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FRUIT FROM NOTHING

*House of the azalea, where thorn meets bud;
Brother betrays brother, blood forgets blood.*

—UNKNOWN LITEROMANCER, AZALEA DYNASTY, YEAR 607

My sister Larkspur was the fifth child we buried.

It was a cold and misty dawn as Ma and I climbed the hill out of our village, towards the Ancestors. We carried with us only some incense and a bamboo casket small enough I could tuck it under one arm.

The fifth time had been the easiest. She had been so little when she left us, only three days old. When Ma wept yesterday, when Larkspur's tiny chest had stopped rising, I suspected that she mourned not her daughter but all the extra bowls of rice she'd consumed during her pregnancy, nutrition that was now wasted. Ba didn't even weep. He might have wept, I thought, if Larkspur had been born a boy.

My brother Bao was still young enough to believe dead girls became kittens in their next life. He liked kittens, so he did not weep either.

So it happened that, of all of us, I was the one who mourned Larkspur the most. Not as much as the other times, but I did cry as we lowered the casket on a bed of poppies at the crest of the hill. As I knelt next to the box on the damp soil, I remembered how I had already nicknamed her in my head. Little Lark. I remembered how I had pictured us chasing each other down the drying rice paddies, her delighted laugh as I showed her the best corners to catch catfish. I remembered how I had imagined braiding her hair, as I thought big sisters ought to do, as we giggled and gossiped about the village boys.

After we lit the incense, I kissed the cold crate. I told the Ancestors to take Larkspur to a place where she would never be hungry.

A place, or a time.

I asked the Ancestors to let her be born again earlier. Perhaps when

the Azalea Dynasty was not withering and a dying emperor did not sit the throne. I asked them for a time when the people who ruled over us were still good, and children newly born did not die of a famine nobody knew the cause of.

An earlier time, or perhaps even a later one. When dynasty and emperor and thrones and famine became all a distant memory. I should like Larkspur to be born again then, in a time when all children could learn to read, even poor ones, even girls.

It was not long before the land took her.

Ma and I watched, silent, as tendrils of vines snaked up from the soil and wrapped themselves around the crate. Little white flowers blossomed on the bamboo, and from the canopy above, a nightingale crooned. The country might have forgotten people like us, but the Ancestors still remembered.



For New Year's there was no meat on the table. There was only half an extra bowl of rice porridge for everyone—a whole bowl for Bao, since he was growing—and as many preserved bamboo shoots and spiced radishes as we could want. Bao and I got two prunes each from Ba, who had traded some eggs to one of our neighbors, Uncle Gray.

"Take me to the city," Bao said after lunch, tugging at my skirt as I washed the dishes. "I want a Blessing! Please, I want one!"

I smiled as I ruffled his hair. He was only seven to my sixteen, and the gap in our ages meant I was almost a second mother to him. "It's a far walk, Bao-berry. We could play together at home if you'd like."

I was too hungry to want to make the walk to Guishan. The energy required for the half day's journey could have been spent gathering extra food—foraging for dandelion leaves or catching frogs in the paddies—or resting. But that was not the only reason for my refusal. The more important reason was that I did not want Bao's heart to be broken.

On New Year's, supposedly, representatives from the palace would come to our cities and share their magic with the people. A proverb or two that would help the fields grow lush and fertile, ward our huts from mosquitoes, or heal a child from the gray fever. It was said that an Azalea

House prince had once raised a lake in a drought-stricken town with a poem, and that another, with a ballad, had carved a valley road from Duerlong all the way to Cloud's Landing.

Those were the stories, anyway. I had gone to Guishan every New Year's since I was Bao's age, and I had never seen them come by once. Perhaps another place or another time, the Imperial Houses might have given out Blessings, but I had given up hope for ours.

Bao was not giving up, however. He snuggled up against my side, his brown eyes wide in a way that he knew would move my heart. So I sighed, kissed him on the forehead, and said, "All right, Bao-berry. But you'll have to stay close to me."

I then looked for permission at Ma, who was sitting on a bamboo mat on the floor, mending Ba's trousers. She said, without glancing back at me, "Change into a clean shirt, Wei. And remember to walk like a city girl, the way we've practiced."

I didn't miss the hint in her voice. It was every village mother's dream for her daughter to marry a city boy.



