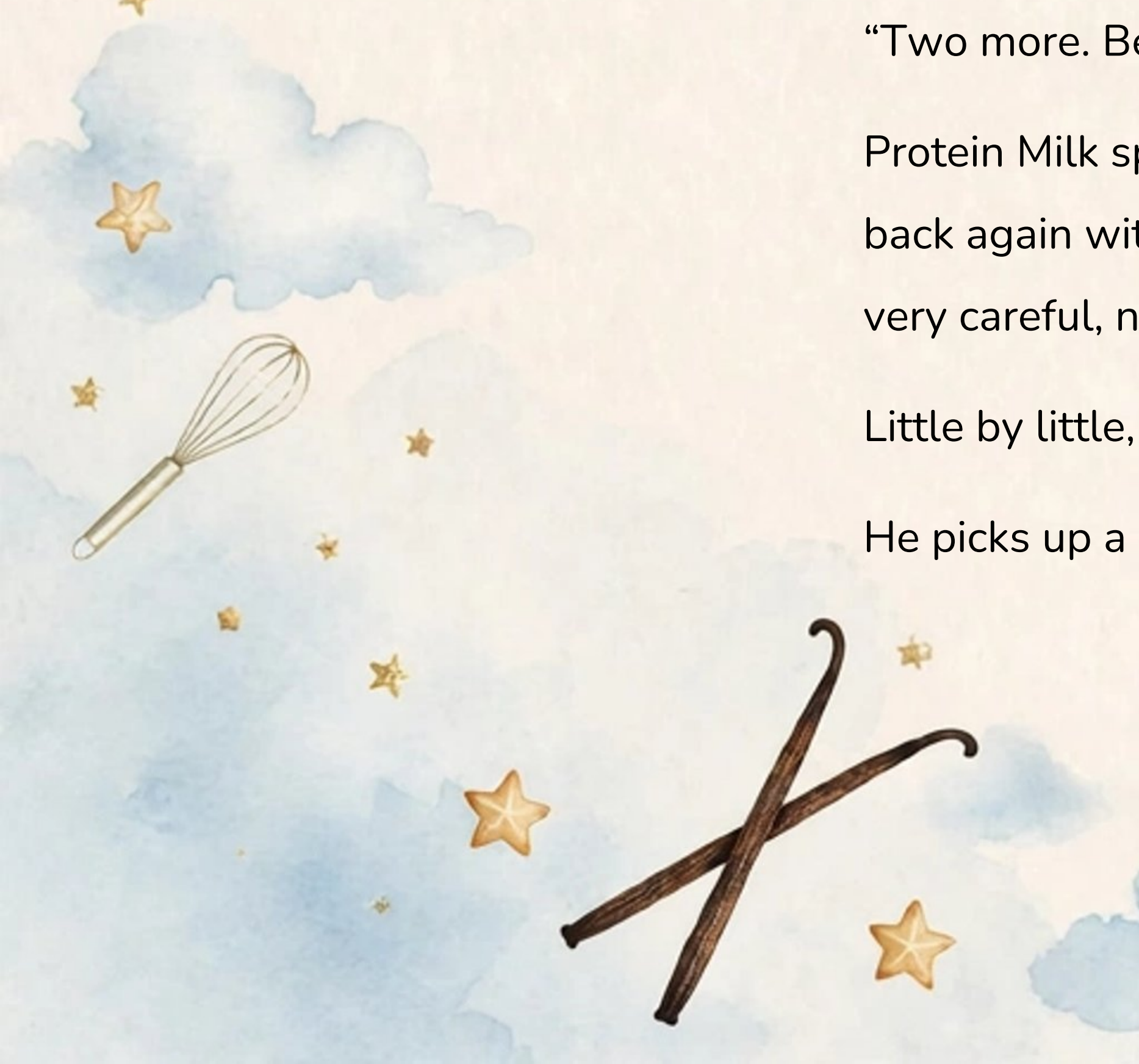
Oreo flicks his ear. Cats rarely argue. They say the true thing once and let you think about it.

Aj looks down at the purple smear on his thumb. Without really meaning to, he licks it.

It tastes like starlight and summer and something warm. It tastes, if he is honest, much stronger than a whole berry ever did.

