

## Best Served Hot

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# Best Served Hot

by [JackOfNone](#)

## Summary

I thought, when the girl barged in nearly begging us to ruin her wedding, that we were in for a lighthearted romp, something I could tell to delight the children back home. With Master Li, though, nothing is ever quite that simple.

## Notes

This story was inspired mostly by my roommate doing some reading about the history of tea, and telling me about tea brick production and how some tea bricks used some very unusual things as binding agents so that they would survive trade :) I'll admit that I did not have time to do a great deal of research so historical accuracy is not really one of this story's virtues, I'm afraid, but I tried to capture some of the spirit of the original.

Happy Yuletide!

It's customary, I understand, to begin these sorts of things with some anecdote about the weather. Besides setting the mood quite nicely, it provides the opportunity to either lament the callous indifference of nature or wax poetic about the natural sympathy that causes the heavens themselves to weep for your troubles or stream sunlight down upon your joys.

I'm not a poet, though, and to be quite frank I honestly can't remember what the weather was like that day, so instead I will begin this story in the same way I begin all my stories — by telling you that the affair began at midday and Master Li Kao was already drunk. All my stories begin this way because it is nearly always true.

I had spent most of the morning going from establishment to establishment in this town where we'd settled briefly in our travels, banging on the door and demanding that the inhabitants pay out what they owed Master Li. Apparently he had wrangled half the district into making him some kind of monetary bet that he was all but guaranteed to win — a proof of concept, he called it, though I'd think the concept of "anyone can be talked into anything" would have been proved to Master Li's satisfaction a thousand times over by now. He'd called me over to collect on their debts because I was big enough to be intimidating but inoffensive enough that even people who thought nothing of a tussle in the street with a fellow twice their size would go out of their way to avoid fighting with me. By the time I returned to the mostly-empty stable where we had been sleeping, I was carrying a full satchel of coins, an obviously expensive inlaid hairpin, and a bamboo cage containing a fighting cricket with slightly more wins than losses.

"Put it on the table," Master Li said, without even raising his head from where he'd lain down in a pile of sacks with his now-empty wine jug. I set the coin purse and the cricket cage and the hairpin on the table, which was really more of a wobbly plank laid across two rocks. "I can hear by that delightfully solid thunk that you have done well."

I opened my mouth to say something, but I was interrupted almost immediately by someone jangling the chimes outside Master Li's shop. Master Li made a vague gesture indicating that I should see who was at the door, so I trotted to the window.

There was a fetching creature at the door, her face only halfway concealed by the veil she'd drawn over her face and the hat that shaded her aristocratic brow.

"Describe our new client," Master Li asked. "You are a fantastic judge of character."

"It's...it's a woman," I said. "She's...not very tall," I managed.

"Well, Confucius tells us that the gods accept the blemished and unblemished cattle alike. Let the lady in."

I didn't have to let her in, as it turned out. She opened the door on her own and barged in, sliding the door shut behind her.

Master Li finally sat up, pushing himself up on his elbows to look at her. He didn't make any move to meet her, so she sat down of her own initiative. The fighting cricket hopped in its

cage and chirped shrilly as she folded her hands and leaned over the table.

“They say you’re the man to come to when a problem needs solving,” she said. Her eyes slid over to me with a calculating gaze that made me blush; I sat down on the floor.

Master Li grinned. “Is that what they’re saying now?”

“In between the curses.” She pulled off her hat, and I finally got a good look at her. I caught my breath — I recognized her! I’d seen her once or twice while running errands in the city — a rich man’s daughter, she was, and I’d always seen her in the company of a young man I assumed to be her twin brother, because they looked as alike as two stars in the sky. Her mother had died young and as a result, she was closer to her beautiful brother than anyone else in the world, and a more joyful pair you could not hope to meet. I only knew her as Laughing Pearl, for that is what everyone called her.

I also knew that she had vanished in the night and hadn’t been seen for at least two days now.