Our knees were aching by the time we felt, through our worn soles, the dirt path turn into the paved cobble of Guishan. But as soon as we were through the gates, I felt myself infected by the excitement of the city, and promptly forgot my hunger and pain.

Though the shadows had turned long, it was so much busier here than back in Lu'an. Festive red lanterns blazed from the sloped eaves of every roof. Vendors hawked dumplings, fried mantou, and clacking wooden toys from every street corner. As we wandered into the city square, we found it so packed with people there was almost nowhere to walk.

It smelled of firecrackers everywhere.

"*Streets of powder and red,*" Bao sang cheerfully, "*means a girl will soon be wed!*"

As we passed through the crowd, my brother's hand in mine, I tried to walk the way Ma taught me to, purposeful and coy. I tried to smile sweetly. Ma might be the one who had the dream first, but she had taught me to have it too.

If I married a city boy, then he might have money. If he had money, then Bao and I would no longer have to feel the dull ache of hunger in our bellies. And maybe Ma would not be sick so much and Ba would not limp with pain as he carried bushels of rice on his shoulders. Maybe the city boy would even have some money left over and Bao could go to school. If Bao went to school he could learn to read, and if he learned to read, he could be anything he liked.

A minister, a merchant, a literomancer.

I realized suddenly that Bao was no longer holding my hand. Panicking, I searched the crowded plaza, and was relieved to find him near a stall that sold glazed hawberries on sticks.

When I came to take his arm again, I saw that his eyes were wide with longing. But he was a smart boy. He knew we had no money, and so he did not even ask.

"Would you like a prune?" I asked him in a hushed, secretive voice, as I pulled him away from the vendor.

His eyes went even wider. "You still have some?"

I gave him my best conspiratorial smile and pulled out one of the dried fruits from my pocket. I had saved both of mine for Bao, knowing how he loved sweet things.

Bao made an excited noise and took it. The precise moment he bit into the prune, a gong shuddered through the city square.

Everyone went very still.

Merchants stopped crying their wares, customers stopped haggling, passersby stopped their conversations. Another ring of a gong startled a flock of sparrows into the sky.

And then the voice of a herald: "Prince Guan Isan! Bringer of Spring, Overseer of Feasts, and Third Son of the Azalea House!"

Bao almost dropped his prune in surprise. My own heart was pounding fast. Prince Isan?

It seemed like a dream, like something that only happened long ago and far away. It was unexpected enough that someone from our Imperial House had actually come to give New Year's Blessings at all. But it wasn't even just any representative.

It was a seal-bearing son of the emperor himself.

The look of wonder on Bao's face was as if he'd just found proof that all

magic was real and all promises were true ones. I was so shocked myself that I didn't even stop to question why a prince hadn't sent a servant in his place but had come to Guishan in person.

The crowd parted to make way for the procession, and I stumbled stupidly back with them. Bao started to climb me to have a better view, and I helped him to sit on my shoulders. I myself could barely see through the layers of people in front of me, all jostling each other to have a look.

When the procession did come into view, there was no mistaking who they were. They were all dressed in a striking red, a red so true it was almost radiant against the brown of the common people and the gray of the city.

It was not just the color that made them stand out, but the sheer *life* they brought with them. Blossoming green vines crawled over their bodies in place of jewelry, lilies unfurled on their hair and their sleeves, and magnolias bloomed along the swords on their backs.

I felt Bao's hand pull at my hair. "Look, sister," he paused sucking on his prune to whisper. "Back there. That's him, isn't it?"

A horse-drawn carriage had appeared from behind the gong, surrounded by eight men on either side. It was made of mahogany wood and draped with wisteria and spring briar. The carriage stopped in the middle of the plaza. A bowing servant reached out and pulled the curtain open, and out stepped Prince Isan into the reverent silence.

I did not know what I expected. In the stories, the children of the House were beautiful and valiant, filial and generous. And though I did wonder where the stories came from, and who had a vested interest in telling them so, I did know them all by heart. If I believed the stories, I might have expected Prince Isan to be beautiful.

If I didn't, I might have expected him to be ugly. The Imperial House was supposed to protect the people from famines. They were supposed to make sure babies were not born small and malnourished and promptly buried. People who were rotten at their hearts, like the sons of the Azalea House, ought to be ugly.

