



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE SWEETEST SKILL

by Tony Pi

The roar of a tiger awakened me. Not nightmare, not misheard thunder, but a roar great and true, from the caramel tiger on my chest.

I held my breath. Before retiring to bed I had left the palm-sized candy on my cooling rack, one of a few sugar sculptures I'd failed to sell earlier that evening at the South City Gate. Somehow it had come alive while I slept, more feral than I had made it, more faithful to the shape of the regal beast than any mortal hand could achieve. From that roar, I was sure it could rip out my throat with ease.

My friend and host—the wheelwright Lun—turned in his bed across the dim room, snoring on.

Had my magic, unknowingly in my sleep, stirred the candy to life?

A voice rumbled in my mind with the force of a rainstorm in surge. *Two-legged Ao, master of the sweetest skill. I, Tiger, am eager for your help. Will you grant it?*

“King Tiger, Most Formidable and Fair!” He was the only zodiac animal I feared. “Forgive this ragged one his ignorant

question, but what can a lowly candyman even imagine he could do for the Immortal General—”

I've no time for honorifics, Ao, said Tiger, padding towards my face, prickling my skin with his caramel claws. One of mine is wounded and in grave danger, stalked by hunters from the Ten Crows Sect. You've risen in the estimation of we spirits, and so I've chosen you to save her.

The mention of injury reminded me of how Tiger had hurt my father. My mistrust welled. Sorcerers like Father and I traded favors for power from the animal spirits of the zodiac, the *shengxiao*. But a year ago, Tiger had asked as payment the life of a helpless man. Father chose to break his word rather than kill. Though I saw Father's defiance as a noble act, Tiger saw only betrayal. Knowing full well that we candymen relied on our breath to blow bubbles of caramel and fingers to pull them into art, he cursed Father to lose the digits on his right hand, robbing him of his livelihood.

And now he had the audacity to seek my aid?

“Is it truly my reputation as a *Tangren* sorcerer that brings you, or do you choose me because I'm conveniently close?”

A snarl. We've watched you craft your sugar animals with pomp and brilliance. Even when all is in uproar, you stay calm and clever, using the powers you borrow from us to put things right.

“So did my father, yet you crippled him.”

Tiger growled and rapped a sticky paw against my sweaty skin. *You're nothing like your sire. He broke his word to me, but you've bargained fairly and truthfully with the **shengxiao**... thus far. Take this task and I'll grant you any boon of your choosing, should it be within my ambit. What do you chase: fortune, fame, or love?*

I was taken aback. It was always us mortals who begged for the powers of Dragon, or Snake, or another *shengxiao* spirit to save our hide. To have Tiger in my debt, of all spirits....

Had I the gall, I would've asked for Tiger to restore my father's lost hand. But it'd be trouble to ask the impossible.

“If I agree to this, Tiger, it's to prove that we who bear the name Ao still have honor, though I'm no fool to turn down your reward. Tell me of this woman you wish me to save.”

She is the Pale Tigress: the City God's Tiger and sacred guardian of Chengdu. Tonight, the Ten Crows shot her with a cursed arrow, which is slowly drinking away her strength. I can barely hear her heartbeat now. The Crows bar her way to the City God's sanctuaries, forcing her to flee from them in the mist.

I gulped. Not a woman in peril, but a tigress? As a newcomer to Chengdu, I knew little of the local lore and had yet to hear tell of such a fantastic beast. I knew City Gods

protected their jurisdictions in divine ways, but this was the first I'd heard of a tiger demon in service to one.

I will not lose her, Tiger continued. You must find her before they do, and take out the arrow.

There were three City God temples in Chengdu. I knew because all hawkers learned quick where best to sell their wares, and temples meant festivals. If the Crows' men could keep her away from them, there must be many on the hunt.

"Where is she?"

She hides at Fledgling—

A long wooden handle struck the candy tiger off my chest. Before I could yell out, a second hit crushed the sculpture against the ground.

Lun dropped the wheelbarrow handle from his bandaged hands and helped me sit up. I could smell the stink from the healer's salve under those dressings. "Are you all right, Ao? I thought your tiger candy was going to maul you!"

"I'm fine, and he wouldn't have."

Lun meant well. I couldn't fault him for thinking he was saving me. The young wheelwright was one of the few in Chengdu who knew I was a sorcerer and how I had shaped a dragon from river water to battle an arson. Lun helped me put out the fire but burned his hands while heroically fighting the flames.

We had become fast friends thereafter. He insisted that I come stay with him here in the back of the shop where he worked, instead of crowding into a poor house with other wandering peddlers. I was grateful for it.

I grabbed my shirt. "Have you heard of the Pale Tigress?"

Lun's voice fell to a whisper. "She's the ghostly tiger that prowls the night, stalking criminals, demons, and children who misbehave." The shadows couldn't hide that blood was quickly draining from his face. "I thought it was only a tale my mother made up to scare us, till I saw the Tigress herself when I was twelve. We were beastly vandals then, my brothers and I, and had snuck out on the night of the Double Ninth Festival. It was on Jewelry Street she found us, ghastly white with eyes that burned blue in the gloom. She stared at me, *through* me, like she only saw the marrow in my bones. I wet myself, though I wasn't the only one who did. We vowed that if she let us live, we'd walk a path of virtue for the rest of our lives. Only then did she slink away into the shadows. From that day forward, instead of smashing things under cover of night, we began fixing things by day, for those in need."

So that was the Pale Tigress. She must've seen the good in Lun and set him right. What a noble act, to save a life from being lived wrong.

Standing between the Ten Crows and the Tigress would surely place me in danger, but we *pao jianghu*, vagrants who walk the margins of the world, knew peril as a way of life.

I knelt by the crushed sugar figurine. I hoped Tiger could still hear me through it. "I accept, Your Fierceness. I will save the City God's Tiger."

"Y-you'll what?" Lun said.

* * *

I hadn't the time to heat up caramel, which meant I had only two leftover candies, still on their drying-sticks, to conjure with: a dog and a pig. I grabbed a knife from my belongings and cut a thin bleed near my elbow, gritting my teeth against the pain. With drops of my blood I dotted eyes onto the two animal figurines. This small sacrifice was needed, should I want to craft an enchanted creature from water.

"Tiger was telling me something when you, um, interrupted," I said to Lun. "Does 'Fledgling' remind you of any place close by?"

He nodded. "Fledgling Bridge, over the Golden Water River. That's where children and their parents go to feed geese and koi."

I pulled the caramel dog and pig free of their bamboo sticks. "Take me there."

* * *

I followed Lun off Wheelbarrow Lane and southward through the chill. The infamous Sichuan fog, especially with the light of the half moon seeping through, made for an eerie nightscape. Glows in the distance were likely patrolmen with lanterns, but it could well be Crows' men on the hunt.

A month ago on the road to Chengdu, many travelers had cautioned me that the city wasn't all hibiscus and brocade. Situated as it was at the western edge of the empire, strange dangers found their way to Chengdu, be they from the sky-raking mountains down the Tea-Horse Road or on the waters from the great ancient irrigation project. Those warnings had never prepared me for a tiger-demon and her rescue.

At least we knew where the Tigress was hiding. Lun navigated through the streets as only a native of Chengdu could, taking us swiftly and unseen towards the Golden Water River that flowed through Greater City.

I thought about appealing to Magistrate Gongsun for help. The Ten Crows Sect had failed to assassinate him only three nights ago. He would surely want to foil this ploy, even though I wasn't sure *why* the Crows sought to slay the Pale Tigress. But it was too far to fetch the judge and the hour too late to rouse him.

The Fledgling Bridge, a covered span with a single stone arch and a peaked pavilion with flying eaves, was small

compared to other bridges that straddle the burbling Golden Water. Shrouded as it was by mists and shadows, for Lun and I to learn if anything lay here, we'd have to cross the bridge. What would we find, I wondered: a tigress dead or dying, or killers in wait?

Nothing, it seemed, but a stray brown Chongqing dog curled in sleep.

