

A crispness in the air made his nostrils tingle. Cedric smelled the faintest hint of burning leaves from the village, with added sweetness from the lush flowers of his garden. He smiled, looking around before glancing back into the cottage.

"Are you coming, old boy?" Cedric stepped through the doorway and to the side, to let Badgerton out into the garden.

The badger hesitated, pausing there to sniff a few times. He narrowed his eyes, as if altogether suspicious of the cooler temperature outside. A short moment after, he huffed an almost indignant sigh as he stepped out into the garden.

Cedric pulled the door shut behind him, chuckling at his familiar friend's manner. "You've left the garden behind, for less green places, haven't you? Still, your coat's never looked better."

Badgerton made a sort of chittering sound, friendly enough for Cedric's question. The fluffy badger immediately poked his entire snout into a flowering bush.

Cedric ambled out into his lush, colourful garden, breathing deep of the chilly air tinged with smoke and decaying vegetation. The sharp, fresh scent of pumpkin vines tickled his nose as he spotted the orange orbs nestled among dark leaves. His garden, bursting with autumn flowers and rustling grass, felt alive underfoot. Badgerton trotted along beside him, his little snout twitching as he inspected every leaf and pebble.

Cedric's knitted sweater tickled his chin, soft and worn from many harvests past. He rubbed his thumb against the faded patch on the sleeve - Nicky's old charm to protect from pricklers. His other hand absently adjusted the wide brim of his felt hat. The cold kissed his ears and the bridge of his nose, making them pink as he squinted against the sun's autumn glare.

He approached a massive, vine-choked pumpkin that rested under a rustling ash tree. The pumpkin's rough skin bore flecks of damp earth, and the vine clinging to its stem looked ready for snapping. Cedric crouched, the damp earth's chill palpable through his trouser legs. He stroked the pumpkin's ribbed surface, imagining its rich scent and deep orange flesh.

"Big one this year," Cedric murmured to Badgerton, who'd burrowed his nose into another clump of forget-me-nots. The badger grunted, a sound that managed to be somehow both contented and dismissive. "Just wait til you see the

pie we make, old boy." Cedric stood and stretched his back, joints cracking softly. He spotted a rusted sickle half-hidden under the bushes, where Nicky must have forgotten it last autumn. "I suppose I'll have to dig up a few more, for Nicky's tarts."

The cottage chimney smoked lazily behind him, the familiar sight filling Cedric with a deep contentment. He bent to snap the thick pumpkin stem, feeling its fibrous resistance. The pumpkin landed heavily at his feet with a satisfying thump, displacing dead leaves.

"One down," Cedric chuckled, picking it up with a grunt. He brushed the worst of the dirt from it and propped it near the back door, within sight of Badgerton. The badger, after inspecting a fallen twig for beetles, trotted over and gave the pumpkin a suspicious sniff.

"Careful, you might give yourself indigestion," Cedric warned, grinning. He spotted Nicky's broad-shouldered figure through the cottage window, gesturing animatedly while setting out the pastry ingredients. The sight made Cedric's heart give a little bump. Nicky had changed into an old, soft woollen jumper that had seen better days, its elbows worn thin and one sleeve pushed up to reveal a tanned, freckled forearm dusted with almost invisible hair. The jumper hugged Nicky's chest and shoulders in a way that made Cedric want to get closer.

He picked up another smaller pumpkin and headed for the cottage. Badgerton scurried ahead, nose twitching at the scent of dough wafting through the open window. As Cedric approached, he caught Nicky's warm chuckle. "I see you found my little helper out here," Nicky greeted them, bending over to pat Badgerton's head.

"I did," Cedric agreed, stepping inside. The cottage's warmth embraced him: the scent of freshly baked bread, spiced tea, and Nicky's musky cologne. He placed the pumpkins near a stack of recipe books and peered at the pastry dough. Nicky's hands had already picked up a layer of flour.

"You look like a snowman," Cedric teased, brushing flour off Nicky's cheek. His fingers lingered on the rough stubble there.

