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THAT LINGERING SWEETNESS

by Tony Pi

“Welcome to the Plum Season, Master Deng and *Tangren* Ao, such as it is,” said the widow Yi to us, understandably sullen. Her tea-and-wine shop should have been as thriving as the street outside, yet it stood eerily empty. “My new hires tried to kill the magistrate on the same night that ghostly rats infested my establishment. Now all my customers stay away.”

“Which is why I brought Master Deng, in hopes we can turn your fortunes around,” I said between coughs. “His teahouse was well-loved before the arson. If you let him join your business, his old customers would surely follow.”

I didn’t tell her that I had, in part, caused her misfortune. Besides hawking blown-sugar candy for a living, I was also a conjurer and worked for Magistrate Gongsun in secret. To foil his assassination on that night of the riddle contest, I had conjured those rats out of wine and tea to help me, but in so doing I’d ruined the reputation of the teahouse.

I had come to fix this wrong.

But before I could say more, my dog Worry bounded past us, jostling my friend Deng and almost making him drop the small bundle he carried.

Pup-Brother Aoooooo, howled the spirit of Dog through Worry's shadow, in a voice that only I could hear. *This place reeks of curses. I'll sniff them out. Follow me!*

Please wait, Most Vigilant One, I cried with my mind's voice. That was the only magical skill I had left: talking to the twelve *shengxiao* animals of the zodiac. My power to inhabit caramel figurines and to shape animals from water had been taken from me, mere days ago. But the dog had already vanished up the open staircase in a blur of white.

"Sorry about her!" I said to the widow Yi. "She has a mind of her own."

The widow sighed but managed a half-smile. "Your dog chooses well. Our best tables are in the gallery above. Rest there, gentlemen, while I prepare powder tea and await your proposal."

"If I may be bold, madam?" said Deng. "Your teahouse is famed throughout Chengdu for your loose leaf tea."

"Loose leaf it is, then, and you're far too modest," said the widow. "Your family teahouse was the king of whisked tea in the city... before that ungodly fire. Set by a monkey-shaped flame, they say?"

Deng knitted his brows. “Yes. It seems we both have grievances against the strange spirits that plague Chengdu.”

Guilt gnawed at me for that disaster, too. I had shaped a dragon from river water to fight the spreading flames set by a monkey made of fire, but I was too late to save Deng’s teahouse. Yet another wrong to right.

“There’s an opportunity here for you both,” I said. “Madam, your patrons and staff have abandoned you. Sir, yours await a new teahouse to rise from the ashes. Why not work together?”

“What of the taint from assassins and rats?” said the widow with resignation in her voice. “I’m cursed, *Tangren Ao*. I’ve known it since my husband’s death.”

She excused herself to tend to the tea.

“She has doubts, as do I,” Deng whispered on the stairs. “What if our bad luck doubles?”

I huffed as I climbed. “It’s a gamble, whether you languish apart or make a try together. Given the choice? I’d take work.”

“True. People like us aren’t made to be idle.” He wiped his brow with a blue-gray sleeve. I liked Deng very much. He was earnest and always put his customers’ happiness above his own. “How’s your cold, by the way? Must be hard on sugar-shapers, being ill.”

“No one buys candy from a man with a cough.” I paused at the top and leaned on the gallery railing to catch my breath. Deng believed it a cold, and I didn’t correct him. It was easier than explaining the wound to my soul, sustained when a man from the Ten Crows Sect jabbed me with an enchanted arrow. Though I had survived, the cough was a result of it, and without strong breath I couldn’t inflate caramel bubbles to shape into zodiac animals. The same fear that had eaten at me for days returned. What if this never healed? What would I do if I could never craft or conjure again?

The Plum Season Tea-and-Wine Shop was the grandest teahouse in Chengdu, with a wide upper gallery that encircled the atrium like a balcony. Empty birdcages and artful hanging scrolls adorned the walls, with great windows open to the streets on the north and the east sides. We found my dog by the eastern overlook, sniffing the floor beneath a table with her pink nose. As Deng and I approached, I greeted the spirit of Dog echoing within my mind with a reverent thought. *Your visit surprises yet honors me, Lord Dog.*

Dog’s gruff voice barked in my mind. *You guard this Xiasi and I guard you, as I vowed. Do you smell the two powers here?*

I took a deep breath and caught a mix of scents on the breeze. Dog stink from Worry. Fragrant porkbone soup from

the noodle shop nearby. A hint of herbs from Medicine Lane. But the spirit said ‘powers’. I closed my eyes and tried again.

Faint they were, but there. Two *shengxiao* powers, though I knew not whose.

Why would an animal spirit curse the teahouse, let alone two?

Ask Monkey and Goat. These are their stinks, Dog said and growled. Or pry the secret from the dowager.

Deng leaned against a window and watched the afternoon crowd down on Market Street. “My daughter said you were here for Matchmaker Tan’s riddle contest that night. Did you see the rats? Or the attack on the magistrate?”

“I was too deep in the wine,” I said, which was half-true; I had not drunk of it but had sent my soul into wine and tea, to make liquid rats to defend Magistrate Gongsun. “But I did help Matchmaker Tan calm people down afterwards.”

“I’ve always envied the Plum Season for its location, Ao. Thank you for suggesting I work with Yi. I will try it. If this venture succeeds, know that you’ll always be welcome.”

“That’s a kind offer. Thank you.”

The widow Yi crested the stairs with a tray of cups, teapot, and three kinds of tea in bamboo scoops. “Our best teas, gentlemen. Yellow Mountain Fur Peak, Ba Mountain Bird’s Tongue, and White Hair Silver Needle. Which shall I brew?”

Wary of my cough, I examined them from afar. Earthy green, bright green, and pale-haired yellow. I favored none above another, but Deng chose the white tea without hesitation. The widow approved and set the tea to steep.

Deng proffered a small brick of tea wrapped in silk. “In return, please accept this gift of *pu’er* tea, madam. May it bring you good fortune.”

The widow took the tea from Deng. “You are most kind.”

I wondered if the curses had to do with her husband’s death. Could I earn her trust and convince her to tell me what had happened to him?

My father had a knack for that. As wandering candymen, we never stayed in one place for long, so we needed to make quick allies to survive. So too did we need to read our customers to best make a sale. He had trained me to watch people and deduce their birth sign from their appearance and personalities. “Some passers-by will buy any caramel creation for the novelty, but more will buy the zodiac animal of their birth year,” Father had once told me. “Thus you must learn not only the clues to a person’s age by their frailty or youth, but also play the part of fortune-teller.”

Could I do it as skilfully as he?

“Madam Yi,” I said, “you say you are cursed, and I believe you. We *Tangren* masters have a deep connection to the

shengxiao and their fortunes, and I feel something amiss here. Perhaps if you explain why you think there's a curse, I can help."

The widow raised an eyebrow. "I mean no disrespect, *Tangren Ao*, but may I ask that you prove you're no charlatan? Naming my birth year animal will do."

After years of practice, I could pinpoint a person's age within a span of three years. I observed her face, adding new details to what I'd already seen of her gait and bearing. How gray was her hair, how pronounced her wrinkles, how stained her teeth from years of drinking tea. That and more told me she was between fifty-three and fifty-five. This was the Year of the Monkey, which meant she was born Ox, Tiger, or Rabbit. But which?

I didn't know her personality well enough to guess her sign. From what I'd seen, she could be any of those three: persistent like Ox; tense like Tiger; cautious like Rabbit. But there was a risk in basing my choice solely on birth-year traits. A person's fate was determined by the Four Pillars of their birth time: year, month, day and hour. For instance, my year animal Rat, my inner animal Horse, true animal Ox, and secret animal Dog. That was why people born in the same year might have much in common yet differ vastly in quirks and fates.

I had another trick to try. For we are told all our lives that our birth year ruled our destiny, the mere mention of the *shengxiao* animal might wrest a reaction from her, however subtle. I just had to watch for her tell.

“I understand your caution,” I continued. “You trusted your servers, only to be betrayed by two hidden tigers from the Ten Crows Sect. I heard that one fought as stubborn as an ox unto death, while the other fled like a rabbit when the tide of battle turned.”

The widow’s left eye made the slightest twitch when I mentioned *ox*. “I did trust them....”

“What’s that old saying? Bitten one morning by a snake, fear the rope by the well for ten years. There was no way for you to know.”

I closed my eyes and recited the names of the twelve zodiac animals in the order they had come before Buddha, thrice and thrice again. Then I opened my eyes and spoke.

“You were born in the Year of the Ox, which is why you aren’t ready to give up this place.”

The widow Yi nodded. “You’re either clever or lucky, *Tangren Ao*.”

“Please, ma’am, tell us what you know of the curse,” I said. “Does it have to do with this table? My dog was drawn to it.”