But now that I was seeing him—really seeing him in the flesh—I found that I hadn't the attention to judge his appearance. I was too busy staring at the House Seal, glowing on his left cheek. It was the only thing I could focus on, and no doubt it was what everyone else was staring at too.

The outer ring of the sigil was circular and bore the flower pattern of the Azalea House. There was a single character inscribed within. I could not read, of course, but everyone in Tensha knew the seals of our imperial sons.

“果/Guo,” a man standing beside me whispered to his wife, and a similar murmur spread through the crowd. “The Ancestors’ word for fruit.”

As if in confirmation, Isan raised his hand.

The earth responded right away. The cracks in the cobble beneath our feet groaned and widened as bushes and vines began unfurling out from the dust-trampled ground. Blackberry bushes, mulberry trees, plump grapes on vines all sprang up from the earth. Branches heavy with pears poured out from under the eaves of a nearby store. Peach trees erupted from the gutters, blossomed, and bore fruit, all in the span of a breath.

Bao squealed in delight, then climbed off me to make a dive for a small haw tree. Around us, everyone else was scrambling to pick fruit of their own.

I helped myself to a peach. As I bit into it, it occurred to me that it was the sweetest thing I had tasted in my entire life. It went into my empty belly like fire filling a cold hearth.

And I started weeping uncontrollably.

I wanted to keep hating Isan. I wanted to keep hating the Azalea House for the years that they never came to give their Blessings, for not stopping the famine that killed Larkspur and four of my other siblings, that might possibly still kill Bao. But I found that I could not. I tried very, very hard to summon hatred, but found myself unable to feel anything at all, except for the taste of peach juice in my mouth.

“I have come to Guishan to celebrate the Year of the Dragon.” Isan’s bright voice rang through the plaza, pulling the crowd’s attention back to him. “I am here to give Blessings to the people, and make one request. First, the Blessings.”

At his command, the officials and servants in red livery all produced strings of firecrackers and lit them. They burst into deafening crackles, and through the smoke, tiny red papers fluttered over the city square like quince blossoms in spring.

“Catch one, sister! Catch one for me!” Bao cried, and then I was

scrambling, like everybody else, to get my hands on one. But I didn't have to fight for it. There were plenty to go around.

I managed to catch two slips in the end, each inked with a glowing four-character proverb. I gave both to Bao, who laughed like a toddler and bounced up and down. He shoved them into his pocket and threw his arms around me in a hug.

"What do you think they are?" he asked, eyes so shiny with excitement that I couldn't help but smile back.

"I don't know. We'll have to find out when we get home, won't we?"

He looked about to burst with impatience. "We can ask someone here. Someone in Guishan will know how to read. I don't wanna wait—"

"Now the request," Prince Isan announced, sending the crowd into a renewed hush. "As you may be aware, my father has recently changed his chosen successor. The heir of the Azalea House is no longer my eldest brother, Maro, but my second brother, Terren. As part of his new duties, Prince Terren has begun a search for concubines. All interested candidates between the ages of fifteen and nineteen should gather in this square for appraisals, one week from now at noon."

This announcement, even more so than the Blessings, sent the crowd into a chattering frenzy.

Everyone here knew of Isan and his Guo seal, but there was not a soul in Tensha who did not fear Prince Terren and his Dao sigil. Prince Terren, whose affinity for blades made him the most powerful man in the nation. Prince Terren, terrifying and ruthless and cruel, who was to inherit the throne after his father's death.

Nobody knew for sure why the ailing emperor had suddenly named his second son heir, but it was certainly not for Terren's character. I had heard that he would have a servant flayed for merely spilling his tea. I had heard that he would have a dog slaughtered if it so much as barked at him as he passed, that he would have a maid's tongue cut off if only she forgot to address him by his proper title.

I had heard that he killed his own mother.

But watching the crowd, it was clear that nobody was thinking of those whispers. Or if they were, they did not care. All they had heard in that speech was an opportunity.

"Sister?" Bao tugged at my arm.

And, it terrified me to admit, so had I. I ran my hand through my brother's hair absently as I stared at the retreating procession. It terrified me that I was not thinking of Prince Terren's cruelty, of flayings or slaughtered dogs or cut-off tongues.

I was thinking of full bellies, and nights on soft beds, and little sisters who did not have to be buried.

