



Bonus Story

Where the Path Comes Home

“The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick and choose. When preferences are cast aside, the Way stands clear and undisguised.” — from the Zen poem, Hsin Hsin Ming by Seng-ts’an

The sun was beginning its slow descent, casting a golden glow across the tall grass. Nia was already there, sitting beneath a crooked tree with a pawful of berries and a calm that made the world feel wider.

The Monkey dropped into the grass beside her with a thud.

“I thought you’d be off chasing clouds,” she teased.

“I did, but they weren’t hiring.”

She laughed, and the Monkey leaned back on his elbows, staring up at the sky.

They sat like that for a while. No rush, no plan. Just two travelers letting the breeze do the talking.

Then Nia glanced sideways. “So? You going to tell me what you found out there?”

The Monkey scratched behind his ear, thinking. There was so much. Where to start? And it felt too big for words.

Eventually, he spoke. “I used to think life was something I had to make happen. Push through. Prove myself. Strive.”

She nodded gently.

“I chased everything,” he said. “Answers. Wisdom. A version of myself that I thought would feel... finished.”

She listened without interruption.

“I tried to fix what I thought was wrong. Tried to copy others, follow the so-called ‘right’ path. But none of it ever felt quite like mine.”

“And now?” she asked.

He was quiet for a long time. Then said, “Now I know I was never broken. I was just believing things that weren’t mine.”

Nia looked at him softly.

“Now I listen. I wait,” he continued. “And I’ve started letting myself be... my own design. Not the Master’s. Not yours. Just... me.”

He picked up a blade of grass and twirled it between his fingers. “I see now that the striving was noise. And funny thing is, life didn’t collapse. It got easier. Freer. Richer. More magical, even when messy.”

Nia stretched out in the grass. “That sounds peaceful.”

He nodded. “It is. But not the quiet kind where nothing happens. The kind where you stop fighting what is.”

She closed her eyes, letting the sun warm her fur. “So... does that mean you don’t suffer anymore?”

He chuckled. “Things aren’t perfect, as such. There’s still pain. But suffering? That mostly came from wishing things were different. Or insisting they should be.”

She opened her eyes again. “And you *never* wish things were different?”

“Not never,” he said. “But I notice it now. And then I let it pass. Because life’s always happening *for* me. Even when I don’t get it right away.”

The breeze stirred again.

“I used to grab at life,” he said. “Now I just let it come. I stay open. No judgment. No agenda.”

Nia smiled. “And does it?”

“It always does. Not always how I expect. Not always easy. But when I stop needing it to look a certain way...” He paused, “It’s enough. Sometimes, it’s even beautiful”

They sat for a while in companionable silence.

Eventually, she turned to him. “You sound different now. Like something landed.”

He nodded. “I think what changed most is... I no longer think everyone needs to see what I see. So I no longer need to convince or explain. We all have our own path.”

Nia tilted her head, intrigued.

“We each do it differently,” he said. “We stumble in different ways. Learn at different moments. And that’s okay.”

He looked at her with a soft smile. “We’re each our own design. And that’s exactly how it should be.”

She reached for another berry, tossed one at him. He caught it, barely.

“Alright, wise one,” she teased. “Still a monkey though.”

He laughed. “Yes. And I love it.”

