

Sleeping Valley

Chapter 1

In the Sleeping Valley, animals of all different species live and work together as a community. Animals previously known as predators and prey now live together in the small villages that sit in the mountains and forests surrounding it.

The reason for this group of peaceful communities sits in the heart of the valley, a towering oak tree. Its branches spread out forming a protective canopy as twisting vines embrace the bark. Carvings in the wood tell stories from long ago. Tales of heroes, deception and magic are etched in intricate designs and marked with signatures from the artists, showcasing the variety of species who created it.

While the tree's mighty branches and artistic renderings are impressive, the true heart is the large opening in its center. A round, wooden door greets travelers with a window casting warm light from within, contrasting the night-time darkness.

Nearby, a brown and cream cat with fluffy fur lingers as she sits and fidgets with the fabric of her sweater. Lumi glances at everyone who passes by her into the safe abode.

Should I go inside tonight? Animals have seemed... off lately.

As she frets, a family of well-dressed rabbits enters the tree. One opens the door, and murmurs of conversation over dinner can be heard from inside.

Lumi notices a firefly flitting past. She breathes a sigh of relief into the cool night air, getting on all fours into a kitten-like crouch. As her tail swishes in the air with excitement, Lumi stalks her prey with precision.

She purrs with delight which notifies the lightning bug, causing it to fly away. The hunter springs into action. Lumi bats at the glowing light playfully as it blinks in the night. The mighty predator lets out a *mrrow* of glee as she rolls around in the late-summer grass. She suddenly feels hot as she notices stares from behind.

A deer and coyote stand near a tree entrance. The two wear formal attire while holding drinks, the coyote takes a sip of his to avoid eye contact. Soon the two go back to their small talk, but the warmth in Lumi's fur lingers. She stands up and brushes blades of grass off her pants.

Why are they acting like they're above me all of a sudden? Lumi huffs an embarrassed breath, forming a faint cloud in the evening air as her ears flatten.

She turns to the dirt path she came from, then walks down the slope to a riverbank. The water rushes over pebbles as late-summer leaves float along the surface. Lumi sits on a mossy rock jutting from the shore. She pokes a branch into the water and watches as the current ripples around it. The cat's dread soon flows and dissipates while she watches the gentle river. Lumi sighs and sits back, letting her feet dip into the cool water.

Most cats hate getting their fur wet. Especially when it's cold. The thought makes her *mrrrp* with amusement. She lightly kicks at the river as it flows around her feet.

"It's so *beautiful*," Lumi unconsciously murmurs aloud as fireflies float above the river, looking like stars falling from the sky. She stands up and reaches out when the rock beneath her gives way.

With a *sploosh* she falls into the water. Lumi tries to stand up in the shallow waves but slips on a pebble and falls back in rump-first. She waves her arms about, trying to grasp at the shore.

Eventually she grabs hold of a tree root and climbs up. Lumi then lays on the shore in defeat, looking up at a sudden eruption of giggles.

"Lumi, that has got to be the funniest thing I've seen all week! And yesterday I saw Holt shove a blueberry up his nose."

Lumi sighs in relief as she recognizes the brown wolfdog reaching a paw out to her. He wears a hoodie and holds a wooden cane in his other paw.

“Thanks, Basil.” She stands up, then aggressively shakes water from her fur.

“Well, Holt *is* pretty hard to beat. Why’re you sitting alone by the river at night?”

“No real reason, I guess.”

“Sadly moping in the dark?” Basil teases.

“I was enjoying the night-time scenery.” Lumi nudges him in the arm. “Hmm, are you sure? You looked pretty pathetic to me—” He gives a sly smile.

Lumi playfully shoves Basil who shoves her back.

“I’m meeting a couple friends at The Overgrown Oak, you coming?”

Lumi strokes her fluffy tail for a moment before responding.

“Sorry, I can’t tonight... but be sure to let me know how it goes!”

“Will do, see ya!” Basil waves cheerfully then walks away with his cane down the dirt path.

Lumi waves then lightly sighs as the wolfdog is soon hidden by the ferns and thin trees lining the path.

I wish I could hang out with him, but I should go home now, it's really getting dark. She thinks to herself, walking to a small wooden bridge curling over the river. As she walks across, Lumi breathes in the cool air with its light earthy scent.

Through oak and maple forest Lumi soon comes to a clearing of ferns and small shrubs. She smiles at the sight of a cozy home burrowed into a small grassy hill. A lantern glows warmly above the entrance.

I hope Haven doesn't mind that I'm home early... or that I need a change of clothes. She looks down at her sweater, still damp from her stumble. Lumi opens the door. She immediately purrs at the sight of the black and orange cat wearing pajamas and glasses.

"Oh, you're back early! Welcome home... you're wet?"

"I fell into the river," Lumi sheepishly giggles as Haven holds her paws.