I was thinking of Ma's hollow cheeks filled in and of Ba's pain getting fixed. With the gifts I might receive as a favored concubine, we could buy anything we wanted, even prunes on days that were not New Year's.

"I wanna go home," Bao pressed. He was tugging at my arm again. "I wanna try the Blessings. Please please please?"

I was thinking of Bao going to school. Going to school and learning to read. I was thinking of Bao leaving the famished village life behind and becoming whatever he wished.

My hand closed around my little brother's, and for a brief moment, I let myself imagine a future as sweet as the peach juice lingering on my tongue.

POWER AND GREATNESS

Ma took to the idea right away, and even got the whole village excited.

For the next week she collected gifts from everyone in Lu'an. New shoes from Aunt Lien, necklaces of beads and daisies from Grandpa Cai's sons, more dried prunes from Uncle Gray. They would all go in my basket of offerings, the day I was to get appraised to be Prince Terren's concubine.

In Tensha, one did not borrow. One gave what one could, always. The idea was that if I became a concubine, I would have so much more to give. The whole village was counting on me for that.

For the next week, I learned and learned again how generous my neighbors and friends were. I was managing pretty well to hold in my tears until the two Rui sisters showed up at our door with their goat on a leash.

"Myrna gives great milk," said Rui Fan, her sun-leathered cheeks tugging into a smile.

"Fresh and sweet," said Rui Shina. "I think Prince Terren will love it."

Then I couldn't keep it together anymore, because I knew Myrna's milk was not supposed to be for me. It was supposed to be for the Rui family's youngest son, because we all knew that the milk was the only reason Rui Dan had so much energy to run around and play. "I can't accept this," I said between sobs. "Keep her for Dan, I beg you, for him to grow up lively and strong."

But they kept shoving Myrna's lead into my arms, and in Tensha when somebody insisted three times it became rude to refuse.

The evening before I was to go into town for the appraisal, all the villagers from Lu'an gathered on the hill where the Ancestors lived, where Larkspur and the other siblings and so many others were buried, where ghosts

sometimes roamed. We sat together in the clearing in the larch grove on the hill, where wild poppies grew, and we all lit red lanterns and let them float into the sky.

For the moment, we forgot how hungry we were. Bao wrestled with the other kids, with Obe and Sangka, and even Ma was all smiles as she chatted with Aunt Raia and Shu Monshu. Ba was sitting solemn next to Uncle Gao, but I was not solemn, I was laughing and dancing. I danced first with Rui Fan, our bare feet stepping in rhythm, and then with Cai Xi'er, my farm-hardened hands entwined in his.

I felt powerful.

The only other time our village had gathered together like this was when we were sending off the Har family's youngest son, ten years ago. Har Asori had always been a bright child. He had snuck into the city more than once to steal lessons from behind the school's fence. Everybody had given what they could to send Har Asori to study in the capital.

Asori wrote us letters every year. None of us could read them, but the Har family kept them all still, and passed them around every so often so that we could all have a look at the beautiful calligraphed characters. Asori held that kind of power, the power that allowed others to believe there was a life beyond death and hunger. And now I had it too.

Later that night, Bao declared, "It's literomancy time!" and we all stopped our festivities and turned to look at him.

His grin was as wide as a young moon as he pulled out the two slips of paper Prince Isan had given us. As impatient as he had been to see what Blessings they contained, I'd managed to convince him to save them until tonight, when we could cast them in front of everyone. When one had magic, it ought to be shared.

Grandpa Har did the honors. His grandson was the one who had gone to school, after all. We all leaned over as the old man traced the four characters from one of the slips in the damp soil with a stick. His handwriting was shaky, unpracticed and uncertain. But he was very careful about it. I could hear everybody else hold their breath, just like I did, as Grandpa finished the last stroke.

Was his penmanship good enough? Was Prince Isan's intent strong enough? Would our Ancestors accept the words?

My doubt only lasted a heartbeat, because the effect was immediate.

The slip of paper Grandpa had been holding dissolved into dust. The characters on the earth flashed with light. The flash coalesced into a tiny spark, and the spark streaked across the ground, through the dirt and grass, all the way to the edge of the hill to where we had buried my youngest sister.

From that spark in the earth, something started to grow. Just a sapling at first, but soon a young tree. We all laughed and yelled like little children once we recognized its leaves as those of a peach tree. A Blessing was not *pure* magic, the kind Isan had demonstrated in the city earlier, so it did not immediately bear fruit.