He frowns at the basket, as if it has told him a secret he is not ready to hear. Then he stands up.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s find Cookie Dough.”







Cookie Dough's Steps



The grand marble steps run down between the second and third courtyards, wide and white and very, very long. Halfway down, Cookie Dough is counting out loud.

“Ten... eleven... twelve. Turn left.”

She turns left, perfectly on the number, and trots seven steps across, the map rolled up in her harness and two canisters of cloud cream bouncing gently in its loops.

“She’s found two!” cries Aj, hurrying down with the basket of berries.

Cookie Dough looks up proudly. “Number nine, by the fountain. Number fourteen, behind the planter. Exactly where you drew them.” Her whiskers droop. “And number three.”

At her paws lies the third canister. Its lid has popped off. It is completely empty, and a long trail of cream has dried in a white streak across the marble, all the way down to the next step.

Aj sits down heavily beside it.

Two canisters, not three. A basket of squashed berries. A torn sheet of dough in a bowl. He opens his journal and looks at the Golden Spiral Tart, with its neat little numbers and its flag that says “FESTIVAL”.

“It can’t be done,” he says. “Not like this. There isn’t enough cream for

the custard, the dough’s torn, and the berries won’t make a spiral.” He swallows. “Maybe we should ask them to wait. Just a little.”

Above them, on the highest balustrade, Chocolate Fudge Brownie stirs.

“The bells ring at noon,” he says. “They have always rung at noon. They will not wait for a tart.”

“Then what do I do?” asks Aj, and he looks at Cherry cat.

But Cherry cat only rests her soft cherry-red cheek against his arm. “When I was little,” she says, “I wanted every day to be exactly like the day I’d imagined. It never was. Some days were better.”