She whitened. “If you would, gentlemen, shutter all the windows?” she said in a hushed voice.

Deng and I rose to attend to the task.

“So there really is a curse?” whispered Deng to me as we crossed the gallery.

I coughed. “We’ll see.”

He went downstairs to close the shutters below while I began with the ones on this floor. Most people in the streets looked up at me and simply hurried past without a second glance, but some patrons at the Cloud Chariot Noodle Shop stared and whispered. I closed the shutters on the noise and the brightness below, dimming the teahouse gallery but for trickles of light.

When Deng returned, the widow asked us to move our table, tea and all. We set it down again where she instructed. Worry pawed at a particular floorboard in the vacated space, but the widow shooed her away.

“*Tangren Ao*, please remove that panel. You’ll need these.” She opened her hand to reveal two coins.

I took them and knelt to examine the plank. It had angled slots cut into it on opposite ends, which fit the coins part-way in, turning them into makeshift handles that allowed me to lift the panel. Hidden beneath was a box wrapped in yellow silk.

The scents of *shengxiao* power—of Monkey and Goat—swirled around the bundle, growing even stronger as I gripped the silk and pulled it out.

I could now hear clearly two whispered curses, one in each ear. In my left, a plaint that this stolen tribute *must* be returned to the authorities. In my right, a prod to steal the power of the tribute for my own. Had it been but one imperative, I might have yielded to its coaxing, but the two opposing urges made me unsure that I ought do either.

Deng reached towards the bundle but then caught himself. “Is that the emperor’s tea that went missing last year?”

“Yes.” The widow solemnly poured tea for us. “Meng Peak Sweet Dew. Tribute tea.”

Dog spoke in my mind. *Unlike you and me, Pup-Brother, they cannot hear the whispers. But nonetheless the curses bite and hold their will, one pulling this way and the other, that.*

I loosened the knot in the silk. Within was a stately wood-and-lacquer tea box, skillfully made and unmarred. I put it on the table to better admire it. I’d heard of tribute tea years ago from Eighth Uncle, blood brother to my father. In his youth, Eighth had been a chef in the imperial kitchens of the East Capital before it fell, and he had traveled the *Jianghu* as a vagabond ever since. He had told many tales of the imperial court, the tradition of tribute tea among them. Each year, the

finest tea leaves from seven sacred trees on Meng Mountain would be sent to the Emperor, who would make ceremonial offerings only with that tribute.

The widow sipped from a cup in her trembling hands. “My late husband came into possession of it on the night of the Double Ninth Festival. Two patrons had drawn swords in argument and slew one another. He found the tribute tea among the belongings left behind.”

I drank from my cup. “How was it stolen in the first place?”

“Meng Mountain is southwest of Chengdu. On his way east to Lin’an, the Tea Commissioner always stays a night here,” Deng explained. “A thief broke into the inn and took the tribute. You weren’t here then, but there was a city-wide manhunt that yielded nothing but rumored sightings.”

“My husband and I argued over what to do with it,” the widow Yi said. “We thought of returning it to the Tea Commissioner, but Meng Peak Sweet Dew was said to heal all. What if our eyes begin to fail in our old age, or our bones begin to ache? We could only agree to hide it. Yet nightmares began plaguing my husband, driving him mad.” The widow choked back a sob. “He would crouch under a bridge and stare into the water, rambling on for hours on end about how his reflection

was not his own. Not long after, they found him drowned in the river.”

“If it’s cursed, why not return it to...?” asked Deng, but he didn’t finish his thought. He knew why, as did the widow and I: the urge from the curses to claim it for ourselves was equal to the urge to turn it in.

Worry growled, her fur a-bristle. Startled, I listened and heard a stair creak. I grabbed the bundle and shoved it under the table, where Worry curled up around it.

“Madam Yi?” A middle-aged woman in a coral pink robe ascended the stairs to the gallery, all smiles. “Ah, there you are. I was worried when I saw your windows shuttered, and thought I should come by.”

We rose to greet her.

“How kind of you to worry, Missus Pan, but all is well,” said the widow. “My guests and I were simply having a quiet tea.”

Missus Pan, a shrill woman who I’d seen and heard many a time welcoming guests to her noodle shop on the opposite corner of the intersection, nodded sagely. “I told everyone you’d have customers again, Big Sister. Greetings, Master Deng. So sorry to hear about your teahouse burning down.” She turned to me. “And you, sir? I don’t believe we’ve formally met, but I’ve seen you in this neighborhood before, selling

sugar animals. My husband and I own the Cloud Chariot Noodle Shop on the other corner.”

“Greetings, Missus Pan. My name’s Ao. I’ve heard wonderful things about your noodle shop.” Strange that we had not heard her enter, but then we had been entranced by the cursed tribute tea. Had she seen the tea box, or heard Madam Yi talk about the Meng Peak Sweet Dew? We hadn’t put the plank back, either.

Missus Pan sniffed the air. “Oh, is that white tea? How delightful! Would you mind if I joined you?”

That wouldn’t do. “Master Deng and Madam Yi were about to discuss business, Missus Pan,” I said with a cough.

“Business?” Her smile thinned. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re selling the Plum Season?”

“I’m not,” Yi replied. “We were discussing tea.”

“Missus Pan,” I said, “perhaps we should let them talk in private? Let me walk you back to the Cloud Chariot.”

“I suppose it’s the courteous thing to do. Please accept my apologies for my intrusion. Perhaps we can gossip later, Big Sister.”

From her polite smile as she allowed me to escort her down the stairs, I couldn’t tell if she had noticed the bundle or not.

* * *

Missus Pan and I left the Plum Season together. Not five steps out the door, Worry dashed up to my side.

“Where are you from, candyman?” asked Missus Pan as we walked.

“I grew up in the east, going from town to town with my father.” I nodded at a passing city guardsman. Roadside, hawkers peddled diverse wares like gourds, charcoal, and old bean curd with rhyming calls or drumbeats. A few, like the sword juggler and the fanmaker, put their talents on display. If not for this cough I’d be among them, pleasing the crowd with my sugar opera. There was so much I once could make with a bubble of hot caramel: pinching candy into coxcomb and wattle for a rooster, or pulling mane and tail to give shape to a horse. I hated that I couldn’t anymore.

“Hm. Word on the street is that you’re from Ji’nan. Isn’t that in the part of the empire lost to the Jin invasion?”

So, she knew more about me than she had let on. “A misunderstanding. My father’s from Ji’nan, and fled south with my grandfather when he was a boy. I’ve never been that far north, and have never called one city my home.”

“Forgive my questions. They say Jin spies have infiltrated the city, and we must all be vigilant. Chengdu’s just a stop on your wanderings, then?”

“Perhaps. The city intrigues me, and I may stay awhile.” I was wary of telling her more. I had met her kind many times. Anything I said would become gossip, and I disliked how she soured at the thought of the widow Yi selling the Plum Season to Deng. The long line of patrons waiting to eat at her crowded noodle shop made me wonder if Missus Pan coveted the grander teahouse space to expand her business.

“When your cough’s better, come by for our signature spicy noodles.” Missus Pan bowed and pushed past her customers and vanished inside her restaurant.

I crouched and scratched Worry’s head. *Honorable One, why do Goat and Monkey quarrel over the tribute tea?* I asked with my mind-voice.

The Meng Peak Sweet Dew comes from seven ancient trees planted by the Daoist Master Wu Lizhen himself, at the birthplace of tea, barked the spirit of Dog. For a thousand years, six-times-sixty of the best leaves have gone to the emperor, who pours the tea in ceremonial offerings. Few know that the emperor also drinks the immortal tea himself, granting power to the animal of his birth year.

No food taster, then? If someone wanted to poison the emperor....

This immortal tea conquers all poisons and grants blessed health, said Dog. Ah, how I miss those lovely flavors,

tasted secondhand in years past from emperors born of my sign. That earthy bite, that lingering sweetness! Last I had it was three emperors ago.

Let me guess. Our new emperor was born in the Year of the Goat or the Monkey?

Goat, he replied. Monkey must have sent a burglar to grab the tribute, and wants someone under his sign to drink the tea so he can reap its power. But that won't happen so long as the curses from both of them stay on that tea, and no fortune will come to the dowager.

I mulled this over. Under the contrary curses, the widow Yi hadn't the will to turn the tea in, or to drink it. If one *shengxiao* spirit couldn't have it, neither could the other. The widow was doomed, unless....

What if I invite Goat and Monkey to drink settlement tea, to resolve their dispute as common folk might? There were times when the involvement of the law was unneeded or unwise, when a respected member of the community would be asked to settle a disagreement at the local teahouse. After the mediator's judgment, the side at fault paid for the cost of the tea.