She tapped the cricket’s cage again and bit her lip. “I need you to get me out of being married,” she said. Master Li sighed.

“I’m afraid I haven’t ruined a runaway girl’s wedding since my hair was black, Miss Pearl,” he said, sliding over to the table. A jug of wine had appeared in his hand, and this one was full. Where he got it, I have no idea. “Which was, indeed, a very long time ago. What’s the trouble with your match, hm?” He started to tick things off on his fingers. “Is he old and feeble? If so, the gods themselves will sort that one out sooner than you can blink. Is he ugly? I daresay you’ll find him an attentive husband, as an ugly man without money knows that he needs to keep the wife he gets, and if he’s rich then there is no better comfort than luxury. Is he young and handsome but cruel and rageful? Then I have a bottle of scorpion venom that perfectly mimics the symptoms of bone-chill fever and I’m willing to sell it to you for an eminently reasonable price.”

The girl shifted and clasped her hands. “No. It’s...its not that. I am to wed Widower Cheng.”

Master Li raised an eyebrow. I couldn’t help myself — Widower Cheng? His name was all I’d heard since we arrived here two weeks ago! Though he was called a widower, he was young — his wife had died young and he’d become something of a recluse. He lived at the very edge of the province and oversaw the production of some of the finest and most sought-after tea in the area — thick and hearty and with the most amazing color, or so I’m told by those in the know, the kind of solid tea that warms you to your very bones and that the barbarians will throw themselves at your feet for.

“But...Widower Cheng, really?” I said. “All the girls here are sighing for him! He’s young, he’s handsome, he’s gentle as a kitten and courteous, and he’s even rich, or so they say —“

“He is kind,” Laughing Pearl said. “And handsome. And even rich. He is a perfect match.” She looked dubious. “But..”

Master Li raised an eyebrow. “But what?”

“But his tea tastes wrong!” she blurted out. I stared at her, and she bit her lip again.

“But there isn’t a man in the whole province who knows more about tea than he does,” I said. She nodded solemnly.

“A man who serves his prospective wife inferior tea...” Master Li said thoughtfully. “Perhaps it indicates stinginess, but I see no reason to—“

“You’re a learned man, Master Li Kao, or so they say even when they are insulting you. Perhaps you have heard that a gentleman can hardly help learning everything about a man merely from observing him in conversation once? I don’t claim to be a gentleman, but...a man’s heart, they say, is in his work. I took a single sip of his tea and I couldn’t bear to face him again. I ran away immediately.”

Master Li looked at her for a very long time. I started to fidget uncomfortably.

“Very well,” he said finally, more solemnly than his drunken state would have implied. “How long do we have to ruin your wedding?” Apparently my participation was assumed. I coughed politely but he ignored me.

“Two weeks,” said Laughing Pearl. Master Li grinned again.

“Two weeks? By Heaven, girl! Given two weeks, I could ruin a hundred weddings.”

And that was how we ended up in a small orchard outside of town with a pair of shovels, in the middle of the night, both of us dressed as monks. I was so worried about the blasphemy involved that I didn’t notice the sack Master Li was carrying contained a live cat until the moon rose.

\* \* \*

There’s a saying that storytellers have: when in doubt, skip directly to the corpse. Even the most pious of folk is really only listening to the mystery to hear about a terrible crime and to see the criminal dreadfully punished in the end. The rest of it is merely to build suspense for one or the other. Sometimes, I wonder if the universe is writing our story out — if some heavenly scribe is looking down upon us and penning our tale for the amusement of the spirits, regaling the rest of the gods with tales of our exploits.

I bring up these things because our story started as a caper. As soon as the lady left, Master Li and I made plans. We were going to impersonate ghosts. We had a bag of rice flour and animals of ill import and Master Li had even concocted a way to fake an out of season snowfall. We were going to look back on this and laugh at our ingenuity.