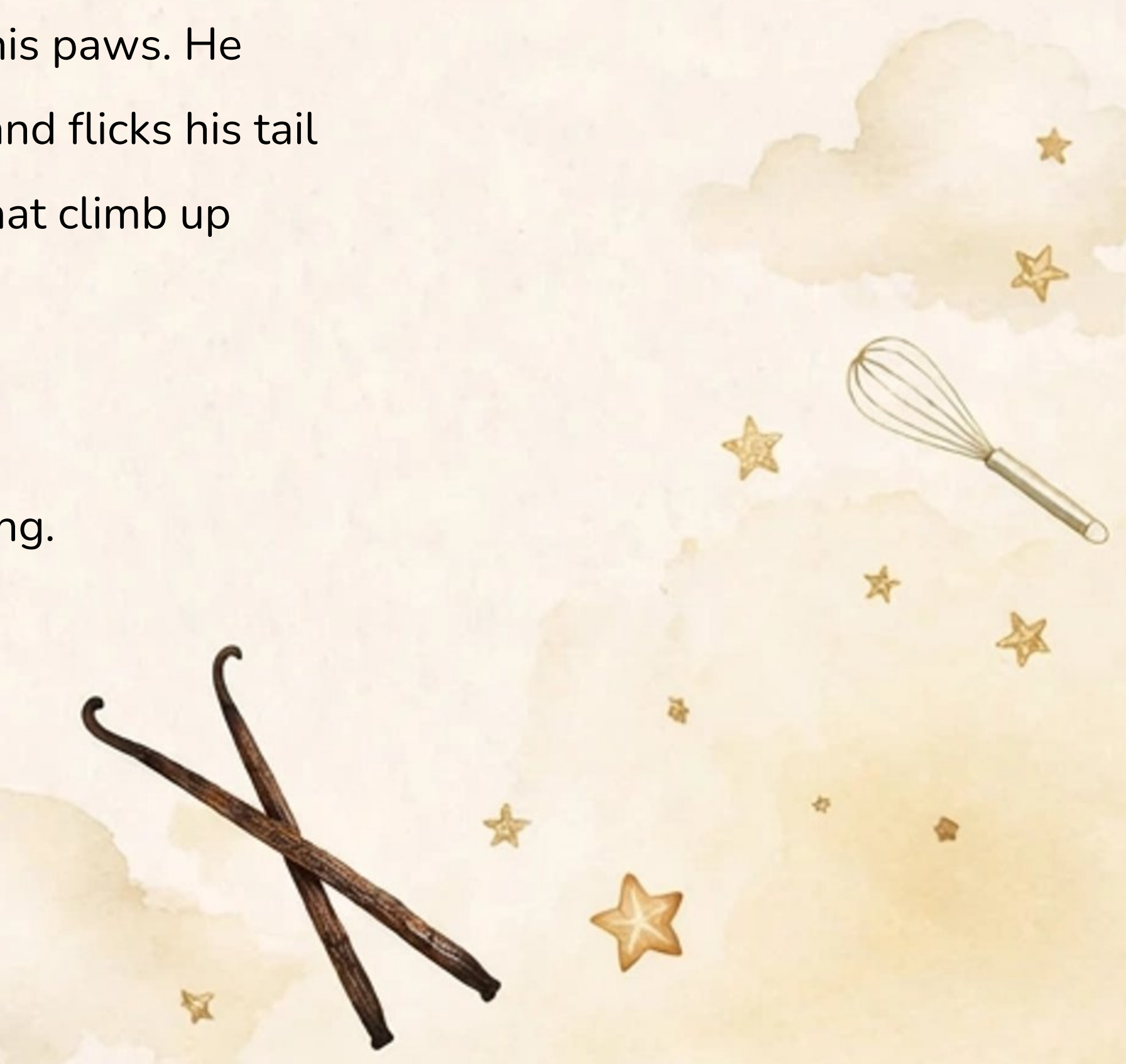
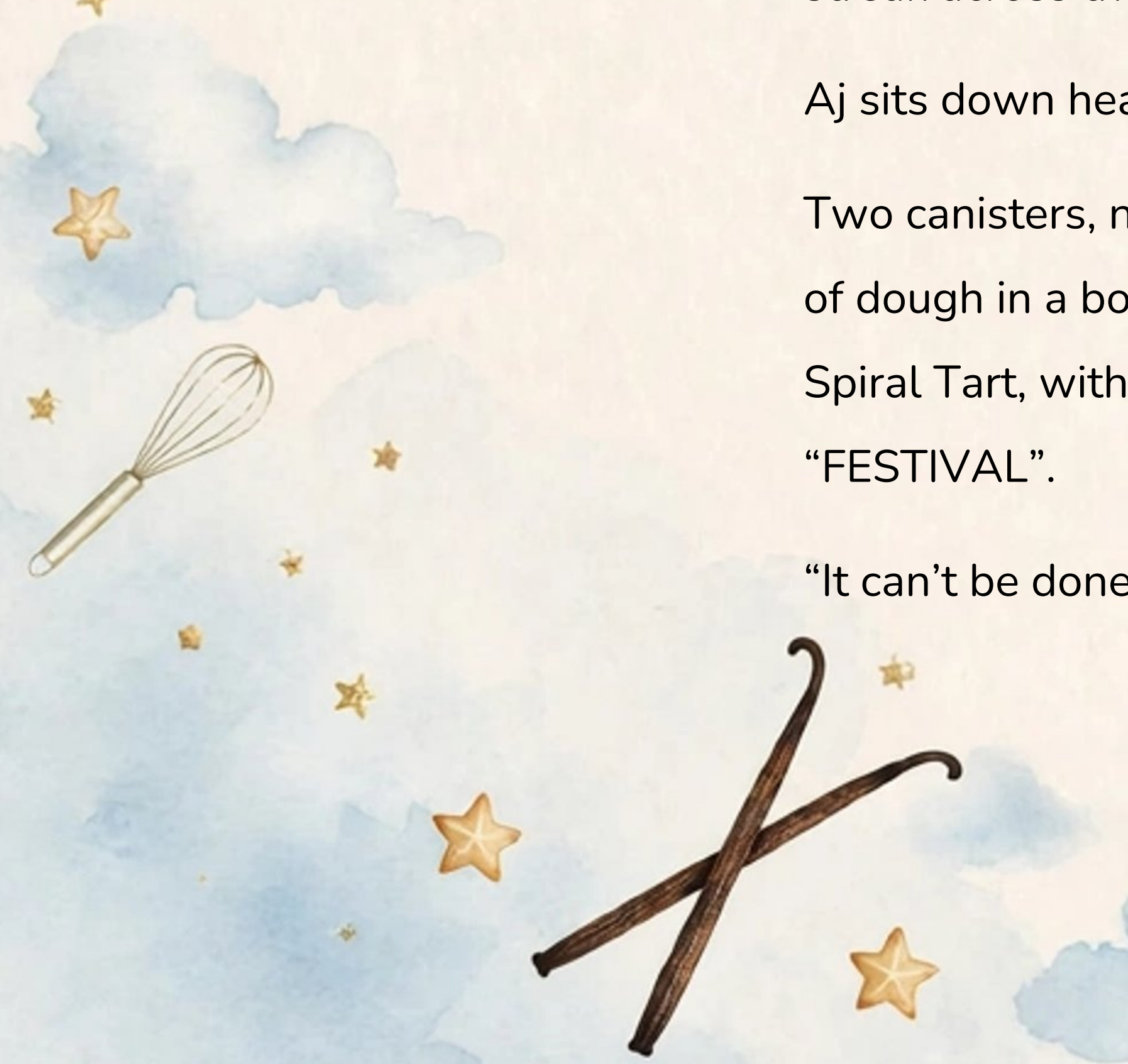
Aj stares at the drawing. It is beautiful, and it is a drawing of something he no longer has.