Had the Pale Tigress fled to the estates on the southern shore, or was she skulking north towards the Prefecture City God Temple?

Or perhaps she was *above*.

With Lun's help, I pulled myself up onto the roof of the covered bridge.

There she was, lying a-tremble by the pavilion cupola, a dire beast the hue of white peony blooms under the shade of a leafless branch.

A tiger. A ghost. Both.

An arrow was stuck deep in her left flank.

I treaded carefully towards her across the mist-kissed tiles. I'd never seen a tiger up close, much less a supernatural one such as she. Grand and beautiful the Tigress was, with coal stripes that seemed to sway and drift upon her snowy fur. She embodied danger and grace in an admirable balance.

But she was bleeding where the arrow had pierced her. I wanted to examine the wound but didn't dare go nearer.

Her whiskers quaked as she scented me. She flinched and opened her jaw in a muted snarl.

In her present torment, she could well think me her foe and kill me. But if she had once looked into Lun's heart and found good, perhaps she could peer into mine and find goodwill.

"Lady Tigress, I beg you not to eat me," I said softly, drawing her piercing gaze. "King Tiger of the *shengxiao* sent me to help you. Please, hold still while I see to your wound."

She lifted her head to better see me. Those bright eyes not only beheld me, they *devoured* me.

A shudder rattled my bones, but I managed another step closer, and was relieved that she allowed it.

Carved upon the blackened shaft of the arrow were strange symbols that resembled birds and worms. Half of the arrow was buried in the Tigress's flesh.

I didn't know the anatomy beneath a tiger's hide. I feared that if I tried to pull the arrow free, I'd do more harm than good.

But perhaps a healer, like the itinerant doctor who had seen to Lun's burns, could extract the arrow safely.

I peered over the side. "Lun. Is your doctor still in town?"

“Doctor Yan? Yes, she is. She’s staying with the moxibustionist on Pepper Street.”

“Fetch her quick, or we might lose the Tigress.”

“But what do I tell her?”

“Whatever you need to. She’s from the *Jianghu* like me, isn’t she? That means she’s met far stranger things in outlaw country.” I produced the caramel dog figure, poured a sip of my soul into it, and tossed it gently down to Lun. “You won’t be alone.”

He nodded and hurried back north.

I returned to the Tigress. Her breathing had become more labored, her exhalations tainted by the tang of blood. How strange, to kneel so close to a man-eating beast and live! But she was a servant to the City God, and I meant to comfort her.

“My name’s Ao Tienwei,” I whispered to the Tigress. It hurt me to see her in such pain. “I’m a candyman from the east. You know, the kind that blows up globs of molten sugar and moulds animal figurines from them? I know a little magic too, so don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe.”

The stripes on her pallid fur seemed spectral, hypnotic. But before I was able to examine her closer, I heard the sound of flapping wings. I stiffened. Didn’t the rumormongers claim that the Ten Crows employed three-legged crows for spies? I

couldn't see any birds through the mist, and hoped it worked the same the other way around.

Lun should've reached Pepper Street by now. I closed my eyes and sent my consciousness out in seek of the candy dog in his care. By bonds of blood, soul, and the signature of my style I found it and stirred it into motion.

I, Dog-I, squirmed free of a fold in Lun's shirt so I could use my eyes of dotted blood.

An old man stood in the doorway of the moxibustion clinic, rubbing his eyes. "What's your business with her at this godless hour?"

"There's been a terrible injury," Lun said. "It's not far. I beg you, please wake Doctor Yan."

"Lun, is that you?" called a woman's voice. "It's all right, Master Xiong. I wasn't asleep." A striking woman, garbed in a *ruqun* embroidered with subtle floral patterns, stepped past her host. "What's happened? Tell the truth and I will help. "

"It's, it's complicated. My friend Ao, who got visited by the *shengxiao* Tiger, who wants him to save the Pale Tigress, who got shot by the Crows, who—"

"Oh? Not a human patient?" She seemed intrigued.

I needed to help out poor ineloquent Lun. With sticky paws the-dog-I-was clambered onto Lun's shoulder and sat. This show of magic ought to convince her.

Doctor Yan tapped my candy-shell with a calloused finger. “I see. This will be an unusual case. Wait here, I’ll need my herbs.”

Confident she’d soon be on her way, I returned to my body, just in time to hear voices below, the yelp of a dog, and the sound of scampering off the bridge. The Tigress must have heard them too, and she tensed. I started breathing as shallowly as I could. There were many footfalls, then the voices of several men.

A commanding voice quieted the rest. “She couldn’t have gone far, not with that arrow in her. You and you, stay on the north shore and head east. You two, go back to the men she slew and ensure the bodies disappear. You four, follow me. We’ll scour the south.”

“And me, uncle?” asked a taut voice.

“Wait here, Wuda. If you hear reports of a sighting, relay the message to those on the wrong shore. Got it?”

A round of ‘ayes’. They raced away.

How long before the man they left here realized he ought to check up top? Or what if the Crows’ men happened across Lun and Doctor Yan?

The man paced below. Odds were, we’d be discovered soon. I was no match physically for a hunter, so I’d have to rely on wits and magic to protect the Pale Tigress.

Luckily, I still had one candy left.

I took the pig-shaped caramel in my right hand. The simplest of the zodiac animals to make, it only needed a steady stream of breath to inflate the body round and pinches to shape flat ears and a snout. Once it grew fat, add stubby feet and finish the tail with the vital curl. I seeped another measure of my soul into it.

Pig, O Mother Sow, I cried with my mind's voice, this shaper of sweets asks your help with a trifling matter. Will you hear me?

The *shengxiao* spirit grunted in greeting. *Oy, yes, oy, maker of treats. Just the sound of your voice makes me crave a snack. But hweh, what doesn't?*

The man below will kill us if he finds us, Mother Sow, I explained. But what aspect of Pig's power could I call upon? Hunger? Fat? No, I needed strength. Your aspect as boar. I need the strength of your tusks, the brute in your rage.

The man below inhaled deeply, then sniffed twice. Not long after, a scrape sounded on the other side of the pavilion cupola. The Ten Crows man was climbing onto the roof. Had he caught a whiff of blood, fur, or caramel in the air? It mattered not; I couldn't mask our scents.

I lay down beside the Tigress. The cupola would shield us from view until he came around it, and then we were dead.

Savor the scraps of my magic as you will, but feed my appetites in return, said Pig. What manner of coin do you hoard; with what delights do you barter?

I could hear the man Wuda's steps circling the cupola. Pig's power would save us, but what to offer her as payment? Once before, I had accepted a spirit's aid without knowing what he would demand in return, and suffered for it. Would I risk falling into the same trap?

I do this in protection of the City God's Tiger, I said. For the sake of all Chengdu, lend me what I ask now, but save the haggling for when I survive.

Pig snorted. *You're with the City God's grunt? Auspicious night! The fur of the Pale Tigress hides the key to a Chengdu treasure. Promise now that you'll learn and tell me that secret, and the power of the boar is yours.*

Her fur hid a treasure? I questioned the wisdom of stealing the City God's secret. Men had been cursed for less. But if I said no to Pig and we died because of it, I feared the treasure would fall into the wrong hands.

Wuda of the Ten Crows was in mid-leap over the cupola, sword in hand.

Done! I cried.

I felt the pig candy in my hand fatten with the wild boar's furious might. As the man landed I charged him, and with the force of a monstrous swine I struck him full in the jaw.

The impact crushed my caramel pig but knocked my foe out. He dropped his sword and fell. I realized too late that I'd hit him too hard, and that he would tumble off the sloped roof and noisily into the water. I grabbed his sleeve with my free hand, but he was heavy, too heavy.

Wuda slipped from my grasp and crashed into the water with a resounding splash.

I teetered on the edge, and would have fallen in after him had someone not yanked me back onto the tiles by my shirt.

"*Tangren* Ao, I presume," whispered Doctor Yan.

How had she climbed up here without a sound?

"That man will drown—"

"Lun's gone in to save him," she said. Indeed, I heard wading noises. "I didn't think you could take him."