You wish to hear their case? Dangerous to throw yourself in the midst of their scrap, said Dog. *You'd need to prove yourself worthy to judge them.*

I owe it to Deng and Yi to try.

Dog grunted. *I cannot stay or guide you when you summon them. You must not show favor to one spirit over the other, not in word, deed, or grin, or the other may even the score by herding disaster your way. Walk the top of the wall between them, lest they cry foul.*

Thank you, O Worldly Advisor.

How to invite Monkey and Goat to settlement tea, then? I needed images of both. If I had steady breath, I'd simply fashion blown-sugar versions of the *shengxiao* animals, but that was impossible now because of my constant cough. There was no way I could invoke my magic on my own. I would have to use someone else's art. But whose handiwork would be accomplished enough to please the spirits of Goat and Monkey?

I approached Fanmaker Bai's stall on the northwest corner, outside the local branch of the Imperial Pharmacy. He was famous throughout Chengdu not only for his skills at fan-making and calligraphy but also as a riddlemaster who had competed in Matchmaker Tan's contest. He finished inking a poem onto a circular fan as I arrived. "Might I interest you in one, sir, graced with a painting or a riddle?"

"Yes, and I'll pay double for haste and exactness in particulars," I said.

The fanmaker smiled. “I welcome a challenge. Tell me more.”

I thought about Dog’s advice. “Your best round fan, with images of a goat on one side, and a monkey on the other.”

“Ah, you wish to spin the fan by the handle and see both at once,” Bai guessed.

“Right. The figures should be the same size, and face each other when spun.”

He plucked an exquisite silk fan with a bamboo handle from his wares. “If you want fast, they won’t be my best work.”

“Your art evokes the spirit of your subject with the barest of strokes,” I said of his samples on show. It was the same with my candy animals: more impression than precision. “That’s all I seek.”

“Then that you’ll have.” Bai held his brush upright and began. Swift ink touched pristine silk and made a shaggy, curve-horned goat upon it, akin to a sketch of shadows. After a wait for it to dry, he flipped the fan and added a lank-limbed and long-tailed monkey a-crouch on the opposite side in the same style.

“You’re a true master with the brush,” I praised.

Bai presented the fan to me. “As you must be with sugar-shaping.”

I was taken aback. “I’m surprised you know my calling.”

“Your hands tell your history,” he replied. “You keep them almost immaculate. Not laborer rough, and the calluses on your fingertips are from old burns. All marks of the *chui tang ren*.”

I smiled. “They say you’re cleverer than the magistrate, and now I believe them. I sometimes paint words onto my sugar animals. Perhaps I could learn better calligraphy from you some day?”

“I’d welcome it.”

But if this cough left me unable to make sugar animals ever again, I wondered as I departed, would any new skill I learned to improve my art simply fall to waste?

* * *

Back at the Plum Season, I left Worry outside and rejoined Yi and Deng in the gallery upstairs.

“Thank you for accompanying Missus Pan out,” said the widow. “She’s a sly one. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s behind the tales waxing wild about my troubles. Do you think she saw the tea box?”

“We’d be wise to assume she did,” I said.

Deng finished the last of his tea. “Madam Yi and I have reached an agreement. We’ll try this partnership, for good or for ill. But whatever shall we do about this accursed tea?”

“I will try to lift the curse with what my father taught me, but I must have privacy. Leave the tribute with me, bring more hot water, then go outside. Do not come in, unless I seek your help. And under no circumstances allow Missus Pan or anyone else in. If something goes awry, I wish neither of you to be harmed.”

Deng and Yi exchanged glances. It must have seemed unreal to them, but they had both felt the touch of the *shengxiao* curses. And so they complied.

Once alone, I replaced the floorboard, chose the large table in the northeast corner, and set the tribute of Sweet Dew upon it. There was just enough light from outside to see by. I held the fan before me.

I had never summoned *shengxiao* spirits to drink settlement tea before, so I didn't know what to expect. Should I call Goat first, or Monkey? My instinct would be to start with the one wronged, but then I caught myself. The advice Dog gave meant I shouldn't show favor to one over the other. By assuming that Goat was the victim, I'd lose Monkey's respect before the judgment even began. I must address both at once.

With the fan handle between my palms, I twirled it back and forth to make the illusion that the silhouettes of Monkey and Goat both shared the same face.

Honored spirits of the shengxiao, whose curses mark this tribute of tea! I called with my mind's voice to the images before me. I, the lowly Ao Tienwei, invite you to have tea on the corner. Your curses have cost lives and may ruin more. That need not be. I offer to hear your grievances and suggest a peaceful resolution to your quarrel.

To my surprise, a swirl of mystic wind twisted the fan out of my hands, setting it a-spin in mid-air. Both figures animated as it turned. The goat sprang off the silk as a beast of ink and shadow onto the floor, growing large. Likewise, the ink-monkey caught the frame of the fan, cast himself into a handstand, then with a giant swing flung himself skyward to catch a wooden beam above.

“Brave of you to summon me, tailless Ao of the thrilling sweets,” said Monkey aloud. “Braver yet to invite Her Hoofed Aloofness to treat with me.”

“Is this to be a game of insults, My Babbling Foe?” Goat also replied with a true voice. She rose onto her rear legs, her inky wool weaving into a long-sleeved robe with goat-hair trims. A lady's hands emerged from the sleeves. In all but her goat's visage she appeared like a woman.

I bowed my head deep. “I am humbled to be in the presence of such exalted spirits. I didn't expect you to come in manifestation.”

“An invitation holds power,” said Monkey.

“An invitation opens a door,” added Goat. “I know you through the candy goats and sheep you make, but not why you butt in. Who are you, Magician Ao, and why should I trust your judgment?”

“I’m a wandering *Tangren* sorcerer like my father, always trading fair favor for magic, as you shengxiao spirits demand.”

“True,” Monkey chittered. “We’ve met before, the candyman and I. He kept his word on a contract.”

“But are you still beholden to Monkey?” Goat questioned.

“In this matter between the two of you, I am bound to neither,” I said. “As for my fitness to judge this dispute, I admit this will be my first try. In my journeys I’ve seen many a settlement tea, but only admired those arbiters who acted with integrity. If I do not, curse *me*. Will you accept my final judgment in this settlement?”

Monkey now dangled from the beam with one arm. “You’re a meddler, Ao, but so are many under my sign. Very well. Someone who’s lived among the outlaws of the *Jianghu* might side with me.”

“Whereas I would rather trust one who obeys the law,” grumbled Goat.

“I walk both the shadows and in the light,” I confessed. “As a wanderer I’ve lived the outlaw ways, but I also secretly serve a magistrate, to help protect the city from the Ten Crows.”

Goat chewed her cud. “I will take you at your word, young ram. A civil tea, then, with you as moderator to settle our clash.”

“But a grievance at tea is heard before a crowd,” said Monkey. He plucked a handful of ink-strand hairs from his head, held it before his mouth, and blew. The hair scattered and turned into dozens of shadowy monkeys crowding the beams above us. Some had a demonic cast to them, raising the hackles on my neck.

Goat sighed. “Then I shall bring my flock.” She teased black wool from her chin and let it drift to the floor. When the tuft touched the wood, it pulled apart and apart again, each lump becoming its own sheep or goat silhouette until they crowded the gallery. A few had skulls where their heads should be.

At the sight of Goat’s flock, Monkey’s troupe grew menacing. They leapt from birdcage to birdcage, screeching as they grabbed and flung chopsticks at the sheep and goats. In response, two goat demons rammed into wooden columns, shaking the teahouse. The jolt made one of his snub-nosed troublemakers lose its grip on a beam. The monkey-ghost fell

through the atrium and broke apart into smoke when it smashed against the floor.

“I will not be swayed by numbers or violence,” I warned. Often the parties in the dispute brought followers to the teahouse to show how strong their support was. Some mediators simply ruled in favor of the one with the larger crew, but I never thought that fair. However, it was their right to a judgment before witnesses, and in this case spirits were the public eye.

“Then let us see your cleverness, Ao,” said Monkey, rattling a birdcage with his tail. “Which of us would you like to hear first?”

It was a trap to see if I’d choose him or Goat, and show my bias. However, I might be able to sidestep that. “Honored ones, as I had issued the invitation, allow me to begin with my understanding of your dispute. I’m told that this shipment of tribute tea was stolen on its way to the capital. Both of you lay claim on it, and thus you each cursed the tribute but with contradictory mandates. Is this true?”

“Yes,” said Goat before Monkey could. “For over a thousand years, the immortal tea has gone to the ruling emperor. This new emperor was born a Fire Goat, and by divine right we should have first sip of that tea, first claim to that power.”

Monkey laughed. “O Bearded Fury, rage on! Whosoever has the thing, owns the thing. If I’m sly enough to steal the tribute from you, then you never deserved it at all.”