Slowly, he turns the page. The next one is blank.

High above them, Chocolate Fudge Brownie rises to his paws. He spreads his broad brown wings, looks straight at Aj, and flicks his tail once, very deliberately, towards the misty parapets that climb up around the spire.

“Is that the signal?” whispers Aj.

Chocolate Fudge Brownie only turns and starts walking.





Along the Misty Parapets

The parapet walkway curls around the outside of the celestial spire like the peel of an apple. It is wide and safe, with a tall stone wall on the outer side, but mist pours over it in soft waves, so thick that Aj sometimes cannot see his own boots.

“Tread softly,” says Cherry cat, close behind him. “Stay by the wall.”

The cats walk ahead in a line: Chocolate Fudge Brownie first, then Oreo, then Cookie Dough with her canisters, then Protein Milk, who keeps bouncing back to check that Aj is still there. Aj carries the berries in one arm and the bowl of torn dough in the other, balancing steadily.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“Somewhere every cat knows,” says Chocolate Fudge Brownie, “and no baker ever asks about.”

At the top of the walkway, they reach a round door set into the spire. Above it, a band of old carvings runs around the stone. Aj leans in and deciphers them, one picture at a time: the sun, high in the sky. A big round dish. Inside the dish, a heap of curled-up cats, nose to tail, all piled together.

“That’s funny,” says Aj. “Cats sleeping in a dish?”

“Look inside,” says Oreo.

The door opens onto a small round room, warm as a hug. In the middle stands an ancient stone oven, its domed top made of golden glass. The midday sun pours straight down through the spire and through the glass, and the whole oven glows.

“The sun oven,” says Cherry cat softly. “I’d forgotten. We used to nap on the warm stones when it was cold.”

As if to prove it, the four cats pile into a wide, deep baking dish beside the oven. They curl up together, a jumble of white and brown, ears and tails and paws, every gap filled.

Aj looks at them. Then he looks at the torn dough in his bowl. Then at the squashed, jammy berries.