Nicky leaned into Cedric's touch. "A rather attractive snowman, then?" His voice went low, but it still carried a delicately playful tone. He grasped Cedric's hand, pulling him in closer. "I could use some help here, if you're not too busy being the gardener."

"Never too busy, for you." For the instant their eyes met, Cedric's grey eyes shone opalescent as the warm light twinkled in them. Completely regardless of the flour coating Nicky's skin, he squeezed the hand holding his.

Nicky leaned in for a kiss, briefly. His lips tasted sweet, from some juice he must have sipped a moment ago. He always seemed to have a sweetness to him, if Cedric thought about it. It made the kiss seem shorter, pulling away when he just started to let it unfold on his tongue.

But Cedric smiled anyway, looking into his eyes. "So, what can I do to help you? I take it you're making tarts, and I promised Badgerton at least one pie."

Nicky's fingers twined through Cedric's, tugging him closer to the kitchen counter laden with autumnal bounty. "First things first, we need to clean these beauties." He gestured with his free hand to the pumpkins, now mostly nestled among parchment, spoons and rolling pins. His voice held such warmth, thick with a quiet affection.

Cedric smiled, settling in beside Nicky at the counter. He felt the heat radiating from Nicky's body and smelled the flour dusting his skin mixed with that faint, musky scent.

"Scrub them well, and then we can peel," Nicky continued, handing Cedric a vegetable brush and a sharp knife. His touch lingered just long enough to send a faint ripple through Cedric's skin. "The tarts will be delicate, a crumbly pastry and smooth filling. Perfect with a scoop of vanilla."

Cedric hummed, running his thumb along the rough handle of the knife. "Sounds delicious." He began scrubbing the pumpkins with slow, deliberate strokes. The task felt domestic and intimate in its simplicity, a comfortable rhythm. Nicky moved beside him, scraping the rinds with a practiced ease.

The kitchen filled with the soft sounds of their work: water splashing, heavy fruits hitting the chopping board. A faint hiss came from the stove, where a kettle bubbled contentedly. Badgerton circled their feet, his little nose twitching at the smells.

"Do you remember when we first tried making these?" Cedric asked softly. His eyes flicked to Nicky, catching the way his sleeves rode up when he reached for another pumpkin.

Nicky chuckled, a low rumble. "Do I? You burned the crust and undercooked the filling." His tone held only fondness. "Still tried to eat them though, because I was hungry and you looked so dejected."

Cedric grinned, heat creeping up his neck. "And you almost choked on that undercooked stuff." He laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "Your face when you swallowed it down..." His fingers paused on the knife handle. It felt like so long ago, even though he could see it clearly, in his mind's eye.

Nicky turned, leaning his hip against the counter. His expression softened as he looked to Cedric. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat," he almost whispered. His fingers found Cedric's again, thumb brushing slowly. "But only for you."

Cedric's breath caught in his throat. His eyes held Nicky's gaze for a long moment. Then, slowly, deliberately, he leaned in, leading with his mouth. It began softly, a slow tasting of the lingering sweetness on Nicky's lips and the faint dusting of flour on his skin. When they parted, Cedric's eyes looked somehow darker, a stormy grey.

"Finish the pumpkins," Cedric murmured, his voice slightly roughened despite his best effort to keep it even. He moved behind Nicky, wrapping his arms loosely around him. His chin rested on Nicky's shoulder. "Then, let's make something sticky and delicious." His hands slid slowly down Nicky's chest. "Just for us."

Nicky exhaled, a shaky laugh escaping him. He turned his head, catching Cedric's mouth again in a swift but deep kiss. "You're going to make us burn dinner," he accused, without a complaint in his voice.

Cedric pulled away with a satisfied smile, his eyes sparkling. "I'll make it worth it." He turned back to the pumpkins, picking up his knife with renewed focus. The task ahead was simple in its familiarity, comforting, and guaranteed to have a reward of some kind at the end.

Whether tarts or romance, or both, or some other wondrous delight, Cedric felt a promise at the evening as it rolled on. It didn't take long before the kitchen smelled good, and soon after that, the sweet aroma stretched out into the rest of the cottage.