Goat scoffed. “But with its magic, I guard the emperor. Deny me this and the empire will suffer bad fortune. Less than two years has he reigned—”

“That one does not truly rule while the retired emperor tugs his strings.” Monkey flicked his tail. “Besides, you had your hoof on this boon six emperors ago. It was seventeen emperors ago, two hundred-odd years, for me.”

“Then why didn’t you bother Rat or Dragon or Rabbit or Pig? They’ve had more emperors and years of rule than me.”

“My Gruff Lady, I had a thief and an opportunity. Pity that you cursed the Sweet Dew and forced my paw. My counter-curse almost had my man brew a cup of that tea for me but for that guilt you laid upon him.”

“Your curse has made men go mad desiring the tea’s power,” said Goat. “For shame.”

“You would give that power to an emperor as always, fattening his wealth and waist,” said Monkey. “I swear to only use that fortune to bless children born this year, for even a sliver of it at the right time may save an infant’s life.”

I raised my hands for quiet. “Thank you, both. Your reasons have merit and claim to the tea, but while the curses

clash, they rob you both of the privilege to enjoy the Sweet Dew. All they've done is cause grief. From what I've heard, the first sip of the immortal tea is key?"

"Such is our way," answered Goat. "The first mortal who drinks of it gifts that year's power to his *shengxiao* patron."

"Let me compose my judgment, good spirits."

I'd forgotten completely about the hot water I'd asked for, and it was now lukewarm. Goat and Monkey had come more for a settlement than to drink tea. I poured myself a cup and stared at the spinning fan.

How should I rule in this case? Goat invoked law and divine right: the tribute was the emperor's to offer to gods and ancestors. If fortune smiled upon him, it smiled upon the kingdom. To find against Goat might bring calamity upon us all. I had heard that the emperor sought peace with the Jin court in the north. The blessing brought by the tribute might achieve that.

Yet if I sided against Monkey, would I condemn countless innocents to an early grave? Monkey's argument was that theft was justified when it might save a life. That was sometimes the way of the poor. When I was little, my father sometimes had to steal food to keep us alive. Was this any different? Infants faced so many dangers in the first year of life: disease, accidents,

abandonment. If Monkey's luck could bring them a fighting chance....

It was a dreadful choice. Perhaps Monkey and Goat were both in the right. But they couldn't share the power between them, when only the first to drink the immortal tea would lay claim for them.

Or was there another way?

The fan still spinning in mid-air reminded me of Fanmaker Bai, and in turn Matchmaker Tan's riddle contest. An idea began to take shape. There was one way a matchmaker might help.

"My Divine Guests, I have weighed your words and will give my judgment."

At my pronouncement, the gallery seemed to still to hear me. The phantom factions turned their spirit eyes upon me, and I felt an otherworldly chill seize me.

To calm my nerves, I sipped my water. "You both have good intentions to save lives but in different yet commendable ways. I am heartened that the power from the tribute won't be wasted. But who has been wronged? Does divine right mean more than 'he who dares, wins'? To you immortals, these ancient rights are equal and surpass mortal laws. Thus, I deem you both to have just claims."

Monkey dropped down onto the table. “That’s your ruling? It solves nothing.”

“I’m not finished,” I said. “You are also both to blame for your feud of curses, bringing death and madness to mortals. Thus I also rule that neither of you deserve the whole of the tribute power.”

Goat thumped the floor with a hoof under her flowing robes. “But the first sip can only go to one. Do you deny us both?”

I gestured for her to calm down. “You merit equal shares of the power to do as you have vowed. The Four Pillars of Destiny rule each man or woman by birth year, birth month, birth day, and birth hour. It has been your custom that the tribute magic goes to the birth-year animal, but as arbiter in this settlement, I decree that whosoever sips first the tea from this shipment, grants half the power to his year animal, and the other half to the secret spirit who rules over his birth-hour. You must also lift your curses. That is my final judgment.”

After my last word, thunder rumbled outside.

Neither Goat nor Monkey seemed entirely pleased. Monkey scratched his head. “Half of something’s better than nothing, I suppose, but you’re gambling on finding the proper person to drink the tea. Many things could go wrong between then and now.”

“Brother Monkey, might I suggest a consequence if he does not deliver?” said Goat. “We have pledged to use the tribute magic toward our causes: empire and children born of our signs. Until Ao resolves our dispute, let us take what luck we need for those tasks from all those in Chengdu born of our signs.”

Monkey jumped around excitedly. “Agreed, agreed!”

I shivered as I felt the touch of this combined curse. If I couldn’t locate the right person to drink that tea and soon, I’d be bringing misfortune to many in Chengdu through no fault of their own.

“And one more curse upon him,” Monkey decided. “Until our dispute is resolved, no *shengxiao* spirit except you and I may hear or help Ao. And if the wrong man drinks, let this ban last lifelong.”

“Seems fair,” said Goat.

Their ban was a potent threat against a *Tangren* sorcerer like me, robbing me of aid from my *shengxiao* patrons. What magic would be left to me?

“I will find the right one, and fast,” I said.

“How?” asked Goat.

“I’ll write to Matchmaker Tan. To predict the fortunes of a couple-to-be, she notes down their Four Pillars. She if anyone could find the person we need, and quickly.” I hesitantly took

hold of the spinning fan. It was blank now, perfect for my message. “Cleverest Son of the Forest, and Hardest Daughter of the Mountains, may I have some ink?”

The two glared at one another. Goat spat ink into an empty teacup, while Monkey pissed his donation into the same.

I took a chopstick, dipped it into the ink, and wrote on the fan:

Honorable Madam Tan,

We met once, after your riddle contest. Forgive my odd plea, but many lives depend on finding someone whose year animal is Monkey and whose secret animal is Goat. Or in the other order. I vow to visit soon and repay this favor. Thank you.

In Your Debt,

Tangren Ao Tienwei

It took both sides of the silk and was far from fine brushwork, but it would do.

I begged the spirits to wait while I hurried to find Deng and Yi. They were resting on stools outside the door to the street, alongside Worry.

“Thunder without clouds,” said Deng. “An ill omen.”

“Or good, if we act swift,” I said. “Master Deng, bear this message to Matchmaker Tan and beg her to help us. Do all you

can to bring the person she names here to drink tea. Only that will break the curse.”

The widow raised an eyebrow. “That’s all? Tea?”

I nodded. “Immortal tea.”

* * *

I returned upstairs to my celestial guests. “And now the curses, please, O Noble Ones.”

“Not until the power is ours,” said Monkey.

“Agreed,” said Goat.

I frowned. “But how will I make the Meng Peak Sweet Dew tea, if your curses are staying my hand?”

“I’ll mute mine to your ears if she will do the same.”

Monkey raised his paw. “Truce?”

Goat freed a hoof from her sleeve, abandoning the shape of a human hand. “For now.”

Paw and hoof touched above the tea box. Like long-held sighs let fly, the bewitching whispers fled my hearing.

“Thank you.” I untied the knot in the silk and set the splendid wood-and-lacquer tea box to one side, and spread the cloth on the table. With reverence, I broke the red seal to the box and found two silver bottles within. The spirits watched as I opened one bottle and shook a palm’s worth of tea leaves onto the silk.

Each moss-green leaf was rolled and roasted with perfection. I'd never seen such care taken with tea, and might never again. The scent reminded me of fields at thaw and wet wood smoke. I set the bottle down just as Worry began to bark loudly outside.

I hurried to the east window and opened the shutters a crack.

Below, Missus Pan had arrived with five city guardsmen. However, Worry stood her ground at the teahouse door, barring their way.

"Ma'am," the lead guard said to the widow Yi, "please restrain your dog and let us inside, or it's the blade for her." He was an older man with words tattooed on his face.

"Let me try, sir. She belongs to a friend," begged the widow. "But my teahouse is closed. Why must you go in?"

"We suspect we might find the stolen imperial tea within."

"Who told you such a thing?"

"Missus Pan. She said she overheard you and your guests discussing it."

"She must be mistaken."

"I'm very sorry, Big Sister, but we all have a duty to obey the law," said Missus Pan.

The lead guard's hand brushed against the sword on his belt. "Third Brother, ensure no one escapes from the north," he

ordered one of his men. “Ma’am, if you know something about the missing tea, tell me now.”

I hurried back to the table and switched back to my mind-voice. *Reverend Spirits, men are coming. Please hide, and send your followers away.*

They nodded. Monkey chose a hanging scroll and climbed into its plum tree scene, while Goat did the same with a mountain painting beside it. Their ghostly crews faded back into nothingness.

Worry and the widow had bought me some time, but not much. We couldn’t be found with the tribute, but neither could I escape with it. Even if the windows weren’t being watched, I was no acrobat or martial artist. If only I still had my powers, I could have conjured a creature from water to help. I couldn’t even ask a spirit other than Goat or Monkey for a boon.