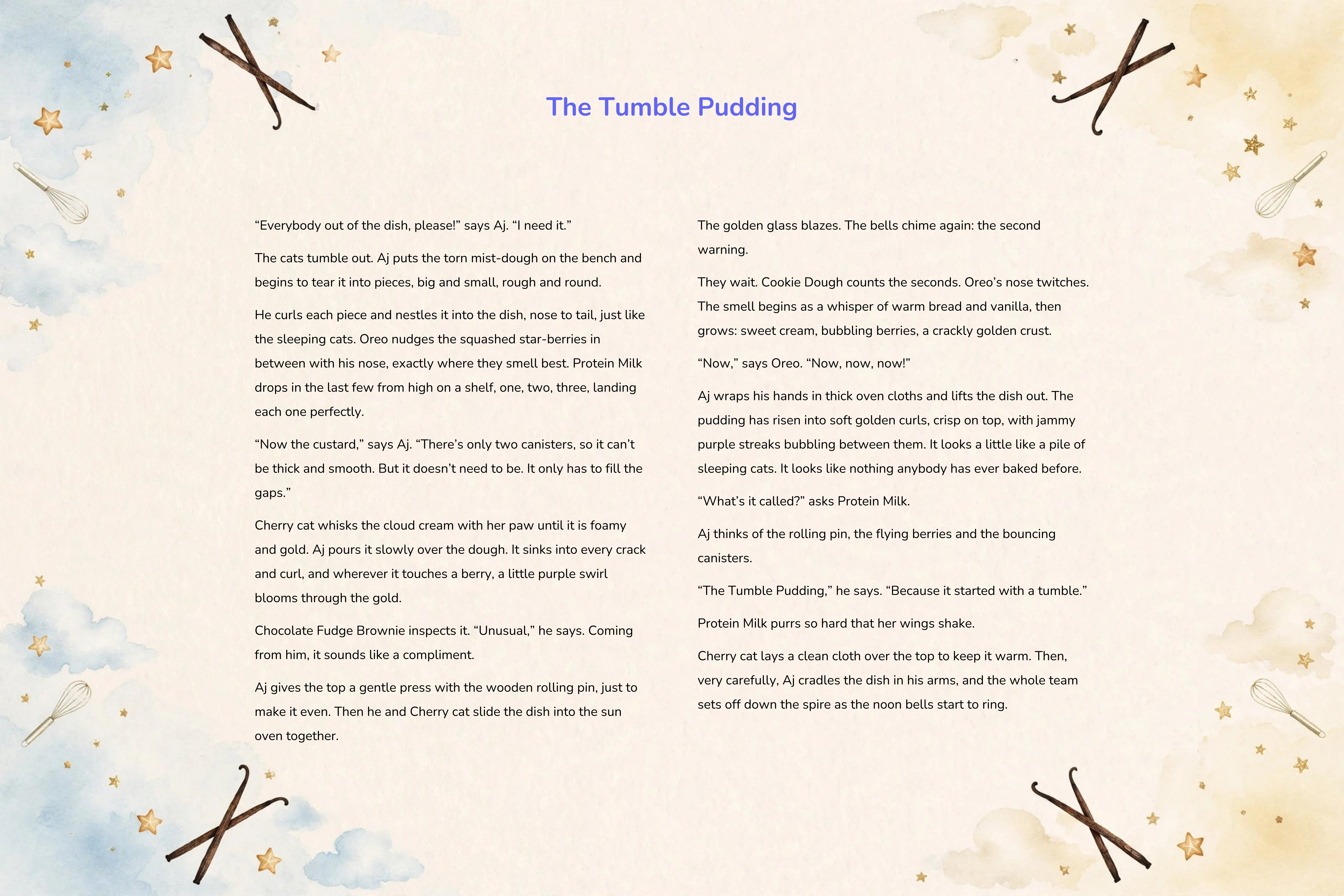
Not a sheet. Pieces. Lots of pieces, curled up together. And between them, something soft to fill every gap.

“Not a tart,” he breathes. “A pudding.”

He opens his journal at the blank page and draws faster than ever: no measurements, no flag, just arrows, a dish and a pile of curls.

Far below, the first bells begin to chime.





The Tumble Pudding

“Everybody out of the dish, please!” says Aj. “I need it.”

The cats tumble out. Aj puts the torn mist-dough on the bench and begins to tear it into pieces, big and small, rough and round.

He curls each piece and nestles it into the dish, nose to tail, just like the sleeping cats. Oreo nudges the squashed star-berries in between with his nose, exactly where they smell best. Protein Milk drops in the last few from high on a shelf, one, two, three, landing each one perfectly.

“Now the custard,” says Aj. “There’s only two canisters, so it can’t be thick and smooth. But it doesn’t need to be. It only has to fill the gaps.”

Cherry cat whisks the cloud cream with her paw until it is foamy and gold. Aj pours it slowly over the dough. It sinks into every crack and curl, and wherever it touches a berry, a little purple swirl blooms through the gold.

Chocolate Fudge Brownie inspects it. “Unusual,” he says. Coming from him, it sounds like a compliment.

Aj gives the top a gentle press with the wooden rolling pin, just to make it even. Then he and Cherry cat slide the dish into the sun oven together.

The golden glass blazes. The bells chime again: the second warning.

They wait. Cookie Dough counts the seconds. Oreo’s nose twitches. The smell begins as a whisper of warm bread and vanilla, then grows: sweet cream, bubbling berries, a crackly golden crust.