"Surprised me too." I set the squished pig sculpture down. "Thank you for coming."

"I count myself friend to all kindly spirits," Yan said, her voice taking on a more soothing tone. "The hunters will have heard that, so let's not tarry." She knelt by the tiger. "May I examine you, Lady Tigress?"

The Pale Tigress studied Yan intensely before she gave a slow, upward nod.

As Yan attended to her patient, I studied the tiger's odd but fascinating pattern of stripes. The moonlight through the mist was wan, but if examined carefully, what seemed at first to be stripes of her dark fur deepened as if by magic to become shadowed streets with stalls, trees, and even swaying shop signs in ghostly miniature.

The Pale Tigress was a living map of Chengdu.

Yan produced a small sachet and took a blend of herbs from it. "This arrow was enchanted to stop its victim from drawing divine strength. The extraction must be delicate and slow, lest the arrowhead break off inside her." She sprinkled a pinch onto the wound. "And who might you be, *Tangren* Ao, to be tasked to save the City God's Tiger?"

"I'm merely a candy peddler who sometimes meddles when there's need for meddling," I said. "What of you, Doctor Yan? So light of foot, so quick of hand, and of no small strength. I've not seen a swordsman in the *Jianghu* as capable as you."

"I'm a simple physician," Yan said, though she was surely much more. "Lun says you saved the city from burning by conjuring a dragon made of water."

“Ah, such tales he tells,” I said, while trying to figure out more streets among the Pale Tigress’s stripes. There was Barrel Street, which crossed Fragrant Osmanthus Street; Golden Alley, and Little Bowl Road where they sold my favorite spicy tofu. If I concentrated, I could even follow the mirage roads as though I were hurtling along the rooftops and leaping across alleyways. But where was the treasure supposedly hidden in her fur? And would I know it when I saw it?

Yan smiled a bewitching smile. “We both have secrets, it seems.”

They said that doctors in the *Jianghu* could read a woman’s pulse by merely touching a string tied to her wrist. I saw an echo of that as Yan gently took hold of the arrow with her left hand. The Tigress flinched, and that was when I saw it: hidden in the stripes of her fur, always floating at the juncture of the same mirage streets, was the image of a bronze pearl.

Was the pearl the treasure that so intrigued Pig?

Yan flicked her right hand, and a small knife appeared in her grasp. “Lady Tigress, the first cut will be the worst, but for all our sakes, hold your roar. Ao, I need your help holding the Tigress down.”

The Tigress gave another upward nod.

I whispered an apology to her as I put my hands where the doctor indicated, on either side of the wound. I thought her flesh would be warm, but it was supernaturally cold.

From this vantage I could see the pearl clearly. It floated above the crossing of the same phantom roads. If I had identified the landmarks right, that intersection must be Pawnshop Road and Birdcage Alley. Could this mean that one of the shops there might hide a treasure of Chengdu? Did this charm hint that the prize was also a pearl, or did it merely signify a hiding place?

The doctor made her incision. The Pale Tigress writhed, despite my best attempt to keep her still.

But what willpower she must have, to not roar in pain!

A moment after Yan took the blade to the Tigress again, she hesitated. "Voices approaching, and many," she whispered. "But I can't stop the procedure now."

I heard them too. "I'll lure them away."

Lun should still have the dog figurine. I closed my eyes and sent my soul forth once more.

The first sensations that hit me when I inhabited my caramel dog were wetness and cold. I was bobbing in the stream next to Lun, who was holding that man Wuda's head above water while grabbing onto the lower edge of the bridge.

The structure shielded them from sight, but how much longer could they bear the cold waters?

Honored Gallant Dog! I called. *This loyal servant begs your aid to save his friends.*

Let's play, Pup-Brother Aoooooo! barked the *shengxiao* spirit, harkening to the dog shape of my caramel body. *Wag your tail if you're happy to see me, just like that.*

To my surprise, my candy tail was indeed wagging. *My Genial Friend,* I said, *I intend to shape a hound from the water.*

Ah, your growing water-shaping skills, said Dog. *You've already set Chengdu a-stir with that magic, Ao. A water dragon against the fire. Rats of wine and tea against assassins. Now a river dog against tiger-slayers?*

That alone won't be enough to distract the Crows' men, I replied. *But if I could borrow a bite's worth of your authority over the dogs of the city....*

You wish to lead a pack? Let me gnaw on that. What meat will you bring me for that right?

The voices were getting closer, and I couldn't risk not reaching a deal. But what would Dog find pleasing?

I thought back to a scruffy Shar-pei that had tagged along with us when I was small. My best friend for few happy years, I named him Rumor because he was vicious when it suited him

and he always ran wild. But when Father and I needed to escape Fujian by junk, we had been forced to leave old Rumor behind.

What if I promise to take in a dog as a companion? I asked.

Dog howled with glee. *One of my choosing? Oh, what opportunities that opens! Lead on, Aooooooo. Shape your water-hound. I give you leave to call all the dogs you can convince to follow you.*

I sensed the blessing of Dog rise within me, boundless in vigor like a pup chasing her own tail. My conjurations had no voice, so I couldn't howl to the dogs for aid. *I am in your debt, Friend, but how do I...?*

Use what you already know, said Dog, and his presence receded.

What did he mean? I thought back to the bridgetop confrontation. Scent, not sight or sound, had given us away. Dogs had an incredible sense of smell; Rumor had always known in which hand I hid a treat. Could I use scent to my advantage? I had, after all, spent the day at the South City Gate selling blown caramel animals made from my family's secret blend of sugars. Some of my creations had likely been eaten since then, but some might've been kept to admire while others

thrown away. My *Tangren* magic connected me to all those candies scattered across the city.

What if I worked Dog's blessing into that power and called to the dogs of the city through the fragrance of my sugar-blend?

Men with bows and belt-quivers were nearing the bridge, shouting for their man Wuda.

I opened pathways to all traces of my sugar-blend in the city and let Dog's blessing sprint through them all to mark their aromas with a plea: "*Dogs of Chengdu, by the power of the **shengxiao** I call you to my side. Wherever you lie, awaken.*"

Distant barks broke the silence. Some dogs must have smelled my summons, but would they come in force and in time?

I needed to stall the Crows' men. I asked the Golden Water River for leave to shape my water-hound from its substance, and in return I'd offer my candy dog as tribute. It was pleased, and it pulled the caramel into deeper currents while granting me dominion over a vat's worth of sugar-tinged riverwater.

My soul animated the river's gift. I sculpted my liquid body as I would a glob of hot caramel, paying homage to my old beloved dog. I shaped and smoothed a flat and broad head with a full and wide muzzle, and pinched surface folds to look wrinkly all over. Lastly, to imitate the short 'sand-skin' fur that

gave the Shar-pei its name, I imagined a dusting of sugar crystals to render the right texture. Once I felt the shape was right I clambered onto the riverbank.

Like a wet dog I felt a compulsion to shake myself dry, but if I did my water-body might fall apart. With my new canine nose I could scent my fragrant call, drifting down from the crushed pig candy atop Fledgling Bridge. But my airborne message was not pure sweet: the hint of dank was my doubt and the sour my fear. Would enough answer my call?

I had no time to court those that questioned my call. I called to the others: *"Helpers south of the Golden Water, bark at the shadows or yelp in fear. Make noise, make men come and see. Scrappers north, come to me in silence and under cover. I may need you all."*

My dogs began their commotion just as the Crows' men were about to set foot on the bridge. As I hoped, the frenetic barking on the south shore drew the hunters' attention. With luck they might believe that the dogs were spooked by a wounded tiger and race to find her before the night watchmen took interest in all the noise.

My gambit played out half-right. Their ringleader sent all but one of his men dashing south. He, a tall malodorous man with a bow in his left hand and a sword in his right, bade an

underling to stay and search the bridge while he himself took the riverbank, heading towards the water's edge.

I couldn't let them find Lun with Wuda.

Water-paws on grass, I charged the ringleader. He must have seen me out of the corner of his eye and tumbled aside. He cut me with his sword, but it passed through without harm.