Could I hide the package back under the floorboard? No. Missus Pan had seen it before we’d thought to replace the plank, and she surely would tell the guards. Then where?

With as much speed as I could muster, I stuffed the bottle back in the box and closed it. But in my haste I had forgotten about the dried tea leaves I’d already poured on the silk, and when I tried to bundle up the box, they scattered onto the floor. I cursed under my breath. They would surely spot those, but I had no time to gather up all I had spilled.

Outside, Worry stopped her barking.

If I was caught with the tribute, I would be arrested, and Deng and Yi as my accomplices. I couldn't count on the magistrate overlooking this crime. We'd lose our freedom. Goat and Monkey would resume their quarrel, and that devil Missus Pan would take the Plum Season. I couldn't let any of that happen. But how? I could no longer ply my magic, unless I bartered for power from the *shengxiao*, but I couldn't ask favor from any spirits other than Goat and Monkey.

Then I remembered that I hadn't yet discussed payment for the settlement tea.

Spirits! When an arbiter of the settlement tea finds both parties at fault, they both share in the cost of the tea. The cost today is success in serving the immortal tea to a guest not yet come. I ask for magic from you both, so I might bring that to pass.

I heard the front door open.

What do you choose? said Monkey.

Bleat what you wish, said Goat.

I looked up at the beams in the gloom above. *The spryness of a monkey, the balance of a goat.*

Then drink... Goat began.

...that cup of ink, Monkey finished.

I grabbed the teacup and downed the horrid drink. While I retched at the taste, I felt the power of the two *shengxiao* animals course through me. I felt I could tumble and leap and screech my joy, while at the same time felt a steadiness to my stance.

Bundle in one hand, I hopped soundlessly onto the table where the widow had left the tray of loose leaf tea and crouched. The Yellow Mountain Fur Peak tea leaves resembled Meng Peak Sweet Dew, so I strewed the whole scoop of them onto the floor. Let Missus Pan try to find the Sweet Dew among that mess.

Voices rose below.

I leapt, caught the highest beam, and pulled myself onto it. Had I not the surefootedness of a mountain goat, I might have lost my footing. Balance came so instinctively that I could focus on hiding the tea box in the darkest recess of the rafters.

Footfalls on the stairs. I was out of time.

As agile as a monkey, I dropped back down just before Missus Pan escorted the lead guard up the stairs and into the gallery. I could now read the aged and faded oath tattooed on his face that marked him as a former member of the ill-fated Eight Character Army routed by the Jin. He scowled and kicked away chopsticks in his path. The widow Yi and another guardsman followed shortly behind them.

I coughed in greeting. “Water,” I managed to say, covering my mouth with a hand as I realized that my teeth must be black as soot after drinking that ink

Yi quickly poured me a cup from the pot I’d left to cool. “As you see, sir, it is only my friend needing rest up here. How are you feeling, Ao?”

Almost gagging on a sip, I admitted I still wasn’t well.

There came the cacophony of a search from down below.

“We’re searching for stolen property. Fourth, check everywhere,” said the guard to another of his men. “You, who are you?”

I gave him my name and occupation.

“You’ll want to ask about that plank,” said Missus Pan, pointing. “It wasn’t in place on my last visit, and I bet they’ve hidden the tea there.”

The widow glanced at me, and I gave a slight nod. “You are welcome to search it,” she told the lead guard demurely. “On occasion my late husband kept extra cash there for safekeeping.” She showed him how to open the panel. “See, it’s empty. Fortune has not been kind in recent days.”

The lead guard raised his voice. “Men, check for other possible hidden panels.” He looked up at the beams, then knelt to inspect the spilled tea, taking a pinch to smell. “What’s this?”

“My carelessness,” I muttered, hiding my relief that he didn’t see the hidden box in the rafters. “Foolish of me, trying to make tea while suffering a coughing fit.”

His eyes narrowed. “And the chopsticks?”

“My dog got playful earlier.”

“She’s yours? Keep her out of our way.” He shouted again. “Anything, men?”

They responded with a chorus of no’s.

The guard scowled at Missus Pan. “It seems you misheard, ma’am. The tribute tea isn’t here.”

“But I heard them mention the tea,” she insisted.

“So it’s you who’s been spreading lies about my tea-and-wine shop, *Little Sister*,” said the widow. “You must stop these false rumors against me. Or shall we drink settlement tea and invite the neighbors to hear my grievance?”

Missus Pan dropped her pleasantries. “No need. Your business will fail, soon enough.” With that, she stormed out, the guardsmen in tow, leaving us to clean up the mess.

“They didn’t hurt my dog, did they?”

“No, she’s a shrewd one. Backed off before they could.” The widow frowned at the hanging scrolls that hosted the *shengxiao*. “Did you paint these?”

“I suppose I did,” I said. “May they bring you luck.”

“You’re full of surprises. Where did you hide the tea?” she asked.

I pointed up.

She raised an eyebrow. “I won’t ask how. Is it safe there?”

I shrugged. “Possibly until an earthquake. It’ll do until we can figure out a safer place for it.”

“How will we serve the tea, then?”

Good question. The boons that Goat and Monkey had given me were fading, and I still had no magic of my own. There was no way I could climb back up to get the tea box down.

I knelt and began picking up the scattered tea leaves. “Madam, I’m afraid I need your help sorting through these for Sweet Dew.”

* * *

Deng returned with a wisp-bearded gentleman he introduced as Master Zuoren, who was to be married in a month’s time. Yi and I welcomed him into the gallery.

“Forgive the mess, Master Zuoren,” said the widow. “Please, relax while I brew a very special tea for you. You might say it’s one of a kind.”

“Matchmaker Tan was ill and couldn’t see me, but her servant brought her the fan,” Deng whispered to me. “I was

told Zuoren's name and where I might find him. Year of the Goat, Hour of the Monkey.”

I clasped his shoulder. “Then I will thank her in person once she's feeling better. Would you mind seeing to the hot water?”

“Not at all. Why's your tongue black?”

“I drank ink by mistake.”

He laughed and headed downstairs for the kitchen.

The widow was paying great attention to Master Zuoren, making him feel at ease. “We'll be happy to host your wedding banquet here for a very modest sum,” she told him.

I looked to the hanging scrolls. *I'm just checking if Master Zuoren belongs to you both?*

Born in my year, confirmed Goat.

And during my hour, agreed Monkey. You may serve this man the tea.

Also, my Esteemed Friend and I have agreed on a parting gift for you, Tangren Ao, said Goat. After first sip seals the settlement, we will allow you all to drink of the Sweet Dew. For Master Deng and Widow Yi, it will give them the luck they need to restore this teahouse to its former glory. For you, the tea may help heal that wound to your soul.

I bowed to the two spirits hiding in the hanging scrolls. *Your kindnesses know no bounds.*

It was dusk. I opened a shutter on the east side and looked down. Worry was guarding our doorway again, nose towards the noodle shop. I spied Missus Pan there, welcoming guests but casting a sidelong glance towards the teahouse.

The curses might be broken, but I feared Deng and Yi would always have Pan's malice to contend with. I too had made myself her enemy. One thing bothered me: how had she entered the Plum Season and mounted those steps with almost no sound? Could she be more than she seemed?

When the immortal tea was brewed and ready, the widow poured it for Master Zuoren. The gentleman thanked us and lifted the cup, blowing on it to cool the tea. He took his first sip and smiled. "It's the finest tea I've ever tasted. Fragrant. Invigorating."

I sighed with relief. "Then let us all drink to better days."

As Yi poured three more cups, Worry bounded up the stairs and sat at my feet.

I heard Goat and Monkey go, said Dog. I smell no more curses. Good boy, Aoooooo.

It was a relief to hear Dog's voice and to know that I could once again speak to other *shengxiao* spirits. *Only because of your wise advice. Thank you.*

I raised my teacup. The aroma of the Sweet Dew was subtler when brewed, and the infusion a pleasing clear yellow. I

took a tentative sip and grimaced. The tea tasted of smoke and rain and iron and nut and soil, and a sweetness that lingered long after.

Was the quality fine?

Yes.

Unique?

Yes.

Agreeable to my picky palate?

No.

Nonetheless, I drank it all. In the end, disagreeable tea still tasted lovelier than a mouthful of ink.