“Now,” says Oreo. “Now, now, now!”

Aj wraps his hands in thick oven cloths and lifts the dish out. The pudding has risen into soft golden curls, crisp on top, with jammy purple streaks bubbling between them. It looks a little like a pile of sleeping cats. It looks like nothing anybody has ever baked before.

“What’s it called?” asks Protein Milk.

Aj thinks of the rolling pin, the flying berries and the bouncing canisters.

“The Tumble Pudding,” he says. “Because it started with a tumble.”

Protein Milk purrs so hard that her wings shake.

Cherry cat lays a clean cloth over the top to keep it warm. Then, very carefully, Aj cradles the dish in his arms, and the whole team sets off down the spire as the noon bells start to ring.



The page is framed by a decorative border. In the top-left and bottom-left corners, there are blue watercolor clouds with several golden stars of varying sizes. Two dark brown vanilla beans are crossed in an 'X' shape in each of these corners. In the top-right and bottom-right corners, there are yellow watercolor clouds with golden stars. Two dark brown vanilla beans are also crossed in an 'X' shape in each of these corners. A small wire whisk is positioned near the bottom of each cloud cluster.

The Midday Feast

The great terrace is full. Long tables stretch from one end to the other, covered with white cloths and silver dishes, and every cat in Cat Land is there: on the benches, on the balustrades, on top of one another. In the very centre of the main table stands an empty space, waiting.

The twelfth bell rings just as Aj reaches it.

He sets down the dish. The terrace falls silent. Hundreds of eyes turn towards the cloth.

Aj's hands are shaking a little. This is not the Golden Spiral Tart. There is no spiral and no flag. For a moment, he wishes he had something perfect to show them.

Then Protein Milk bumps her head against his elbow, and Cherry cat gives a tiny nod, and Aj lifts the cloth.

Steam rolls up in a warm golden cloud. The smell spreads across the terrace like sunshine: vanilla, cream, berries, crust. Somewhere at the back, a very old cat says, "Ooh."

"That's not a tart," whispers a kitten.

"No," says Aj, and his voice gets stronger. "It's a Tumble Pudding. Our tart fell apart this morning, so my team and I made something new out of the pieces."

Chocolate Fudge Brownie steps forward, takes the first spoonful and tastes it with his eyes closed. The whole terrace waits.

At last, he opens his eyes.

"Citizens of Cat Land," he declares. "Every year, we honour the best bake of the festival. This year, we honour something better: a baker who did not give up when everything rolled away. A baker who listened to his team, looked at what he had, and invented something no one has ever tasted."

He bows to Aj. "The Tumble Pudding will be baked at every Sky Festival from now on."

The cats cheer. Then they purr, all of them at once, until the whole castle hums like a cello. Spoons clink. Bowls are passed. Oreo, Cookie Dough, Chocolate Fudge Brownie and Protein Milk sit in a proud row beside the dish.

Chocolate Fudge Brownie turns the carved ivory token over in Aj's hand. On the back, freshly scratched with a claw, are three new words: King Cat of the Kitchen.

Aj grins so widely that his cheeks hurt.





A Page for the Real Pudding

That afternoon, when the feast is over and the sun has softened, Aj sits on the edge of the vaulted terrace with a warm bowl of Tumble Pudding on his knees.

Cherry cat sits beside him, her pink fur glowing in the late light. Protein Milk is curled in his lap. Oreo and Cookie Dough are sharing the last crusty corner of the dish. Chocolate Fudge Brownie is pretending not to want any, and eating it anyway.

All four of them are purring.

Aj opens his leather journal. On one page is the Golden Spiral Tart, perfect and neat, with all its numbers. On the next is the quick, messy drawing he made in the sun oven, with arrows going everywhere.

He turns to a fresh page and draws the real pudding, exactly as it came out, with every lumpy, golden curl. Underneath he writes: “Made by Aj, Cherry cat, Protein Milk, Oreo, Cookie Dough and Chocolate Fudge Brownie. In full.”

“Which page do you like best?” asks Cherry cat.

Aj thinks about it. “The one we made together,” he says.

Cherry cat leans her cherry-red cheek against his shoulder. “That’s my little king cat,” she purrs.

And far below, the marble bridge waits patiently in the clouds, ready to bring them back next year.