He sneered. "Another damnable servant of the City God?"

His underling heard and turned. I barreled onto the bridge and slammed my watery body against the underling's legs with the force of a waterfall. He fell, and I continued on. I needed to startle and anger them so that they'd ignore the waterline and the roof of the Fledgling Bridge and chase after me.

"Leave him," said the ringleader. "The cur took pains to remove Wuda, and now he's desperate to lead us away, which means the tiger demon must be here. I'll skin her yet. Check above."

With that, my ploy fell to pieces. I frothed at the mouth to see the underling grab the handrail and struggle to his feet.

The ringleader looked under the bridge. "You, in the water. My nephew had better be alive."

Deception wouldn't work any longer. I charged the ringleader.

The dogs that had answered my summons scrambled from the mists of the northern shore, barking wildly. Mangy strays,

white field dogs, Tibetan mastiffs, and even a pampered lion dog darted into the fray. Two growling mastiffs leapt upon the underling and pulled him down, while others chomped at his limbs. He cried out and struggled but to no avail against the massive weights of the pair of Tibetans.

I continued towards the ringleader on the south riverbank, with a press of Chongqing and Xiasi dogs behind me.

With much calm the man flung his bow at my head. I knew the weapon would pass through me so I didn't dodge. The hit disrupted my eyes, blinding me for a moment.

He was counting on that. Drawing a black arrow from his belt-quiver, he drove it deep into my side.

The arrow stuck in me like I was truly a creature of flesh and blood, and a chilling pain surged in my right lung. The ringleader let go of the arrow and swung his sword.

This time, I was afraid.

I bore the arrow's pain and scurried a tail's length away from the blade, which struck the muddy riverbank where I had stood but a moment before.

My pack of attack dogs became confused, unsure, and retreated from the man.

I put more distance between me and him. Where the arrow had hit me, the water was turning into ice, and the ice was spreading.

A new fear consumed me. What would happen to me if my water-body froze solid? Could my foe then smash the ice and shatter my soul?

My instinct was to remove myself from the water-hound manifestation, but the cursed arrow had lodged in my soul. I was stuck. And just as the one in the Tigress had cut her off from divine help, this arrow was undoing the *shengxiao* magic gifted me by Dog. The chorus of barks south of us dwindled, and the fight fled my pack of scrappy defenders.

The ringleader kicked a field dog aside and advanced upon me. He could smash the part of me that had turned to ice.

I didn't want to die here, but what could I do? Jump into the river to save myself, letting the current carry me downstream?

But if I ran and somehow survived, the twelve spirits of the *shengxiao* would all know me as a coward. If they thought me unworthy, would they ever deign to help me again?

No, I couldn't be craven. Tonight, I had begged Dog to let me lead his kin, so I must behave like a true leader, one who'd never tuck tail and run. If I died here, I'd die with honor to my family name.

I stood my ground and bared my teeth, though the arrow's curse was creeping up my neck, threatening to freeze my snarl in place.

Three dogs who hadn't yet fled in the chaos followed my lead, growling at the ringleader, readying an attack.

It gave the man pause. Our gazes locked as he considered his next move.

In the mist behind my foe, Lun heaved the unconscious Wuda onto shore and clambered out of the water, shivering.

The ringleader spotted him. "Another come to die?"

I cursed. Knowing Lun, he'd do something stupid like tackle the man and end up dead on the point of the sword.

Get away, I shouted to Lun with my mind-voice, but he couldn't hear me.

But my dogs seemed to. They yelped and turned to run.

The ringleader stepped towards Lun. "Will your eyes sate the carrion crows, I wonder?"

Pouncing from the mists above Lun, the Pale Tigress fell upon the ringleader and forced him to the muddy ground. With a matter-of-course bite to the back of his neck, she snapped it.

The arrow in her side was gone. She was still weak, I could see, but somehow she had mustered enough strength to save me.

Her eyes burned blue as she stared through me.

I thanked her with my heart.

The Tigress gave an upnod, then dragged the dead man into the shadows.

I felt more of my water-hound body turning to ice, and all I wanted was to close my eyes and sleep away the pain. But I also knew if I did I'd die.

Doctor Yan called to Lun from the roof of the bridge. "Help me move *Tangren Ao* closer to his conjured self, please."

Lun nodded. He retrieved my slumbering body and brought it to my side.

Doctor Yan appeared from behind him, clutching the cursed arrow she had removed from the Tigress. "She saved you," she said to my dog form, "at much risk of aggravating her wound, but likely wanted to thank you for buying us time, *Tangren Ao*. As do I."

No time or way to blush. I lifted my paw, the only part of the water-hound that hadn't frozen yet, and touched the lips of my sleeping body. Would the trace of sweet water in this conjured form return me to my flesh?

A part of my soul was still pinned to the water-and-ice by the cursed arrow. I had no choice but to will my soul to tear free from the arrow, feeling the agony as though I had ripped it from my own chest.

Only then did I fully reclaim my body.

Without my animating force, the ice-and-water hound fell and smashed apart against the riverbank dirt.

I sat up with a start, and couldn't stop wheezing.

“What’s wrong?” asked Yan.

“I still feel the pain from the arrow strike,” I said in short breaths.

Lantern lights signaled the approach of the night watchmen. “Get him home safely, Lun, and don’t be seen,” she whispered.

“Shouldn’t we all help the Tigress find sanctuary?” I asked.

Yan shook her head. “Now that the arrow’s out of her, even as wounded as she is she remains faster and stealthier than any of us. But here, one man nearly drowned and the other’s newly mauled. I can’t leave them untended in good conscience, even if they are criminals. I’ll meet you at the wheelwright’s when I can.”

Lun hefted me onto his wet back and headed away from Fledgling Bridge.

“Thank you for your help, Lun,” I said.

“No thanks needed,” Lun said. “The troublemaker I was misses these midnight adventures.”

Twenty, thirty paces later, I lost consciousness.

* * *

I was awakened by a warm, wet tongue licking my face. Groggy and short of breath, I fended off the dog and sat up to get my bearings.

I was in my bed in the back of the wheelwright's shop. By the light, it must have been well past midday.

Doctor Yan sat bedside, studying my face. "How do you feel, Ao?"

"Still hard to breathe," I admitted. The dog with the slobbering tongue was a Xiasi Quan, lean and powerful with a white, wiry pelt. I rubbed her head and noted a deep notch in her left ear. "Your pet, Doctor?"

"Ours," corrected Lun, entering the room with a bowl of medicinal stew on a tray held in freshly-bandaged hands. "She followed us home and wouldn't leave you."

I recognized the dog now: one of the last three who had fought at my side against the malodorous ringleader. I rubbed her head in thanks, and remembered my promise to the spirit of Dog. Was this the companion he chose for me?

"Drink," Doctor Yan bade.

I gagged from the bitterness of the goldthread herb but downed the awful soup in the end.

Yan told me to breathe deep, and listened to my respiration. "There's nothing wrong with you physically, Ao. I fear your lack of breath comes from a deeper cause." She showed me the two black arrows from the night before. "Your soul remembers the wound where the water-hound was struck:

in the right lung. You're fortunate that it did not pierce the heart."

My chest tightened. It dawned on me what this meant for my livelihood and my magic. While my soul stayed wounded, I'd continue to have difficulties breathing. I wouldn't be able to inflate a bubble of hot caramel to shape my figurines, no matter how skilled I still was with my hands.

I could work no more as a sugar-styler.

Or *Tangren* sorcerer.

"Will it heal?" I asked, softly.

Sadness clouded her eyes. "It might heal on its own, or it might not. I don't know...yet. But we have these arrows. I'll learn all I can. Until then, you are my patient. I'll visit again in a few days."

"Thank you, Doctor. May I keep one of them? I'll inquire discreetly with my sources." The magistrate would surely want to see one.

Yan allowed it. "Some air will do you good. Lun, make sure he rests and drinks that soup twice a day."

I winced at that.