The orchard-keeper apparently owed Master Li a begrudging favor from years ago. He was selling a barrell of lychees to the father of Laughing Pearl and Master Li had badgered the fellow into letting him douse the roots of the tree with some concoction that would make the fruits bleed bright red the instant the cleaver touched them. The orchard keeper allowed it and promised his silence but wouldn’t have anything to do with the application; that we had to do ourselves, in the dead of night, with shovels.

The moon was beating down on us, the cat was starting to wake up and yowl softly, and I had just cracked into the ground with my shovel with Master Li perched on my shoulders directing where I should dig. The lip of the shovel disappeared into the earth, where it struck something solid. Thinking I had struck a root despite Master Li's explicit instructions to the contrary, I hastily withdrew the spade.

In the moonlight, I could see something wet and dark coating the tip of it. Master Li leaned over my shoulder and rubbed his fingers through the smear. He was very quiet for a moment, holding his hand out in front of me so that I could see them.

"Did...did I strike the root?" I asked, fearing I had once again blundered the whole plan. Behind me, Master Li shook his head and dropped the sack with the cat in it with a thud and a meow. The creature woke up immediately and busied itself with clawing its way out.

"Number Ten Ox," he said, solemnly. "Not unless we've run into a supernatural omen ourselves. That's blood, I'd swear my life on it."

I went pale and set about digging in the spot where I'd stuck the shovel in initially. Within the hour I was staring at the pale corpse of none other than Laughing Pearl's twin brother, his beautiful face bloodless and his delicate throat slashed open with a knife. I winced as I saw the hollow wound that my shovel had struck in his forehead.

Master Li clambered off my back and I bent down to examine the unfortunate's corpse, dumbfounded. I stuck out my hand to close the poor boy's eyes, and drew it back with a yelp as something sharp and fast as lightning skipped off the back of my hand. I stuck my bleeding hand into my mouth to staunch it and glanced over to see Master Li crouched in a fighting stance, a knife at the ready between his fingers. On the other side of the body, pinioned by one of these throwing daggers, was a black scorpion easily the size of my entire hand's breadth. Black blood seeped out from beneath it.

"Master Li...what's going on?" I asked. He waited a long time before sliding his brace of knives back into the sleeve of his robe.

"What's going on is that I should have known better than to take a case on the word of an innocent young girl," he said. The scorpion started to dissolve into black ichor, staining the ground and steaming. "They have far too keen a nose for wickedness. It wasn't the slit throat that killed this boy. It was poison. Black magic. *Gu* sorcery, Ox."

We carried the poor boy back to Master Li's in silence. I never did find out what the cat was for.

\* \* \*

Laughing Pearl wailed and flung herself over the body of her brother before either of us could stop her. I didn't want her embracing the corpse, as it was according to Master Li, infested on a spiritual level and continually oozed fitful drops of black blood that would form themselves into a scorpion or a viper.

I shouldn't have worried; Laughing Pearl (whose name had never seen less appropriate than right now), started at the feel of something crawling on her hand, threw a small spider to the ground and stomped on it with a growl of anger. It crumbled into ash and left a smear of black on her slipper.

"You haven't taken him to the magistrate," she said, her eyes full of tears. Master Li shook his head.

"There's poison and sorcery at play here — not something I'd leave to a magistrate. A Celestial Master, perhaps, or a very wise man at the very least, but magistrates and wise men are two groups who so very rarely overlap. I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me. And besides, how are we to explain how we came by your brother in the first place? We'd have to dodge charges of trespassing, which shall turn our attention from your impending wedding, and none of our problems will be solved. Your brother's ghost will be far better off being settled here."

I did not have the same confidence that Master Li affected. I had touched one of the tiny vipers in the transport of the unfortunate twin of Laughing Pearl, and it had chilled me to the bone and filled me with a nameless sense of dread. It was foul magic at work, all right, and I would be glad to be quit of it.

"It's Widower Cheng," Laughing Pearl said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I know it is. His heart is in his tea and it left a foul taste in my mouth."