Badgerton, at some point, slipped out of the kitchen to drape himself across his overstuffed bed by the hearth. He still kept the goings-on in sight, though,

because certainly someone had to keep the boys on task. How they got on without him, he could hardly guess.

The pumpkin peels piled up on the counter like small orange mountains. Cedric's fingers, now pleasantly damp and cool from handling the squashes, reached for a warm tart shell. He rolled it in his hands, feeling the buttery flakiness give way slightly under his palms.

"Careful," Nicky warned, looking over from where he was mixing spices. His tone held a teasing edge as his gaze drifted over Cedric. "That flaky shell's going to be even more delicious with pumpkin in it." His fingers worked methodically in the bowl, but his eyes held something heated.

Cedric smiled, nodding. He placed the tart shell into a pan, pressing it gently to the edges. "I always forget how good it smells when I open the oven," he mused. His hands brushed against the flour-dusted countertop, leaving smudged prints as he moved closer to Nicky, with a slight tilt of his head. "Though I do like being between the warmth and you."

Nicky's stirring faltered. He glanced down, then up at Cedric through his lashes. "Flour," he uttered softly by way of explanation, brushing over Cedric's cheek with the back of his knuckle. The touch lingered just a moment too long to be purely practical.

Cedric's breath hitched. His hand rose, capturing Nicky's wrist before he could pull away. "Then it's a good thing I have someone to clean me up." He guided Nicky's hand lower, over the worn fabric of his shirt. His pulse hummed under Nicky's fingers.

The kettle on the stove softly started to whistle, shattering the moment. Nicky started slightly but didn't pull his hand away. "That would be the tea," he murmured, though neither of them moved.

At last, Cedric released his grip, letting Nicky's hand slide away. "There," he called back, leaning in to turn the flame off, his voice rougher than intended. Then he moved back to the counter, picking up a second tart shell. "For now, we have pumpkin to tame."

They fell back into their tasks, but the sparks rekindled in every shared glance and brush of elbows. The cottage in time wholly filled with the sweet scent of baking pastry and spiced pumpkin. Badgerton, sprawled near the fire, twitched an ear but kept his eyes closed. The comforting routine of measuring, mixing, and

baking became a rhythm. Their bodies moved with a practiced ease that spoke of years spent in this kitchen.

Nicky pulled the first tray of tarts from the oven, setting it on a wire rack with similar ease. The scent intensified, warm and homely. He reached for a clean spoon, scooping up a small bite from the cooling filling, then held it out to Cedric.

"Taste test," he offered, his voice low.

Cedric stepped close enough to feel hotter, from the tarts, the oven, and of course Nicky right before him. He leaned in, lips parting slightly to accept the spoon. The filling was still warm, velvety smooth with a perfect balance of spice and sweet. He closed his eyes, savouring it.

"Perfect," he murmured, opening his eyes to find Nicky's gaze fixed on him. He stepped again, almost pressing against him, his free hand resting on Nicky's waist. "Though it needs one more ingredient."

Nicky's breath caught. He leaned in, meeting Cedric halfway for a slow kiss. The spoon clattered to the counter, forgotten as their hands found each other again. This time, there were no interruptions, just the steady sound of their breathing, the heat from the oven at their backs, and Badgerton's soft snore from his spot by the fire. The evening stretched out before them, filled with great warmth.

With little kisses and shared closeness, the two made good time in their kitchen endeavours. Within the hour, they had tarts, roasted pumpkin seeds, and a pie made of the pumpkins they picked, with enough left over in the icebox for perhaps a sweet loaf of bread, perfect for breakfast or tea-time.

And while the sweet treats rested, cooling across the kitchen surfaces, the pair busied themselves putting together a simple dinner of hearty vegetable stew, paired with the crusty bread remaining from the loaf Cedric baked earlier in the week. Their appetites stoked by the work they'd done made the meal quick and satisfying.

After it all, with the sun's rosy-fingered last beams of the day wiggling a farewell as they dipped beneath the horizon, the two sat on the sofa. The fire danced before them, crackling softly.