Lun held out his bandaged hands. "Aren't we a pair? My hands, your breath. We can't but wait for them to heal, but at least we can wait together."

I smiled. "Thank you, I needed to hear that." All this hadn't been for a boon from Tiger, I reminded myself. All this had been to repay the Pale Tigress who had made Lun the good man he was today.

After Doctor Yan departed, Lun, the dog, and I went outside to sit in front of the shop. Despite the fresh air, I still couldn't stop huffing and wheezing. Children were playing kick-ball in the lane while old women gossiped in the doorways. A six year-old boy came by to ask Lun about the dog.

There came a roar once more, this time from the God of Wealth altar just inside the wheel-shop doorway. The image of the god was riding a painted black tiger, and it was the beast who spoke: *Your mission was a roaring success, Tangren master. I commend you.*

Great and Illustrious Tiger, I did only as a humble man should, I said.

Yet he wasn't the only *shengxiao* spirit who found me. The boy who was petting the dog was wearing pig-head shoes, a folk charm that was said to fool evil spirits into leaving the child alone.

No welcome for me, candyman? asked Pig in doubled voices through the boy's shoes.

Merciful Mother Sow, forgive my blindness. I was startled that two *shengxiao* spirits would appear to me at the same—

And me, Aooooooo, said Dog through the Xiasi's shadow. Greetings, Brother Tiger, Sister Sow.

O Noblest Dog, I am blessed by your presence. Three of them at once. An omen for sure, but for good or for ill? I felt I should throw myself prostrate on the ground before them.

Pig snorted. Ao has rooted out the secret I asked, I know it. But he will tell it only to me.

I have something of it, Mother Sow. I still wondered what treasure it was.

Do not speak it here before them, she warned. Have you two come to hinder us?

Tiger roared with laughter. It was I who helped hide the treasure of Chengdu so long ago, and I who bound the City God's Tiger to its guardianship. I know how dangerous it is in the wrong paws.

But I must tell her what I discovered, King Tiger, I said.

And so you shall, said he. You gave your word to Pig and you will honor it. I'm here only to help you heal.

I sighed, guessing what he meant. You want me to use the boon I won for saving the Pale Tigress.

You presume wrong, Ao. The boon remains yours, said Tiger. It is the Pale Tigress who asked this of me and paid the price I required, so I will chase the cure your way. Watch for your chance in the coming days, and let it not dart past.

I choked back a cry of astonishment. So there was hope that I could ply my craft again? But what had she promised Tiger? *Such generosity from the Tigress touches me, but I cannot allow her—*

You matter not. She has already given her word.

With that, Tiger withdrew.

I looked down at the pig-shoes. *Mother Sow, here's what I know of the treasure.*

Wait, she said. Kindly leave us, Lord Dog. The secret is mine by right, not yours.

How true, Sister Sow, said Dog. And yet if the treasure of Chengdu is truly a peril, it hurts no one if it stays buried like a bone. Brother Aoooooo honors our deal by taking a canine companion, and so I will stay at his heel.

I understood his gambit. I would not be breaking my word to Pig because it was *she* who had forbidden me from telling the secret while within Dog's hearing.

Well played, said Pig. But there will come a time when Ao will be with me alone, and I will hear what's due.

The boy with the shoes ran off, and Pig with him.

That was unexpected, Worthy One, I said. Might I ask why you interceded on my behalf?

When Tiger warns, you best listen, replied Dog. Sister Sow's right: I cannot shield you forever from revealing the

dangerous secret you now carry, but it may stave off disaster for a time. Schemes multiply like fleas in Chengdu. Have your wits about you, and keep your loyal friends close.

The spirit's aspect receded from my dog's shadow, but I knew he was keeping watch.

"The boy asked what her name is," Lun explained. "What do you think?"

The Xiasi gave a small whine and nudged me with her nose.

I sighed. "Worry, my friend. Worry."

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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"](#), from BCS #155, was a finalist for the Aurora Awards and its [BCS podcast](#) a finalist for the Parsec Awards. He is a finalist again in the 2016 Aurora Awards for Best English Short Story for "Cosmobotica", which he co-wrote with Costi Gurgu for The.

Mammoth Book of Dieselpunk. Visit www.tonypi.com for a list of his other works.

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RABBIT GRASS

by Kelly Stewart

Mama says, “Never let Rabbits into the garden, Aril, or they’ll eat up everything.”

This makes working in the garden troublesome, because there is almost always a Rabbit sitting just on the other side of the fence. The fence isn’t nothing fancy, just old dry timber trussed up with wire.

But Rabbits won’t come in unless they’re invited. No one would invite them, except they have their ways of smoothing things over with the folks around here. For one thing, you’d hardly know them from any old Person, except for the long ears perched atop their heads, all covered with velvety fur and turning this way and that to listen for things. They dress nice, too. They can be real charming. That’s how folks around here get their gardens et up.

This Rabbit at the fence is talking to me the whole time I’m out in the garden. Lots of different Rabbits visit the garden, try their luck. Today it’s Picket. Picket’s around a lot. When Rabbits have been sneaking around the fence at night, I can tell them apart by their shoeprints. Picket’s pretty big for a Rabbit.

He's as tall as me. Seems to me he don't need no more garden food. He's wearing a purple waistcoat today, maybe satin with a diamond pattern quilted in. It looks brand new and very costly.

There's a nice breeze blowing the sting off the sunshine. Robins are singing their challenge-songs in the woods. Crickets are humming their daily devotions out in the fields. And then comes Picket's shy little voice, just sitting on top of the breeze like he don't mean to be no imposition.

"Please, Miss, I promise I won't eat much. Just a leaf or two. Maybe a flower. I am a Rabbit, after all. I eat so very little, you would hardly notice anything missing."

I don't even look at him. I just look down at the rich, dark soil I'm patting down around the Potatoes. Their pretty five-pointed flowers wave a soft scent under my nose. "You may be one Rabbit, but the trouble is there's more of you. If you all et a leaf or two, there'd be no leaves left."

"Do the leaves matter?" Picket says. "It's the flowers that are so pleasant and colourful, like the ones on your hat that bring out your eyes so well."

"Don't you try flattering me, Mister Picket!" I snap at him, catching his eyes now so he knows I mean it. "I'll tell the whole village and all the other Rabbits what a rascal you are, and you'll be chased right out of the valley."

Picket shrinks back with my dressing-down, with his ears all flat.

I shouldn't have called him "Mister". Addressing them like a gentleman or a lady makes them get all important, makes them bold and harder to shoo away. Mama taught me my manners too good.

"And besides," I add, "it's the leaves what catch the sunlight and make the flowers grow, so of course they matter."

I stand up and stretch my back, and wipe my grimy hands on my apron. I have to attend to the Carrots next, and they're near to the fence. I don't want to go near the fence, but I tell myself to march right on over and ignore that Rabbit.

I haul my basket over to the stand of flowers that look like ladies' lacy handkerchiefs. While I'm digging in the soil with my trowel, sure enough, Picket hops over in the funny way Rabbits do and stares at me through the fence. His ears have perked up again, and I can see him smiling out of the corner of my eye. Insults and scoldings never keep them down for long.

"I meant no harm," Picket says. His voice is sweet like the flowers smell. "You know a lot about leaves and flowers. You must know how to care for them very well."

"Course I do," I say. "My mama taught me everything. She knows veggies and flowers, what they need to grow and be happy, and how to talk to them."

“They must love you both very much,” says Picket. “In fact, they must grow so abundantly that surely you have extra produce and discards and orts and such...”

“And you don’t get any.”

I glare at him from under the brim of my hat. He’s got big dark blue eyes, and his eyebrows are turned up, and he smiles into those cute little cheeks of his. Even though he’s as tall as me, I can’t tell how old he is—fourteen, like me, or younger or older, you just can’t tell. Rabbits all got baby faces. His dark brown hair is smooth as silk and picks up the sunlight like a glossy flower.

Sometimes I wish I could just talk to Picket, like a regular Person. He isn’t such a bad Rabbit. I think we could be friends, except all he does when he comes by is try to persuade me to let him into the garden. It’s wearisome.