"We shouldn't be hasty," Master Li said. "This is a very serious matter. This will require more investigation. It's not that I doubt you, but--"

Laughing Pearl glared at him. "I don't claim to be a gentleman, or a master of deduction, Master Li Kao, but..." she narrowed her eyes. "I do claim to be the best judge of taste anywhere within three provinces."

I went over to the little table where our winnings from Master Li's bet yesterday morning still lay.

"Master Li," I said, as quietly as I had ever spoken. "I think she may be right."

The little cricket with slightly more wins than losses was curled up on its back, quite soundly dead. Its tiny black eyes were glossed over with a red film and a strange pattern of black had permeated its carapace, shriveling it and twisting it into odd shapes. When we left last night, it had been hopping and chirping as cheerfully as you please.

"Widower Cheng loves raising crickets," I said, "but he's said to be too gentle-hearted to watch the fights, even though the beasts are rarely even wounded."

"Whose cricket did this one lose to last?" Master Li said, though I had a feeling he already knew the answer. He shook the cage in which our prize's shriveled husk lay. As he did, it crumbled into red and black dust.

"Widower Cheng," I said.

Many years later, when I finally saw Laughing Pearl again, the first thing she said to me was “I told you so”. At the moment, she was far too distraught to gloat.

\* \* \*

Widower Cheng’s tea processing house was very poorly guarded by a single armed man who was already half asleep when we got there. He was a largish fellow, with a nose that had been broken a few times and a scar on his ear, but he was clearly not expecting an attack and after only a few moments of struggling he was laid out on the ground. A liberal dose of medicine into his gaping mouth ensured that he would sleep soundly until morning.

“A warehouse full of fine quality tea bricks that the barbarians will pay for in gold and weapons,” Master Li said. I trotted inside carrying him on my shoulders after sliding aside the door. It was barred, but that posed no particular barrier to me. “And it guarded by a single fellow with a staff.”

“It’s said that the bandits here would rather rob the Buddha himself than Widower Cheng, due to his kindness,” I said. Master Li shrugged languidly.

“I’ve never seen a bandit deterred by kindness — only fear, and in the case of the Buddha himself, a lack of anything worth stealing and the terrible danger of enlightenment. Set me down.” I did so.

Inside it was dark as pitch, but the moon was still out and my night vision has always been good. There were monstrous drums of liquid lining the walls, and the entire place was filled to the brim with presses and molds, drying racks and grindstones. The smell of ground tea was almost nauseatingly thick in the air, though my nose picked up the coppery scent of blood below it. It’s said that some folk use ox blood to bind their tea into bricks, but I thought of Laughing Pearl’s poor brother and shuddered. There was a coldness in the air that made all the hair on the back of my neck stand up on end.

Master Li moved over to inspect one of the drums. I busied myself looking at one of the presses, still not sure what I was searching for. Unfortunately, it found me first.

I heard it before I saw it. A skittering sound, like the scratch of claw on stone. I whirled my head around as Master Li yelled something I barely caught, just in time to have the creature careen into me at what seemed like a breakneck pace. It had fallen on me from above — something as big as a dog, chattering and clicking like a bag of shattered porcelain. I am not ashamed to say it — I screamed. It responded with a screech that drowned out even my shriek of terror and something sharp stabbed into my arm. I lashed out blindly and felt my fists strike something hard — armor?

No, I realized, as my hand closed around a hairy, chitinous leg as big around as the handle of a pot. Not armor.

An insect.

The powerful back legs of the creature kicked and scratched at me as I struggled to free my arm from its powerful jaws. It was hard to make out its form, because it was black as night,

with red eyes that caught every scrap of light and refracted it into unwholesome colors. I struck at its face and was rewarded with a spurt of black-and-purple ichor all over my hand, which seared like fire.

It unlatched its jaws and reared back, its back legs twitching as it let out another shriek. A cricket, I thought wildly. A cricket the size of a dog that spat poison.