"You silly goose, are you alright?" She tries to hide a purr.

Lumi nods, "Yeah, just a little slip. Oh, and I ended up not going to The Overgrown Oak after all."

"How come?" Haven flicks her ear in interest.

"Well... I didn't see many of my kind there tonight," Lumi mews.

Haven's golden eyes light up with understanding. "I've noticed that too, lately," She lightly growls. "It's okay, though. Wanna get changed so we can have our required comfy time before bed?"

Lumi purrs as her tail springs up, "Yes, I'll get my PJs!"

A few moments later, she comes back wearing pajamas and holding a cow stuffed animal.

"It was nice to get out of the wetness," Lumi giggles.

"Now c'mere, it's blanket time," Haven lays on a couch in the living room with her arms outstretched, holding a blanket with autumn designs.

Lumi rests beside her and yawns as Haven holds her, gently running her dark fingers through Lumi's light hair. The two cuddle for a while before Haven's smile drops slightly.

"Work sucked today," Haven sighs. "I was trying to help a customer grab a book off a high shelf, and I fell onto a pile of books on the ground. Then Copper snapped at me for being 'too clumsy'. It was weird, he's never like that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, love." Lumi looks at her with concern in her gaze, "I can assure you, Henry does not approve!" She holds her plush cow up to Haven to make him kiss her on the cheek.

Haven lightly giggles, "Thanks, Henry. I guess we both had experiences with jerks today."

"Yeah, tomorrow will be better," Lumi kisses her on the forehead before yawning.

"Goodnight, sleepyhead," Haven purrs before turning off the lamp on the end table. The two (three, including Henry) fall asleep underneath the blanket on the couch, too comfortable to get up to go to bed, listening to each other's purrs and the crickets outside.

Lumi blinks open her eyes, expecting to see the living room in the early morning light. Instead, she finds herself in a lavender, dreamy landscape with a bright sky full of glowing stars.

Where am I? Lumi looks down to see she is still in her pajamas and holding her plush cow, but does not see Haven.

"Haven? Are you there?" She desperately searches through the vast, open area. The ground feels soft on her feet like clouds.

"Do not worry, your partner is safe," A voice calmly speaks behind her with a slight echo. Lumi whips around to see a large fluffy blue creature. On its back are two large wings. It has multicolored horns and wears a large cape.

Is that a dragon? I've only heard of them from legends of the past.

"W—where am I, who are you?" Lumi holds Henry protectively, for once ignoring any potential embarrassment because of the unbelievable sight in front of her.

"I am Wonder, and you are currently dreaming. Your consciousness is currently in the Cloud Realm because I have an urgent message," they speak politely but with importance in their tone, "The entirety of the Sleeping Valley is in great danger."

Lumi nervously swishes her tail as she stares at the dragon. "But we've had peace for so long, how are we now in danger?"

"Have you been told the tales of who created harmony in the valley?" "I know about the celestials who created the Overgrown Oak tree. That's what helped all animal species have peace, right?"

"Yes, that is correct. I helped the other celestials, Hope, Vision, and Dream, create that tree," Wonder smiles and looks away for a moment, as if reminiscing of a time from the distant past.

"Wow, you're really a celestial? That's incredible! But why are you warning me of this?"

Wonder's smile fades, and they face Lumi seriously, "I am, but unfortunately celestials cannot create all forms of magic. We were able to

originally grow the tree with our powers, but we now face a threat that requires mortal animals to learn magic.”

Lumi gasps, “Mortal animals have never learned magic before, I thought that was only a myth.”

“There have been mortal animals in the past who were able to harness the powers of different elements, but there was no need for it to be taught for years until now,” They swish their long tail with a round spike on the end.

“I cannot put it into clear mortal words, so I will show you. Don’t worry, this will not hurt.” They step forward and press the soft horn on their nose to Lumi’s forehead.

Lumi’s sight flashes from the Cloud Realm into a vision of the Overgrown Oak. The Sleeping Valley looks calm, with animals of all kinds walking through and living in their villages. A darkness sweeps over the valley, and many mysterious spirits attack the tree with magic.

She watches in horror as one mage uses dark clouds to suck life from the tree, and another breaks the previously indestructible branches with glowing orbs. Soon, the tree is ashy and torn apart, and animals below stare at it in horror. A wolf and a fox growl at each other while a rabbit and deer fight.

Oh no... Lumi trembles, hugging her Henry plush as the whole valley descends into chaos.

Before she can see anymore, the vision fades and Lumi returns to the Cloud Realm. Wonder looks at her solemnly, "If nothing is done, that is what will happen to your home."

Lumi takes a shaky breath, "How am I supposed to save everyone?" Wonder puts a paw on her shoulder and smiles warmly with their eyes full of starlight. "The other celestials and I are here to help you, and don't fear, you will not have to fight alone."