But our hearts still soared. We knew that this tree was magic enough, at least, to withstand the blight. We knew it would bear fruit for us in the years to come and that we needed only be patient.

"The next one!" Bao yelled, delighted. "The next!" He held out the other slip.

Again Grandpa Har traced the characters into the earth. Again there was a flash.

This time, the glow traveled, unexpectedly, to Bao. We all fell into hushed silence as we watched it climb up his leg, to his heart, stay there for a brief moment, and vanish.

Everybody was staring. My brother was staring at *himself*, his chin resting right against his collarbone, his eyes bug-wide.

"The Blessing went to Yin Bao," said Shina. She was stating the obvious, of course, but that was fine because that was what we were all thinking.

"Well?" Ma said after a while. "Do you feel any different?"

Bao, who looked still very surprised, shook his head.

"It's a sign," Ba announced decisively, standing. When something strange happened in a small village, whichever interpretation was stated with the most authority tended to stick. And Ba put much authority in his voice as he proclaimed, "My son will grow up to be a great man in the future. Perhaps one who will change the world."



Later that night, Ma surprised me by coming to my bedside. I had been asleep, but my eyes fluttered open when I felt somebody's hands fold over mine.

"Ma?" I whispered.

I was surprised to find her crying softly.

I sat up and cupped her thin cheeks. "Ma, everything will be all right. I promise." I had no idea why she was weeping on a night of celebration. We had Isan's peach tree, and Bao had the other Blessing, and I was possibly going to be a concubine.

She was too sad to speak, but finally she swallowed and whispered, "What if he hurts you? What if he kills you?"

I blinked. "Prince Terren?" All the stories of cruelty, of death, tied to his name. "I'll be careful, Ma. I was raised by you and Ba, after all—and you have made me very clever." I hoped the praise directed at her would please her.

"You don't have to go, you know," she said, voice as fragile as fallen petals. "You can still change your mind."

It was then that I realized Ma loved me.

I mean, I did know, but I had always thought she loved me the way any mother in Tensha loved their daughters. They loved them, then they sent them away to marry somebody from a better family, then they loved them a little less.

But I didn't know she loved me in *this* way. In a way that, if it meant I could be hurt, she would not wish me to be a concubine of Prince Terren's, or join the palace, or bring our family wealth with his gifts. I had no idea she could ever prefer that I stay.

And she was right. I could still change my mind. I could try to marry a city boy instead and bring my family out of poverty slowly instead of all at once, one copper or bowl of rice at a time.

But then I remembered all the people of my village gathered earlier, on the hill, their eyes glittering as they reflected the lanterns in the sky. I remembered feeling powerful. I imagined all the things Bao could be if he could go to school and learn to read, and I knew at once I could not choose anything else.

I kissed Ma on the cheek and lied. "I am not afraid of Prince Terren or of the Azalea House. I am not afraid of anything."

THE JOKE OF GUSHAN

I may have felt powerful that night, but when the sun was high the next day, when we entered the city square with our basket of gifts and Myrna on a leash, I felt a fool.

I was far from the only candidate there vying for Prince Terren's attention. The fact should not have surprised me, but it did. The whole plaza was filled with young women, at least several dozen. And they were all far better than me—this was the truth, not false modesty.

They were city girls, not girls brought up on the rice paddies. Their skin was not sun-leathered, their cheeks not hollowed, their lips uncharred. Their baskets were filled not with baked buns and prunes, but with flowers, precious stones, and silk cloths.

How could I have ever thought Prince Terren would want me for his court?

My family, who was with me, seemed to have the same worries. Especially Ma. Ma's lips went into a thin line as her eyes traveled over the other candidates' clean, dyed gowns, their sturdy shoes, their painted nails. I had done my hair in braids for the occasion, but their hair, pinned up in the fashion of the city, made mine seem crude by comparison.

One of the girls near me, who had clearly darkened her brows with ink, actually laughed at us as we passed by.

"He stinks," her companion said, jabbing a finger at Ba. Everyone around her burst into giggles so falsely dainty that I felt my blood heat.

Bao's hands balled into tiny fists, but I held him firm. I was angry myself—it nearly broke my heart, watching Ba limp with his shoulders