So this was the kindness of Widower Cheng that kept the bandits away. His pure-bred fighting cricket, bloated with the murder of every little insect it had faced in battle.

I gritted my teeth against the pain and kicked at the creature's underbelly hard enough to send it flying. It crashed heavily into a tea brick press, knocking it over, and it flailed with its legs in the air for a moment trying to right itself.

"Master Li!" I yelled, not caring who heard. There was no sign of him, and I hoped that I'd tied up the monster's attention for long enough that it hadn't gotten to him first. The creature flipped the right way up, and with a click of its legs it leapt into the air higher than I can see. I ran and ducked under a drying rack, and the creature landed on it hard enough to rattle the whole thing. I groped blindly for a weapon, and my hand fell on half of a grindstone; it was heavy, but I heaved it into the air and brought it crashing down upon the creature's head. It screeched when I hit it -- a more unearthly screech I have never heard. I dropped the grindstone entirely, cracking the drying rack under its weight, and crouched down with my hands covering my ears. I watched in horror as it kicked and squirmed, not dead in the slightest, but there was a blur of movement from somewhere behind the drums. Master Li was on the creature in a moment, upending a bag full of something black and squirming. The creature shrieked again, and then went silent. When the black and squirming mass finally dispersed, there was nothing left.

"*Gu* sorcerers will take something that crawls and force it to devour the most poisonous of beasts," he said quietly. "The poison will ferment in its belly and it will grow so venomous that it becomes a demon."

Something crawled across my foot -- I started and kicked it off. "Centipedes?" I asked him. Master Li nodded.

"The only way to fight *gu* poison is with poison of a different sort," he said. "There's enough blood in that vat to drown a man. I took a vial of it."

"What do we do now?"

"Take it to Laughing Pearl and hope that it's oxen," he said.

\* \* \*

Laughing Pearl shed a single tear when she held the vial up to her nose.

"Oh, dearest," she sighed. "Ah, that we should be separated like this!"

"I take it that the blood we found did not come from a yak," Master Li said. I felt sick, so I said nothing. The girl set the vial down as though it burned her. "Tea bricks made with human blood, sold to barbarian and aristocrat alike riddled with blasphemy and curses," Master Li went on. "We have every indication that Widower Cheng is a monster."

"Surely the magistrate will believe us now?" Laughing Pearl asked. Master Li only laughed bitterly.

"You've seen how Widower Cheng has poisoned the mind as well as body. There isn't a soul in this city who will believe us if we denounced the fellow!"

"We have evidence," I volunteered, but Master Li shook his head and began to tick our assets off on his fingers.

"We have a vial of blood that could easily be anyone or anything's, the word of a girl and a pair of strangers, and a corpse that we could easily have made ourselves. Oh, and a few injuries from our struggle with a venomous giant cricket, which no one has seen but we two vagrants. We haven't enough evidence to convince a drunk to buy a bowl of wine, let alone convince a magistrate who nearly worships the ground Widower Cheng walks on."

"What more do we need?" I asked, throwing up my hands in despair. "Do you want me to find one of his accursed *gu* creatures and bring it to court on a leash?" My heart was sick — were we to be finally defeated by the politeness of a wicked sorcerer? I didn't want to leave Laughing Pearl to her fate — who knows what awaited her in the kindly embrace of her prospective groom.

"Well, we do have one more asset on our side," Master Li said, his eyes sliding over to Laughing Pearl. She bit her lip. "The magistrate's weaknesses."

Laughing Pearl had told us a bit about the magistrate of the town.

Like many rich men, the magistrate here was legendary for not being able to clearly distinguish good from bad except by how much it cost. He would pay for the most expensive silks without having the refinement to see how beautiful they looked on his wife, pay the most extravagant fees for artists whose work he could not distinguish from that of students, and import the finest ingredients for his banquets despite the fact that he could hardly tell a boiled silkworm from a bundle of rice if he were blindfolded and not looking at a bill of sale.