“Don’t you have something to eat out in the woods?” I say. “What do you do when you can’t sweet-talk your way into somebody’s garden?”

“Oh, there’s food out in the woods,” says Picket. He gets a dreamy look in his eyes. “But nothing tastes quite like garden food.”

“Why don’t you Rabbits grow your own gardens?” I say. The idea sprouts fresh leaves just as soon as it’s out of my mouth. Why hasn’t anyone thought of this before? “That’s it,

Picket. You just need to grow your own gardens, and then you won't need to bother no more People-folk for their gardens."

"That's just the trouble, you see," says Picket, all full of pity for himself. "I'm afraid we don't speak Vegetable, and so nothing will grow for us. Nothing but Rabbit Grass, of course, but it's so very fickle."

"I ain't never heard of no Rabbit Grass," I say, peering at him sideways.

And then Picket gasps and throws his hands over his mouth. His eyes are round as saucepans. "Oh dear... We're not supposed to talk about our Rabbit Grass." He leans forward and puts his nose through the fence. "I'll share some with you if you keep it a secret."

Well this was something new. "Never thought I'd see the day a Rabbit tried to give me food. What's it taste like?"

"Oh, it's scrumptious. The leaves are juicy and crisp, and have just the tiniest hint of heat. The roots are meaty and toothsome, with almost a nutty-sweet flavour. But like I say, it's a very fickle plant. It don't talk much, except to other vegetables."

I purse my lips while I think. I remember the old saying about teaching a man to fish.

"I'll tell you what, Picket," I say as I dig around some Carrots and tug one out of the dirt. The Carrot gives a yawn.

“Take this here Carrot plant and stick it in the ground next to your Rabbit Grass. It’s still a bit sleepy, but they like to jaw once they get going.”

Picket’s eyes are nearly sparkling as he reaches through the fence with wiggly grasping fingers. He snatches the plant out of my hands faster than I could have changed my mind. His eagerness makes me a little nervous—Mama will be sore if she knows I’m handing out our plants to Rabbits—but I know I’m doing the right thing. Once the Rabbits get their own gardens growing, they won’t bother us People no more. And Mama and I might just be the first People in the whole valley to grow Rabbit Grass. If it’s as good as Picket says, it might become a big hit at market.

“Now don’t go eating up that plant before you can get it in the ground,” I warn him. “I won’t give you another.”

“You can be sure I’ll go straight home and plant it,” Picket says, hugging the dirt-covered Carrot to his new waistcoat. “And I’ll be sure to bring you some Rabbit Grass just as soon as it’s grown up a bit. Thank you, Aril. You’re my favourite girl in the valley.”

“Get outta here, you fool Rabbit,” I chide. He scampers off into the woods.

* * *

I ask Mama what Rabbit Grass is. She hasn't heard of it no more than I have, and she lays into Picket (even though he isn't there) for telling such tall tales. I don't tell Mama that I let Picket have a whole Carrot plant, or else she would've chewed me out, too. I don't need no chewing out. I know better now. I'm gonna get Picket back real good.

The next day Mama sends me out to the garden, Picket is standing there at the fence with a big old smile puffing up his cheeks. Today his waistcoat is light green-blue with a floral pattern, and he's got a pinky-purple bowtie. The two look awful together.

"Well howdy, Picket," I say, all friendly. "How's your garden growing?"

"Very well, so far," he says in his meek little voice.

"Well that's grand," I say. "But you know what, I been thinking about your garden. It kept me up last night. I'm worried for your Rabbit Grass."

"Oh, are you?" Picket says, a bit surprised. He thinks he's got me fooled.

"I am," I say. I've got a bundle wrapped up in a paisley kerchief tucked away in the big pocket of my apron. I take it out real careful, with both hands, and hand it over the fence to Picket. "This is for you to plant next to the Rabbit Grass and the Carrot. It's a real clever sort of a plant, and if you talk to it

enough, it'll learn how to talk your talk. And then it can tell you what the plants underground are saying."

"Oh... Oh my," says Picket with a funny smile. "That is extremely kind of you. Not that I would ever dream of it, but could I eat this plant? If I had a mind to?"

"Oh, sure," I say off the top of my head. "The berries will talk until they've ripened, and then they get all restless looking for someone to eat them. They're sweet and tart, and all covered in juicy pods that burst in your mouth."

"It sounds wonderful!" says Picket with his eyes all a-sparkle. "I'm so honoured that you would deign to give a poor Rabbit like me such a generous gift."

"Don't be a toady, Picket," I say. "It's unbecoming of a handsome Rabbit like you."

He shrugs and gives a little laugh. Two can play at his game.

"But Picket," I say, letting all the smile drain out of my face. "I gotta tell you something real important."

"Do go on." Picket holds the bundle under one arm and leans on the fence with the other, and waits on me with a sly grin. He can't tell who's tricking who. Rabbits love tricking folks more than anything else. So long as he thinks he's fooled me, I might have a chance to fool him.

"You mustn't open that bundle until you're home," I say.

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s... It’s real important,” I say. Drat. This fibbing business is harder than Picket makes it look. He’s a professional fibber. But I know he’s curious. Rabbit-curious. “I don’t dare tell you what happens if you unwrap it in the middle of the forest. It’s real shy. It don’t like being unswaddled all higgledy-piggledy. You gotta give it respect.”

“Oh, I will be sure to do so,” says Picket with a knowing smile. “I’ll go home straight away to plant it. You really are the most wonderful girl in the whole valley.”

“That sweet-talk business don’t work on me,” I tell him.

He turns and runs into the woods. I shoot a big, satisfied grin at his back and scoop up my basket to get to work on the garden. I listen closely to the sounds of the woods while I’m crouched down. A Chickadee is singing to his sweetie somewhere.

And then I hear it. A high-pitched wail comes sailing out of the woods. I step up onto the fence and gaze through the Trees.

Here comes Picket, chasing after a little critter with a walnut shell nose and a curly green shoot for a tail, squealing and skittering just out of Picket’s grasp. Picket makes a dive for it and misses.

“Ha! I got you back real good!” I shout to Picket. “Couldn’t stop yourself from peeking before you got home, huh? Don’t

bother trying to catch it anyhow. It's just Pigweed. There ain't no plant like the one I told you about, just like there ain't no Rabbit Grass like you told me about!"

Picket is sitting up where he fell down, just staring at me with great big eyes and his mouth open and clutching the paisley kerchief to his chest. It's hard to make out in the dappled sunshine, but I think he's all flushed from embarrassment. I almost feel a little bad for tricking him, he looks so stunned. But then I remind myself I was only doing him a turn like he did me, so I set back to work on the garden with the sunlight leaning on my back.

* * *

Picket don't come back for a long time. I wonder if he's vexed with my trick, but that would be awful hypocritical of him. I'm surprised to find I miss him a little, but if he can't take what he dishes out, then good riddance to him, I say.

Just as I'm ready to give up seeing Picket ever again, I see him in his usual spot just beyond the fence. Except he's sitting down and staring at his worn patent leather shoes.

I come up to the fence and try him. "Is that you, Picket?"

His head snaps up like he never noticed me coming—which is pretty odd for a fellow with such long ears. He leaps up and cries, "Aril! Good morning!" but his little voice cracks under some kind of strain.

He's smiling, but he's pale, and he's got dark circles under his eyes. Did my trick really upset him that bad?

"Good morning," I say. "You don't look so good."

"Don't I?" he says. He fidgets with his dirt-smudged white collar.

"Look, Picket, I do feel bad for tricking you, but when you do somebody a turn—"

"What? Oh, heavens, I'm not upset about that," he says. "In fact, it was a very clever trick, and you are a very clever girl." Some colour returns to his ghostly face. "So clever that I thought you might be able to give me some advice."

I'm powerful confused now. "Well sure, Picket, if I can."

"What kinds of plants do People give each other when they're not feeling well?" Picket asks. His face is just as pale as before. His eyes are stuck on me, desperate.