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Originally from Taiwan, Dr. Tony Pi earned his Ph.D. in Linguistics at McGill University and now lives in Toronto, Canada. His story [“No Sweeter Art”](#) in [BCS #155](#) was a finalist for the 2015 Aurora Awards and its [BCS podcast](#) a finalist for the 2015 Parsec Awards, and the [BCS podcast](#) of its sequel, [“The Sweetest Skill”](#) in [BCS #197](#), was a finalist for the

2016 Parsec Awards. Visit www.tonypi.com for a list of his other works.

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A MARVELOUS DEAL

by Kate Dollarhyde

When Sylvie was eight years old, she became very sick. Her parents, too, became very sick. And while Sylvie burned in fever dreams, her parents died.

When she could move again, when she had stopped crying and wiping her dripping nose, Sylvie dragged her parents to the back of their small wooden home and laid them out on the ground. She found a trowel in the dried-grass basket near the hearth, and with that trowel she buried her parents. On her ninth birthday, Sylvie was alone.

On a brisk fall morning scant weeks after their deaths—a morning where the dead leaves of creaky old maples danced in circles on the ground—Sylvie pulled the last of the carrots from Mother Shabna's garden. They were her mother's favorite carrots, clothed in burgundy skin with centers orange and sweet. Sylvie called them dragon carrots, because their hearts were filled with fire. She had seven carrots, which was very good, as she'd already eaten all the cabbages, the pumpkin, the squashes, and the potatoes. She'd saved the carrots for last—they were her favorite.

But there, under a small drift of leaves, she found an eighth carrot. Sylvie delighted in her bounty and pulled the carrot with careful hands from the hard earth. It emerged screaming. Sylvie threw it to the ground.

“Wicked child, wicked child,” it screeched, “look what you’ve done! I was dreaming the most delicious dream, a dream of hot rabbit’s blood on the frozen ground. How will I slake my thirst now?”

Sylvie was a cautious, calculating child, and regarded the indignant carrot from a distance. Its face was small and wrinkled, heavy in the jowls. It looked to Sylvie like Farmer Seless’s baby boy, and it screamed just as the baby had.

“Young carrot, please forgive me. I was foolish, and did not think you might be sleeping, even though Mother Shabna told me to always check for ones with faces. How do I put you back to bed?”

The carrot rustled its lush greens in irritation and crossed its spindly root arms. “It’s too late for that, too late, too late. Now the great spirit in the sun has seen me and named me, and so I must take up my purpose.”

The carrot opened a crack in its front wide like a grin and stretched its taproot taut.

“Start with the bargain, start with that. ‘The bargain always comes first,’ the great spirit taught me. Young girl who

has woken me early, who pulled me from my sweet dreams and soft earth bed, there must be something you want. What is it, then? What, what do you want?"

Sylvie's heart picked up its beat. Spirits were wild things, Mother Dar had said, remainders of the fertile earth, the world's birth blood. Not the seed but the chaff. She remembered Mother Dar pressing a carved stone into her hand, pressing so hard the swirling design in its surface had etched briefly in her skin.

"When someone you do not know tries to speak with you, clutch this stone as I've shown you and think of the fire holly wreath above our door. Then I will know, and will find you, and be certain you are safe."

Mother Shabna had clicked her tongue from beside the hearth where she bent over a fat pot bubbling with lentils. "You'll put fear in her heart if you speak to her thus. Fear will not help her."

Still, Mother Dar had pressed the stone into Sylvie's palm and closed her fingers around it. "A witch's daughter is a rare and precious thing, as you are mine. Take the stone. Think of the fire holly. Be safe."

Sylvie had put the stone in the safest place she could imagine; Mother Dar had guarded it so dutifully, it was only

right she take it to her grave, as Mother Shabna had taken her trowel and her seeds.

Sylvie pushed her curling unkempt mane from her eyes and dashed away with dirty fingers the tears that burned her cheeks. She kneeled beside the carrot.

“I have never seen a carrot strike a bargain. What manner of carrot are you?”

“A hungry one!” The carrot threw itself into the dirt and whined.

“How might I feed you?”

“With rabbit’s blood, with rabbit’s blood! Wet and hot and fast in the veins.”

“I thought carrots only desired water, a kiss of sunlight, and dirt.”

“I am different, yes. You’ll see it’s true. What bargain, then? What? What?”

“What can you do?”

“Anything you want, anything. It is easy. I am a carrot of great power! See my stalk, this green? Yes, I am strong, strong.”

Sylvie thought of her parents in their cool earthen graves: Mother Dar, her face hard-planed, lined, and deeply brown but always soft in the eyes for her, redolent of oak moss and sweat; Mother Shabna, ensconced in a rushing tide of skirts and

shawls of indigo blue, her fingers long and finely-boned, webbed with old scars and laden with rings of twisting grapevine and woven river grasses.

It had taken Sylvie many days to get strong enough to sit up after her illness, to get off her pallet on the floor, to dig their graves and plait their dark hair and find the right rounded river stones for their cairns. Her mothers had raised her a practical girl, and she didn't cry until she'd put them to bed. They had only smelled a little bit. It hadn't been so long.

“What of my parents?”

“Parents, parents, what parents? I see an impertinent little girl with nosy fingers, yes, rude little fingers. There are no ‘parents’.”

Sylvie twisted the hem of her homespun—now threadbare—dress in her fingers. Her legs beneath the dress were bony and knock-kneed, a patchwork of scrapes and dried mud. “I had parents, once. Then Farmer Seless came to the door and cried of sickness and begged Mother Shabna for a draught. Then we got sick too, and then there was only me.”

“Dead parents!” The carrot squeaked. “Dead parents, dead parents, you must find me a very large rabbit for ‘dead parents’.”

Fear fought with longing in her chest. Fear was strong but longing larger and always growing. Nothing the carrot could do to her was worse than life without her parents.

“Will you swear it? You will return my parents to me for one large rabbit?”

“Yes, for the largest rabbit you’ve ever seen, the most tender, succulent rabbit. Yes, I can do it. Bring it here, and I can do it.”

Sylvie glanced once at the forest of spindly alders just beyond her home, where Mother Dar had warned her spirits dwelt. Mother Dar had told her spirits could deceive, but they did not always; they were bound by a different charter not always at odds with our own.

“And you will not try to trick me?”

“Certainly not, certainly not! Faithless girl, how mean you are, how cruel! A generous spirit offers you life and you call it ‘liar!’” The carrot formed its little mouth into a perfect ‘O’ and screeched long and loud.

The carrot’s screeching was an awl between her ears. Fear of losing the carrot and its bargain was bitter nettle on her tongue. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it!”

The carrot ceased its screaming and glanced sidelong at her through the drooping greens at its crown, its empty,

bottomless mouth still round as if it might resume its wail at any moment.

“And so generous!” Sylvie appeased it. “The most generous spirit I’ve ever met. Please—will you keep our bargain?”

The carrot tittered and bobbed, waving its crown at her in sweeping arcs. The crown’s green tips whipped back and forth as it nodded. “I will, I will, I will! But until you return with my feast I will sleep, sleep well. I am very tired, you see, because some girl, quite disgraceful, yes, disturbed me. Go on, little girl, and find me a rabbit.”

The carrot dug itself back into the earth and went still, not even a fluff of its top in goodbye. Sylvie poked it—gently!—and it did not stir.

Sylvie set out to find a rabbit.

She would need a weapon; Sylvie knew from watching Mother Dar that a weapon is what you needed to kill a rabbit, just as she knew from watching Mother Shabna that you needed a spark to make fire and fresh water to prepare gruel. She shoved the larder stool against the wall of her cottage and strained on tip-toes for Mother Dar’s bow and quiver of arrows.

Sylvie struck out into the forest surrounding her home and walked until she could not see the garden. This was where rabbits lived, Sylvie was certain, for when Mother Dar left to hunt in her dark, smelly leathers, it was in this direction she

walked. And while she had never strung a bow—Mother Dar had promised to finally teach her come spring—she figured it couldn't be too difficult.

Sylvie had a sense for figures. As she crept through the underbrush, she noted the types of trees and the condition of their leaves. The sun was low on the horizon, and Sylvie knew that with the leaves as they were and the sun it was, she had perhaps forty-two days before the first snow came.

Two seasons prior, when Mother Shabna was fretting about when to plant her seedling herbs, Sylvie had told her not to worry, that the last frost was but twelve days away and there would be none after. Eleven days passed, and when on the twelfth they woke to find a crown of ice on the young sea holly umbels, Mother Dar had clapped Mother Shabna and the shoulder and said, “You were right—we've raised ourselves a weather witch.” There were no frosts until the fall.

For forty-two days, Sylvie woke each morning, prepared herself a small bowl of amaranth soaked in well water, then set off into the forest with a Mother Dar's bow on her back and a crisp apple in her pocket from their last old tree that hadn't caught the blight.

For forty-two days, Sylvie strung the too-tall bow and loosed wobbling arrows at every rustle in the underbrush.