Though he loved Widower Cheng as everyone else in the township did, the man's vanity was greater even than the manipulations of a sorcerer. If someone dared to challenge the stranglehold of Widower Cheng — if even a stranger implied that Cheng's tea was not in fact the finest in the land — he would call in an impartial judge to make certain that their town's reputation held. The greatest authority in matters of taste in the entire province? The magistrate's own chef, whom he had procured at a high price from a wealthy princeling in the capital.

"Number Ten Ox," said Master Li. "How quickly do you think you could make yourself into a credible tea merchant?"

“What?” I said. Master Li nodded.

“Very well. I’ll be the tea merchant, and you’ll drag the cart. And you, young lady...” he said, looking at Laughing Pearl, “we have a very special job for you.”

\* \* \*

I am not proud to admit that I think I was more terrified when I found myself in the middle of the market wearing a false beard than I was when grappling the monster in Cheng's production house. I could feel my palms sweat around the walking stick I was holding. I have never been good with lying, and I was dead certain that anyone looking at me could see right through my disguise.

Master Li, with a plaster nose and his eyes rubbed with pepper to appear weepy and a horsehair wig, had set up a block in an unoccupied spot in the market and started, in a high pitched and nasal voice that was quite different from his ordinary tone, to proclaim the virtues of his particular tea. He had three cakes that we’d pressed the night before from soot and clover — a reasonable facsimile, unless you tasted it of course.

“Extends life! Greatest in the world!” Master Li whined. I held my staff and looked out at the crowd, my eyes thankfully shaded by a hat. “Banishes the cough, kills intestinal worms, shrinks boils, clears cataracts, why...it even mends a broken heart!” By now a small crowd of passersby had gathered, and Master Li harangued them, gesticulating wildly.

“There’s no greater tea in the world than Widower Cheng’s!” yelled someone from the back. Master Li spat on the ground.

“Bah!” he said. “You’re only saying that because he grew up here! I’ll bet a brick of my finest that you’ve never even had anything else to compare! Let that home-brewed simpleton come and test me — I have traveled the world and found nothing that will compare to mine.”

A man in the front row tried to argue, but Master Li really *had* travelled the world, or at least could plausibly improvise enough knowledge to seem learned to the crowd. He was just building his story to a climax when he looked up, and winked at me briefly.

“Perfect timing,” he breathed, and I nodded.

The crowd parted to the east for the litter of the magistrate himself, en route to court.

The crowd parted to the west for the arrival of Widower Cheng, dressed in a somber robe and hat and carrying a horsewhip. He had clearly just come from his production house, and I could see he was on edge. He was a tall man, handsome in an unassuming way, with a finely groomed beard and soft grey eyes and ruddy cheeks. He like the sort of person who might become your greatest friend after sharing a single jug of wine.

I pointed my staff at him, on cue. “Are you the man they call Widower Cheng?” I boomed. He bowed.

“Your humble servant,” he said. His voice was so mild that I almost felt my resolve melting, but then I remembered the gruesomely slit throat of Laughing Pearl’s twin brother. “Forgive me, but I could not help but overhear your comments about my tea.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “They say you’re the best in the world,” I said, and Widower Cheng shrugged.

“Truth and rumor are so rarely friends,” he said, with such genuine-sounding modesty that I had to close my eyes and think of Laughing Pearl’s beautiful eyes filled with tears and despair.

Master Li hopped down from his block and shook his finger at Widower Cheng. “Come now,” he said. “Even the man himself admits that he is not the greatest.”

“How much are you asking for your tea?” came a smooth voice from somewhere inside the litter.

Master Li grinned, and quoted a price that was easily triple Widower Cheng’s.

There was a long silence — long enough that the crowd began to murmur. Widower Cheng cocked his head and waited politely for the magistrate to speak. It was faint, but I thought I detected a note of smugness in his gentle smile.