"That depends," I tell him. "Ginger's good for a wobbly stomach, and chewing on Cloves will numb a toothache..."

"What about a fever? Does anything fix that?"

"Echinacea plants are good for that sort of thing." I point out the tall pink and purple flowers in one corner of the garden. "The ones with the black, spiny middle. You can dry the flowers, leaves and roots to make a tea."

Picket's ears droop. "How long do they take to dry?" he asks meekly.

“If you need some now, we’ve got some dried in the house,” I say. “Do you want a bag of it?”

Picket nods. His voice is quieter than ever: “Yes, please.”

I get a Butterfly-flutter of worry that I’m falling for another trick, but Picket just looks so ghastly that I can’t help believing him. And besides, if he only meant to eat the plant, he wouldn’t ask for the parts already dried. I run into the house and grab a net-bag of dried plant parts, searching around all the while to make sure I don’t get caught.

Picket takes the bag in his hands. The dried bits crunch under his fingers. “Thank you,” he murmurs, and runs off before I can much wonder what he’s all about.

* * *

Next time I see Picket, it’s the middle of the night.

A light rapping at my window pulls me out of a deep sleep. I’m all dozy yet, unsteady on my feet. I rub my bleary eyes and look out. Picket’s looking back at me with that haunted look in his big dark eyes.

I unlatch my window and slide it up. “Land sakes, Picket, do you know what time it is?”

“I know,” he says. “I’m so very sorry, but if the others had seen me, they might have tried to stop me. I need your help.”

I cover my mouth while I yawn. “Didn’t the Echinacea tea work?”

“A bit, for a little while, but...” Picket trails off. “I would appreciate it more than anything if you came to the Warren on the night of the full moon.”

I look up at the sky, dressed for the evening in deep blue velvet all covered in shining sequins. The moon would be full in a few days.

“Why the full moon?”

“It will make travelling through the woods safer for you,” says Picket. “Also... We Rabbits say that miracles happen on the night of a full moon. Do you know how to get to the Warren? There’s a fallen-down Tree with three Mushrooms living on it...”

“And then the signs point it out from there, don’t they?” I finish.

“That’s right,” says Picket. “So you’ll come?”

“I reckon I will,” I say. “Though I’m not sure why you’d trust me after I tricked you.”

“Oh, well, that,” Picket stammers. He looks at me from under his eyebrows, and his poor moon-pale face turns pinkish. “You must understand that Rabbits have a great deal of respect for good and proper tricks, and yours was exceptional. I can’t stop thinking about it. We Rabbits might trick each other ten or twenty times if we have a... you know, a... a fancy for one another.”

Oh shucks. I had Rabbit-flirted with Picket without even knowing it. What had I got myself into?

“I want to help,” I say, “but I don’t know if I’ll be able, on account of I don’t know what the trouble is.”

“I know you can help,” Picket says. “You’re the only one who can help; who’s willing to help. Here...” His hand disappears inside his waistcoat, then he reaches a flower up to me at the window. It’s the prettiest little flower, sort of like a Saxifrage, with white petals all speckled with gold, long stamens, and a pair of pink buds in the middle that look like Picket’s ears.

“Wear that when you come to the Warren, in case you get stopped,” Picket advises.

“I’ll keep it in water till then,” I say.

Picket bounds off into the night.

* * *

The moon is a big old lantern lighting my way through the woods. The night birds are singing a beautiful chorus from up in the Trees, passing verses back and forth to one another, harmonizing and chanting rounds, making the woods feel like an enchanted place from a storybook. The Wolves whistle their short ditties, a secret code, somewhere far away. Some Wolves say they feel a kinship with People, but kinship don’t stick when you’re hungry. I walk a little faster.

The deeper I go, the farther away the voices fade. I pass the fallen-down Tree and tip my hat. “Evening, Mushrooms.”

They give me back a funny grumble, which is their way of saying hello.

Glowing Lichen grows all smattered on the Tree trunks and lights up the signposts hammered into the ground, pointing the way to the Warren. The path is a zigzag, and I notice I’m crossing back and forth along my own tracks. Of course the way to the Warren would be confusing and tricky.

I get a start when two figures hop out of the Trees on either side of the path. Lucky thing the moon is out, so I can see their long ears.

“What are you?” says one, and “What do you want?” says the other.

“I’m a Person, and I was invited,” I tell them. I take the pretty little flower from inside my wool-lined coat and hold it out for them to see.

They come close and look at the flower, give it a sniff. Brown eyes share a look.

“Alright,” says one. “You can pass,” says the other. They leap up into the Trees on either side of the path. After a mighty rustling of leaves, I can’t see nor hear either one of them.

I'm glad to walk into the shelter of a big glade, surrounded by enormous Trees with their roots tiptoeing above-ground, like they mean to get up and dance at any moment.

There are Rabbits all around, sitting on Tree roots and Tree branches or else lying on the soft Grass that covers the bowl of the glade. Big saucepan eyes stare at me from every dark corner. Rabbits freeze and chatter stops when I walk past.

I finally spot Picket as he's dashing out from the shade of a Tree root and he flings himself at me.

"You're here!" he cries. His hug fixes my arms to my sides.

"Get off, you fool Rabbit," I chide him. "A gentleman don't just go embracing a lady like that."

"I'm sorry," says Picket. He lets go and starts fidgeting with his shirt cuffs. "I'm just so happy... Quick, you must come with me!"

And just like that, he grabs up my hand and starts dragging me along behind him, out between the Trees surrounding the glade and down another path. The Mushrooms and Lichen out here glow extra bright, with a light blue colour I haven't never seen them glow before. The mirror-smooth surface of a big old pond reflects the funny light back, and everything looks dreamy and strange. It's like the whole pond is in a cave: The heads of the enormous Trees block out

the sky completely, except for a hole in the middle where the moonlight streams down like a waterfall.

“Are you gonna tell me what I’m here for or not?” I say.

We’re stopped at the edge of the pond. Picket just hangs his head.

“It’s my mother,” he whispers. “She’s... very sick.”

“Oh,” I say, guilty for snapping at him now. I squeeze his hand. “I’m sorry, Picket.”

I hear Picket breathe in, and he points out to the middle of the pond. “See that lone Tree out there? Under its roots is the only place that Rabbit Grass grows.”

“There ain’t no such thing as Rabbit Grass!” I cry, yanking my hand out of his. Have I been hornswoggled again?

“There is,” insists Picket. “That part was true. Everything else I said about it was a lie. Well, except that it’s very fickle. That’s true, too.”

“So, how do we get across?” I say with my hands on my hips. There’s no boat that I can see.

“There are safe places to step. I know where they are.” Picket kneels down and peers at me from over his shoulder. “I’ll carry you.”

I climb onto his back. He smells like fresh earth after a rain, and like nutmeg. He stands up with no trouble and leaps out onto the pond. His foot splashes on a shallow knoll or a

rock, whatever's under the water. He jumps from spot to spot, fleet as a Flea, even with me on his back. I know Rabbits are good jumpers, but I never would have guessed just how good.

"What makes it so fickle?" I ask him.

"It refuses to come out of the ground," Picket says. "It might be telling us what it wants in order to oblige, but we can't understand what it's saying. Likewise, we can't tell it what we want."

"And Rabbit Grass must be a powerful cure," I guess. "That's why you need it for your mother."

"Yes," says Picket. "We have stories about Rabbit Grass we're told as wee kits. You can make a soup out of it, fresh, and it will cure anything. That might be a slight exaggeration—you know us Rabbits."

"I surely do."

"But I still believe it has some power, being so rare and fickle, and having so many stories about it. Don't you think?"

"In every lie there's a seed of truth," I quote. "That's what us People say."

The lone Tree is growing on an island in the middle of the pond. Its bare roots make a trellis all around. Picket crawls into the small grotto under the Tree's trunk. I tuck my skirts up over my knees and crawl in after him.

We have to crouch in the grotto. There's that blue Lichen all over the underside of the Tree, lighting up the smooth pad of Grass and the single shrub growing up right in the middle. The long, pointed leaves start spring-green at the bottom and turn rusty red on the way up.