On the tenth day, Sylvie struck a crow; it fell like a cast stone from its lichen-limned perch. Sylvie offered it to the carrot, but the carrot refused it. Sylvie tried to cook the crow and discovered why Mother Dar never brought them home, dangling from a cord at her waist as she did the cryptically colored quail of late summer.

On the fifteenth day—now plagued by angry crows—Sylvie caught a long black snake, but the carrot refused it, too. She peeled off its skin as Mother Shabna peeled ground grapes, and nearly choked to death when one of its needle-thin bones caught in her throat like a curse.

On the twenty-first day, Sylvie saw her first rabbit, fat and thick-furred, eating fallen hazelnuts. The arrow she loosed flew over the rabbit's head and lodged in the bark of the tree behind it. The rabbit fled, and Sylvie saw no rabbits after that.

On the thirty-eighth day, Sylvie threw Mother Dar's bow in the river and sat on its serpentine bank and cried.

On the forty-second day, Sylvie woke to a light dusting of snow on the ground and knew that her days of stalking the forest had come to an end. She put on her coat—thick and molded from boiled wool, now awkwardly small—and went out to the garden to speak with the carrot.

She brushed the snow off its crown—still green as the new growth of spring!—and tapped the earth beside its head. “Carrot, you must wake up. I need to speak with you.”

The carrot waved its crown at her as if to shoo her away.

Her parents had been dead so long already, so many days now. “No, you will speak to me!” She grabbed the carrot by its greens and yanked it from the earth.

It promptly took up its ghastly screaming. “Horrid child! Horrid child who cannot keep a simple bargain! Away, away!”

She shook it ruthlessly until it quieted. “The first snow has fallen, and I have yet to find you a rabbit. Is there not something else I can bring you? Something that I already have?”

“Hmm!” The carrot kicked its twisted legs and scrunched up its face as if thinking very hard. “You know I must have the rabbit blood, you know it, you do. There is power in the rabbit’s blood.”

“But I cannot find you a rabbit—”

“There are other kinds of rabbits, yes. Fat and sweet-blooded, yes. Other rabbits, soft-skinned rabbits. Do you know them?”

Sylvie racked her brain but could think of no such rabbit.

“They are like you, yes? But small, smaller. And too loud, much too loud! But their blood is so sweet and full of life.”

A rabbit like Sylvie, but small? Sylvie was already so small and whip-thin, and there were so many things in the house she still couldn't reach. A terrible thought leaped before her. "A baby? You want me to bring you a baby!"

"Yes, yes! That is the rabbit I seek!"

"No, I will not. I cannot. I do not have a baby and even if I did, I would not give it to such a dreadful little monster as you!" Sylvie thrust the carrot back into the dirt and ran into the house. She slammed the door and secured each of Mother Dar's seven locks.

A baby! What an evil thing that carrot was. If only she had kept Mother Dar's carved stone, she could have— But Mother Dar could not come to her, could not protect her, because Mother Dar was dead.

For sixty-three days, Sylvie did not leave the house for fear of encountering the carrot in the garden. Her larder and water barrel grew empty. Her carefully collected grain became infested with weevils. She shivered the long days away under Mother Dar's leathers and Mother Shabna's woolen cloak, until the woody smells of Mother Dar's skin and the herb-rubbed hair of Mother Shabna faded from their garments and they became only things, only filthy blankets Sylvie must wrap herself in to keep warm.

On the sixty-third day, Sylvie ate her last apple and burned her last scrap of wood. On the sixty-fourth day, she went again to speak with the carrot.

“You’re back, yes, I hoped you would come back! Do you still remember our bargain?”

“Your bargain is foul. I will not do it.”

“But girl, girl, the figures are quite simple. Two lives for one. A bargain indeed! Two lives, two mothers, a warm home, a barrel of juicy apples. Two lives for one fat rabbit. Yes, yes, I must say, you are getting quite the deal!”

Sylvie drew her knees up into her dress and pulled Mother Shabna’s cloak more tightly around her. Her tailbone ached from sitting on the hard ground. Her stomach no longer burned in hunger. She had nothing left. A heavy snow fell on her shoulders like a freezing blanket, and as Sylvie sat, she considered the carrot’s offer.

Two mothers for one baby. Two was more than one, her hunger-fogged mind knew. Two was twice as much as one, in fact. With two mothers she could eat again, and be warm again. With two mothers she would not have to sleep alone in a dark house where centipedes and mice climbed in through the walls. Mother Dar had always killed the centipedes, and Mother Shabna had trapped the mice. Two mothers meant twenty fingers to comb out her hair, to repair the holes in her dress, to

weave new fabric and grow new food. Two mothers meant four arms to hold her, two tongues to speak her name. What was one rabbit to two mothers?

She knew where to find one.

“Carrot, I will do what you ask, if you will keep your end of the bargain.”

The carrot scoffed. “A carrot always keeps its bargain.”

Sylvie did not waste time preparing. She took Mother Dar’s old boots from the scrap basket and stuffed them with bits of yarn and torn rags. She shoved her feet inside them and tied them tight with the string Mother Shabna used to hang her herbs. Then, she started for the road.

Farmer Seless lived a day and half’s walk away. If she hurried, if the carts from the far distant town had made deep enough ruts in the snow, she could get there before she fainted from hunger.

Sylvie set out at a brisk pace and walked through the day. When the sun set, she built a shelter under a pine tree with drooping boughs and slept. She dreamed of coughing, chills, and boils, and woke with anger in her heart. The next day, she arrived at Farmer Seless’s homestead before the sun reached its apogee.

She crept toward their home on snow hare’s feet, silent after all her weeks spent hunting in the forest. She pressed her

ear to the home's one tightly shuttered window and heard voices within. There was Farmer Seless, high and sweet and laughing. There was Farmer Shyn, her voice deep and rich like late summer honey. There was a rattling cough she could not place. Then there was a cry, and shushing sounds. *There* was the rabbit.

Sylvie settled down to wait for night to come. She pulled Mother Dar's leather jerkin over her head to keep the snow from falling down her back. She was so tired. Her feet, which had ached as she'd hiked through the snow, felt like cracked quarry stones in her boots now, riven with an aching chill that threatened to break them. Soon, she fell asleep.

She woke with a jerk to the sound of a crow cawing in the dim. The sky was dark and void of clouds. The stars were a cobbled road above her on which the wheel of the world rolled around and around. Sylvie pressed her ear to the window and heard nothing. She peeked through a crack in the shutter and could see no light. The house was asleep. Sylvie eased the door open and crept inside.

Farmer Seless, Farmer Shyn, and the rabbit slept together on a wide, straw-stuffed mattress covered with furs. Carefully, so carefully, Sylvie crept toward the bad. Farmer Shyn's face was slack in sleep, round and lined about her eyes. Farmer Seless, her back to the door, lay with limbs thrown every which

way. Sheltered between them was the rabbit, fat and sweet, as the carrot demanded. It was wrapped in a blanket, arms swaddled close to its side. Together, they were two mothers and one baby, just as Sylvie and Mother Dar and Mother Shabna had once been.

Why were they alive when her parents were dead? All had been well until Farmer Seless had come pounding at their door, her horse lathered and panting in the clearing outside their home. She cried of sickness, her eyes rimmed red. Mother Shabna had sat her down and fixed her a soothing tea. She fed her a hunk of fresh walnut bread. Then, she sent her on her way with a satchel of herbs and careful instructions. Farmer Seless had cried in gratitude. Mother Shabna requested only a small portion of their next year's wheat in payment and a few weeks worth of eggs if they could spare them.

Then Mother Dar and Mother Shabna had fallen ill. Sylvie fed and comforted them as best she could, took to their bed to warm them when they shivered. Soon she could not breathe as they could not breathe, the breath in her chest rattling like rocks thrown down a well. After four days, she woke up and could breathe again. Her mothers breathed not at all.

Two for one was a good bargain, Sylvie believed—and one that Farmer Seless would pay.

Sylvie slipped the rabbit from between its mothers and crept toward the door. Farmer Seless stirred and reached instinctively for a warmth that was no longer there. Sylvie froze, willing her not to wake, and the rabbit began to cry. Sylvie stifled its mouth with her dirty hands. It twisted in her arms, struggling like a cat that did not want to be held. Its muffled cries grew louder and almost slipped between her fingers.

Scant feet from the threshold, Sylvie tripped over the sleeping form of an old man bound up in blankets. The rabbit tumbled from her arms as she crashed to the floor. The old man's arm whipped out from his blankets with a viper's speed and caught her around the ankle. Sylvie kicked out with her oversized boot and caught him a cracking blow in the jaw.

She pushed herself to her feet and scooped the screaming rabbit up in her arms. Farmer Shyn fell out of the bed in a scramble and lunged for her, catching her about the waist in ropey arms braided with muscle.