Nicky leaned closer, sliding his arm around Cedric, his easy smile going wider. "Well now, it looks like we've got the evening all to ourselves. Why d-"



Closing his eyes to sigh happily, Cedric eased up against Nicky. Then he opened his eyes again at the abrupt cutoff. "Yes?" He looked to Nicky's face, then traced his gaze to the floor in front of them.

There sat Badgerton, eyes narrowed, staring at the both of them.

"Oh, sorry old fellow, I thought you were asleep!" Cedric chuckled, resting his head beside Nicky's, chestnut hair mussed.

Nicky grinned, bright and toothy. "Apologies, Badgerton. Why don't you come up and join us then?"

Immediately, Badgerton leapt up onto the sofa and wiggled his extremely fluffy bottom between them. Just as instantly, his whole mood changed. From suspicious scrutiny to pleased contentment, the very domestic badger nestled in with Cedric and Nicky, making sure to stay right in the middle. That was, after all, where he could receive the most attention and absorb the most warmth, and it gave him a much better look at the fire.

The soft glow of the fireplace illuminated Badgerton's lush fur, casting him in a golden light. Cedric's hand drifted down to gently scratch behind the badger's ears, his fingers sinking into that dense fur. Nicky mirrored the motion from his side, both of them chuckling as Badgerton let out a satisfied grumble.

"Nice and cosy," Nicky murmured, settling back into the worn cushions of their sofa. His arm remained around Cedric's shoulders, a comforting presence. "Perfect ending to the day, isn't it?"

Cedric nodded against Nicky's shoulder, his eyes on the flickering flames. "Couldn't agree more," he murmured in answer. The evening's quiet contentment settled over him like an old blanket. He shifted slightly, his leg brushing against Badgerton's warm bulk.

The fire crackled and snapped, casting dancing shadows across the walls. Outside their window, darkness had fallen completely, the last vestige of daylight fading. Inside, their cottage felt like a snug sanctuary.

Cedric tilted his head back slightly to meet Nicky's eyes. "You know," he started, his voice quiet and thoughtful, "I think Badgerton might have become a regular homebody. Look how he's taken to the role."

Nicky chuckled, low and rich. His fingers continued their slow movements through Badgerton's fur. "He certainly has a way of making sure he's at the centre



of things," Nicky agreed. He leaned in closer, his lips brushing Cedric's cheek as he spoke. "Much like someone else I know."

Cedric's breath caught for a moment, a small smile curving his lips. "Someone who knows just how to steal the show?" His own fingers trailed up Nicky's arm, tracing the warm skin and the soft pyjamas.

Nicky hummed, a soft sound that vibrated through Cedric. "Someone who makes even the simplest evening feel magical." His hand slid from Badgerton to cup Cedric's cheek, thumb brushing gently across his lips.

The badger grumbled softly, shifting his weight but not moving away from their touch. He would, as far as he was concerned, absolutely be damned before he gave up his comfy spot. The moment stretched, filled with the warmth of the fire and their bodies pressed close. Cedric's eyes fluttered shut as he leaned into Nicky's touch.

"I could stay like this forever," he whispered, his voice barely audible over the crackle of flames. "Right here, with you and Badgerton. No adventures, even. Just you."

Nicky slowly smiled, his gaze soft. "No adventures?" he teased, though some sincerity beneath the jest. "You wound me, Cedric Flyn."

Cedric's eyes opened again, shining in the firelight. "Only a little," he replied, his tone playful and tender. "Besides, adventures can wait for another day." He leaned in, capturing Nicky's lips in another slow kiss. Soft and lingering, it filled with all the warmth of their shared day.

Badgerton, between them, let out a contented snuffling sound as if approving. The fire continued to crackle, casting a cosy glow over their entwined figures. The rest of the world seemed far away, faded into insignificance against the comfort of this moment. Here, in their cottage by the fire with Badgerton nestled between them, everything felt just as it should.

Their evening stretched out before them, close and intimate. The quiet snores of Badgerton, the flickering firelight, and the closeness of Nicky's affection formed a cocoon that Cedric never wanted to leave. Outside, the night deepened around them like a thick blanket. Tonight, that was more than enough adventure.