“Fetch one of my cook’s apprentices,” the magistrate finally said. “And we shall see.”

*The cook is a genius, but indolent and lazy, Master Li had explained to me. He wakes at midday to begin preparing for the Magistrate’s supper, and goes to bed at sunset after he’s finished. He has three boys who help him, each with the potential to be a gourmand of unparalleled skill, but he runs them ragged and even if they could pick out the blood, they’re in the pocket of Widower Cheng.*

They sent a runner to find an apprentice of the magistrate’s cook, while Master Li harangued a serene and still-slightly-smug Cheng. The runner returned with the youngest one, his robe still smeared with sauce and his face white with rice flour, with a scarf tied over his face to block out the smoke.

Underneath the official palace livery and the scarf, I immediately recognized Laughing Pearl. Her eyes danced to me before settling hatefully on Widower Cheng.

The tea was toasted, ground, whisked, and set before Laughing Pearl. The color of Widower Cheng’s tea was magnificent. I don’t think I’ve ever seen its like.

Laughing Pearl lifted the cup of our clover-and-ash tea to her mouth below the scarf and took a thoughtful sip.

“Clover,” she said, spilling the cup. The crowd laughed uproariously as Laughing Pearl lifted the other cup — the one with Widower Cheng’s tea. I could see her hand trembling as she lifted it to her lips.

Her scream was high and piercing, and she threw the cup to the ground. The crowd's laughter died instantly as she wavered on her feet and fell, coughing and sputtering.

"Blood! Human blood!" she cried out. Her distress was all the more convincing for it being genuine. "Murder! Poison!"

Widower Cheng started to protest but it was too late — some flunky of the Magistrate had already grabbed one of his tea bricks to take to the indolent chef and Laughing Pearl had vanished into the crowd, half crying and half laughing.

The flunkies of the magistrate expected, I think, that the head cook — whose palette was perhaps even more sensitive than Laughing Pearl's — would taste Widower Cheng's tea and declare the whole thing a hoax perpetrated by a young boy's overactive imagination, perhaps mistaking ox blood for human. What they didn't count on was the fact that the cook was a confessed misanthrope who hated Widower Cheng on principle and wasn't particularly inclined to lie on his behalf. In fact, I think I can say with certainty that the head cook's palette was more refined, because he not only identified the binding agent in the brick as the blood of a man, but he described poor Laughing Pearl's twin brother down to the color of his hair and the manner in which he was killed. They found the body a day later where we had buried it, still bleeding scorpions from its mutilated mouth. Evidence discovered on one's own, of course, is far more convincing than evidence presented by anyone else, and there was . By the time they found out that the head cook's youngest apprentice had been stone cold drunk the entire time and someone had broken into Widower Cheng's production house, we were long gone with no intention of ever coming back, and Widower Cheng had already been executed and his production house burnt to the ground. I believe they still have a priest presiding over the place to this day.

Laughing Pearl walked with us for half a day when we escaped the city, dressed in her dead brother's clothes. As the sun was setting we stopped by a journey marker and sat down together to watch the clouds.

"Where are you going?" I asked. She shrugged.

"Away," she said. "With my brother dead, what is there for me here?" She turned a knife in her hand over and over again — it was too large for her hand, the kind of knife given to boys whose parents believe they will grow up to be warriors. It had been her brother's, and it was the only thing that she had taken from his body.

"You could come with us," I offered, but she shook her head.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "My brother always wanted to see the world. I think he and I will find our own way from now on."

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked. This time, she smiled — a real, genuine smile, prettier than the sunset behind us.

"Maybe," she said, flipping the knife in her hand. "I hope so."

When she vanished in the night, I thought that would be the last I ever saw of Laughing Pearl. As it turns out, I did see her again — I'd stolen a one-of-a-kind pepper from her kitchen, and she was pointing that knife straight at my throat. I had a good reason, mind, but that is a story for another day.

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