An animal panic ran through Syvlie; a deafening buzzing flooded her ears. She bit and kicked and tore at the ensnaring arms. Farmer Shyn threw her back, swearing, and she careened through the cottage door, the rabbit howling in her arms, and stumbled out into the snow.

With Farmer Shyn's mad shouts at her heel and the rabbit's shrieks piercing her heart, Sylvie fled into the dark. This time she took the deer paths in the forest—the paths she knew so well now—to avoid meeting any carters on the road or being overrun by Seless' horse. She knew the freshly fallen snow would cover her tracks.

Sylvie returned home in just a day. She'd run the entire way with the rabbit screeching in her ear and crows screeching at her back. She burst into the garden and found the carrot buried beneath the snow. With one arm, she shoveled the snow away, searching for the patch of earth where it waited. When she could no longer feel her hands and was sure the carrot had left or been eaten by some wild beast, she found the bright green spray of the carrot's crown. Holding the rabbit tight to her chest, she once again ripped the carrot from the earth and unceremoniously dumped it on the ground.

“I have brought you the rabbit you asked for, fat and sweet as you said it would be.”

The carrot yawned enormously and smacked its rooty lips. At least it had the dignity now not to scream. “Place the rabbit on the ground before me, yes, let me look at it.”

Sylvie did as it asked.

The carrot cooed and whistled. “Oh yes, oh yes! This will do very well, very well. What a lovely rabbit you have brought to me, sweet girl. Yes, yes, a lovely rabbit. I shall love to eat it.”

Without another word, the carrot opened its little mouth, which grew and grew until it was large as a stew pot. The carrot lifted the rabbit on stubby arms still speckled with dirt and hastily popped the rabbit into its mouth. Its eyes closed in bliss, it let out a large belch and spit out the blanket the rabbit had been swaddled in.

“Lovely, lovely, lovely! Oh yes, what a treat! A sweet treat for me indeed.”

For a brief, panicked moment, Sylvie saw the rabbit for what it had been. A sick revulsion caught her up like fever, and her empty stomach tried to turned itself inside out on the ground. Just a few drops of bile fell at her feet.

Shaking, she asked: “You have your meal. What of our bargain? What of my parents?”

“Oh-ho, yes, the parents! Two for one, how could I forget such a deal, such a marvelous deal. They should already be stirring, little girl, already be turning in their soft, shallow graves.”

Sylvie scrambled to flee, to push through the deepening snow out to the back of the house and pull her beloved parents

from the ground. She was halfway through the garden when the carrot's voice stopped her where she stood.

"There's one thing, one thing, yes, just one *little* thing. A wrinkle! Ah, a wrinkle I forgot to share with you. You see, you see, our deal is not yet done, oh no."

The sky turned on a pin and Sylvie stumbled to stop herself from falling. Two for one—that had been the bargain. Two parents for one rabbit. Had she not fulfilled her end?

"But I promise you will not mind it!" The carrot trilled and cooed and rolled about in the snow, an exultant grin upon its wrinkled face. "Now you must eat me."

Sylvie collapsed woodenly to the ground. Snow seeped down the back of her mother's leathers. "I won't do it."

"But I am food, don't you see? Delicious and perfectly crisp! The best carrot you will ever taste."

"No, no, you horrible thing—"

"Your parents are waiting, girl, your parents are waiting for you. You must help them from the earth or they will stay there forever, yes, forever!"

"I can't!"

"It would be such an easy thing to place me in your mouth and swallow. Then you could run to your parents and all would be as it used to be. Wouldn't it?"

The carrot shook the snow off its crown and inclined its vivid tops toward her.

“You must eat me, or I will leave your parents in the dirt.”

Sylvie picked the carrot off the ground. She held it to her mouth to bite but was sickened by its smell—it reeked like the slimy stalks of rotting flowers kept too long in water. Worse was the thick, cloying sweetness beneath the reek, identical to an orchard full of windfall apricots rotting in the summer sun. Bile flooded her tongue and she retched, but she bit into it as it had said she must. It snapped with a satisfying crunch. She expected its taste to match its smell, but the spirit was right—it was the best carrot she’d ever tasted, sweet and juicy with a hint of spice that burned her tongue and throat.

She ate the whole thing, and was immediately doubled over with a terrible pain. And then, in just a moment, the pain passed through her and away with a departing shudder.

She dropped the carrot’s crown in the snow and raced through the garden. All would be as it used to be—she knew it like she now knew the greedy emptiness in her gut. She had kept her half of the carrot’s bargain and deserved her just rewards.

Sylvie cleared the river stones from their grave with trembling hands. She pressed her ear to the earth and heard their breathing, heard the slow, shushing *tu-tum* of their

heartbeats. The dirt split easily in her fingers, and she scooped it up in great, heaving armfuls.

But she slowed, though she wanted to shove the dirt away, wanted to grab them by the arms and drag them from their graves. But fear coiled slick and thick as eels in Sylvie's stomach, writhing, twisting, snapping at their own tails.

The carrot was a spirit of the tricky sort, that was clear enough—what if it had lied to her? What if the hearts beating in the earth beneath were not theirs? Hot tears trailed her cheeks. But what if it were their hearts? What if it *were* them? Then all would be well, and all would have been worth it. Sylvie kept that thought close to her chest and steeled herself, biting her tongue against a sob that clawed at the back of her throat. She would not cry. Her tears wet the earth anyway.

With shaking hands, Sylvie brushed the last of the dirt away. She blew fine grains of earth from Mother Dar's long eyelashes and thumbed it from the corners of Mother's Shabna's thin lips. Their eyes did not move beneath their lids as they had in sleep, but they were warm and breathing and unmistakably *alive*. They smelled as they always had, of oak and sweat, of young spring river grass sheared at the ankles, but there was a new smell beneath it, too, lingering on their skin—a smell not unlike the carrot, overripe and darkly vegetal.

A shaking breath snaked past Sylvie's lips. Had they been too long in their grave to rise?

Sylvie shook Mother Shabna's shoulder, but Mother Shabna didn't wake, only breathed on, sending plumes of hot breath into the frigid air. Sylvie shook Mother Dar and found her just the same. She spoke their names, shouted in their ears, begged them to open their eyes, but they would not answer. She pinched them hard in the cheek, the neck, the breast, but they did not stir, only breathed on, on, on.

Something built in Sylvie, rolling, rising in her blood. It was anger, and it spilled from her eyes in tears that fell on her mothers' faces, that rolled down their cheeks and wet the earth beneath them. The carrot had betrayed her after all. She knew it like she knew that she would never be sated again, for the emptiness of that knowledge was a mirror to the emptiness in her gut.

Sylvie shoved the tears away, wiped the snot that fell from her nose, but she couldn't stop the sobs that tore their way out of her chest. She fell limp into her parents' shallow grave. If she could not have them, she figured, they would have her—they would have her nestled in the dirt like a rabbit kit in a burrow. She wiggled down between them, held tight in the warmth of their breathing, dreaming bodies. She threw an arm over

Mother Dar and pulled her close. She pressed her back against the hills and valleys of Mother Shabna's side.

Sylvie closed her eyes. As she drifted off to sleep, she felt herself grow long, felt her limbs delve into the earth, her throat thirst for its first gulp of warm spring sunlight.

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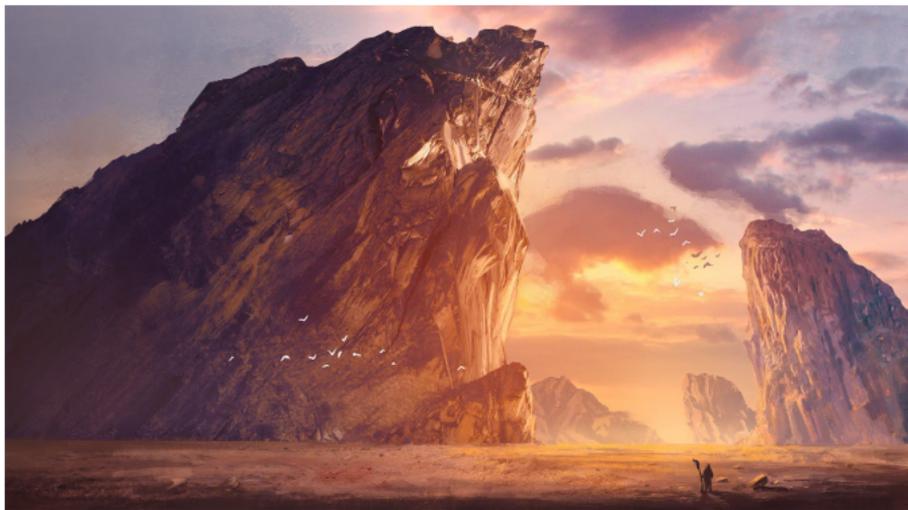
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