Picket takes hold of the base of the leaves and pulls till his face is all screwed up. The leaves slip out of his hands and he falls onto his back.

"Easy now," I say.

"That's what always happens," Picket says sadly, picking himself up. "It just won't come out."

"Let's have a listen," I say, and I get right down so as my chin's level with the top of the root. Picket gets down, too, with both ears turned towards the Rabbit Grass.

There's a sound not quite like a sound, in my ear closest to the leaves. It reminds me of Picket's scream when the Pigweed got away on him.

"It didn't like you tugging on it," I report.

"I'm sorry, Rabbit Grass," Picket moans. "If I only knew what you wanted. My mother is sick, and I think you can help. Please?"

The Rabbit Grass stops wailing. Its leaves shiver in a way so smallish you'd barely notice. "It's listening. Tell it more about your mother."

“Will it understand?”

“Plants will pick up what you’re feeling. Plants don’t need the meaning of the words, just the words and the feelings under them.”

“Um, my mother is very important to me, Rabbit Grass,” Picket says. “She loves me and my brothers and sisters, and we love her, too. She’s so tricky and clever, and very funny, but then she got sick and now she can’t tell jokes or play tricks anymore. Her fever is a vicious one, and some Rabbits who catch it... don’t make it, you see. But I’ve heard that Rabbit Grass will cool it, if only you’ll let me boil you in a soup. I know I wouldn’t want to be boiled in a soup, but maybe plants enjoy that sort of thing. I don’t know. I just want my mother to get well. I don’t want her to die.”

Tears glimmer in Picket’s eyes and spill down his cheeks, wetting the soil. I blink back tears welling up in my own eyes.

Then, I feel a vibration in the dirt. The roots are trembling with excitement—as excited as plants ever get, being so slow and thoughtful—digging up to get at the soil where Picket’s tears wet it.

“That’s it, Picket,” I say. “It just wants to be watered by your tears.”

“That’s rather cruel,” Picket says with a sniff, wiping his eyes with his hand and then rubbing the tears into the soil.

“I reckon it is a bit,” I say. “But if you’re crying, that means something is really wrong, and maybe the Rabbit Grass don’t want to be bothered unless there’s a real crisis. Try pulling it up now.”

Picket sits up and takes hold of the leaves with both hands. The root comes right up out of the ground.

Picket gives a yelp of joy. “It worked! You did it!”

“We both did it,” I say. I reach into my coat and take out my penknife. “Now we got to replant a bit of the root, so the Rabbit Grass don’t all disappear in one pot of soup.”

Picket hands me the plant. The root is all knobbly and gnarled, like Ginger. I cut off a knob and bury it in the soil.

* * *

Picket carries his wet shoes back to the glade. He leaves them outside a door set into the tiptoeing roots of an enormous Tree. He knocks on the door, then lets himself in. The doorway is wide and squat, so he slides down feet-first. He turns and helps me down into the cellar-ish house.

Picket’s ears just clear the wispy roots hanging from the ceiling. It’s a very cozy little house, with oil lamps burning warm gold. There are stuffed pallets in one corner and a stove in the other, with a chimney snaking out through the spaces in the roots.

Two brown-haired Rabbits are crouched next to a pallet, where a third Rabbit is lying down. I can hear her laboured breathing.

The two brown-haired Rabbits look up, first at Picket, then at me, then at the flower still sticking out of my coat.

Picket holds up the Rabbit Grass and says solemnly, "I've got it. We'll take care of Mother. You two go out and play."

I see the lips on the two brown-haired Rabbits move, but I can't hear what they're saying. Their velvety ears twitch.

"Don't whisper in front of company," Picket chides them.

The two Rabbits looked abashed. They hop up into the doorway, peering at me and the flower all the while.

"Good luck, Picket," says one in a voice even littler than Picket's, and they close the door behind them.

Picket stokes a fire under the stove and pours some water from a jug into a pot.

I crouch down by the Rabbit asleep on the pallet. She's got to be Picket's mother. Her hair is white, and so are her eyebrows and eyelashes. She's got the same round cheeks and pointed chin as most other Rabbits, but there's crinkles around her eyes. I don't think she's very old, but she's lived a lot. Her skin would have been tanned like mine from the sun, but now she looks ashen with fever. There's a dish of water with a wet

cloth by her head. I take up the cloth and start to dab her forehead with it.

Picket is quiet by the stove. The only sounds are from the fire and the chuckling pot, and from the chop of a knife. I can smell nice soup smells, and a mix of herbs and spices pinches at my nose. Pretty soon, Picket's got a bowl of brothy soup full of hunks of the Rabbit Grass root, leaves chopped up all tiny, and specks of spices.

"Let's sit her up," says Picket.

Picket holds her while I stack up cloth and fluff and whatnot behind her head. Then Picket takes a wooden spoon, carved by hand, and gets his mother to wake up a bit and try the soup. Her eyes are bright pink but glazy. When she turns her head to look at me, she must notice my round Person ears, because her eyes twitch with confusion and worry.

"Don't worry, Mother," says Picket. "Aril is here to help."

Picket dips the spoon in the soup and cools it with his breath, then holds it up to his mother's lips. She takes some soup, slow at first, but right before my eyes, she seems to wake up a little more, and even gains the strength to chew up some Rabbit Grass root. Her forehead breaks out in sweat, which I dab away.

“That... might be enough for now, dear,” says Picket’s mother. She sounds weary, but judging by the glistening in Picket’s eyes, I’d say she hadn’t spoken in a long time.

“Alright,” says Picket. “There’s plenty more when you want it.”

She turns to look at me again. She considers me for a moment, and then the flower in my coat. She smiles.

“Lapinium,” she says dreamily. “The same flower your father gave me.”

Picket turns pink right up to his ears. “You must still be feverish, Mother. You should go back to sleep.”

Picket’s mother laughs a little, then closes her eyes and falls into a peaceful doze, her breathing quiet and regular.

* * *

Picket gives my foot a boost to help me climb back in my room through the window. I land just as quiet as I can so as not to wake Mama.

“Thank you,” Picket says at my window. “I can’t really... You don’t know... know what this...”

“I got an inkling,” I say. “But don’t mention it, Picket. Really, don’t mention it. Mama will be sore if she knows I been running around all hours of the night.”

“I won’t say a word,” says Picket. He looks at me from under his eyebrows again. He’s becoming more clear under the

lightening sky. “I suppose it wouldn’t be right of me to keep showing up at your fence...”

“Hogwash,” I say. “Don’t you miss a single day, Mister Picket. I still mustn’t let you into the garden, though.” Picket’s ears drop just a tiny bit. “Mama would never let me hear the end of it if I did. But I’d like it if you came to the fence every day, and we could talk, and I could even teach you how to talk to plants.”

“Then I really could grow my own garden,” says Picket.

“Maybe I could sneak you some seeds, just to get you started.”

The stars are starting to fade in the sky, but Picket’s eyes are all alight. He’s looking up at me, edging closer, like he’s fixing to kiss me. He does look awful sweet right now, and he smells like nutmeg and ginger. He isn’t such a bad Rabbit. I lean down and give him a kiss on his cute little cheek.

Then we look at each other. Picket gets a shy smile on his face. “Are you sure you haven’t snuck me any seeds already?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Seeds of the truth,” says Picket. “Remember how you told me I was a handsome Rabbit? Was there a seed of truth in that lie?”

“I don’t think it’s proper to go discussing such matters so early in the morning,” I say, and I add just before I shut my window, “And who says it was a lie?”

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COVER ART

“Forest,” by Geoffrey Icard



Geoffrey Icard is a French graphic artist with expertise in traditional 2D design and game creation. He has worked as a 2D and 3D artist and concept artist on numerous game development projects and now works as a freelance artist. He prefers environments but always tries to learn and push his characters because he believes environment without life is boring. He is also a gamer and takes inspiration from video games. See more about him and his artwork at geoffreyicard.blogspot.fr and his gallery on deviantArt.com.

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