



The Great Race

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Rabbit slouched against a tree on the side of the trail, his pocket watch in hand. His keen ears picked up the sound of heavy, plodding feet approaching from the north, and a smile crept across his lips revealing his large incisors. A moment later, his words broke the silence the very instant his friend rounded the corner. "I really could fall asleep waiting for you," he joked.

"Sorry," Turtle huffed. "There was a wagon with a bad wheel. I stopped to help."

"Ah, it's always a story with you," Rabbit said. "Look, can't you go any faster? I've been waiting here for three hours. This is about half way, so that means I'll have to wait at least three more hours before you are even close to the Finish Line! And that's if you don't slow down." Rabbit looked critically at his short, fat friend who was gasping for breath.

"You're not getting tired are you?" he asked. "Come on, this is only half way! You still have at least three more hours of hard running ahead of you! I don't want to be sitting out here all day. I want to get home in time for dinner. Bunny's cooking vegetable stew tonight!"

"Sorry Rabbit, I'm going as fast as I can," Turtle gasped.

"Ok well, here, take a rest. I don't want you to keel over." Rabbit pointed to the grass next to him, and Turtle slumped down, exhausted.

Rabbit chewed the end off a cigar. "I tell ya," he said, "when we meet up with Fox tonight, we are gonna be rich fellas!"

"I don't know, Rabbit. What if someone finds out?" Turtle worried.

"Who's gonna find out? There's only three of us who know the plan, right? You, me, and Fox. Fox isn't going to tell anyone for sure. He's handling all the money and making all the bets. No way would he blow the cover. So that just leaves you and me, right?"

Turtle nodded.

"Have you told anyone?"

Turtle shook his head.

"Well, do you plan to?"

"No."

"Well, then that just leaves me. And you know me, right? I can keep a secret, can't I?"

Turtle looked unsure.

"Remember that time when we went to Reno with your mother, and you asked me not to tell anyone?" Rabbit asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, did I tell anyone?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I'm not with you every day, all the time. Maybe you told that girl of yours, Bunny."

"I didn't even tell her."

"Where did you tell her you went?"

"I told her I was with you at the Pond."

"Ah, I see... you are a lot better at lying than I am, Rabbit."

"Yeah? Well don't screw this up. Just go along with the plan. Follow my lead. Keep your mind focused on the dough. Think about what you'll do with it." Rabbit puffed pensively on his cigar before adding, "Like me. I'm gonna buy a ring for my girl. What are you gonna do with your cut?"

"I'm gonna buy a ring too!" Turtle answered. "Mine will be a lot bigger than yours, though."

"Yeah, how much bigger?"

"Oh, lots bigger. Thousands and thousands of times bigger." Turtle smiled knowingly.

"Yeah? How's that? The money's being split evenly." Rabbit was always wary of a double cross when Fox was involved. "How are you gonna buy a ring so much bigger than mine?"

"'Cause I'm smart with my money!"

"Ok, how much bigger are you talking about?"

"Big enough for three people," Turtle said with wide eyes.

"A ring big enough for three people!?" Rabbit couldn't believe it.

"Sure." Turtle was certain.

"How are three people gonna wear a ring?" Rabbit asked.

"Oh, they aren't gonna wear it."

"What are they gonna do with it?"

"They're gonna fight in it!" Turtle put his fists up in an old-time fighting stance.

Rabbit rolled his eye. "So you're gonna buy a boxing ring? And host fights?"

Turtle nodded.

"Why didn't you just say that!?" Rabbit could see this was turning into another ridiculous conversation with his short, round friend. "Look, I thought you were already across the Finish Line. Come on! What are you doing?"

"Running a race."

"Well, let's go! Let's go!" Rabbit gesticulated for emphasis. He hauled his friend back up to his feet and pushed him down the trail.

Turtle's stubby legs sputtered in the dirt as he tried to run.

Rabbit leaned back against the tree and checked his watch again. He glanced back at Turtle lumbering breathlessly out of sight, and he let out a sigh. Pushing his fedora down over his eyes, he settled back for a rest. *Might as well add some truth to the story*, he thought.

Hours later, everyone from the Briar was gathered near the old Bent Oak which designated the Finish Line. Skunk, Rat, Fox, Badger, and everyone else from the Briar were all crowded together watching the Forest Trail. The first runner to come into view was the rotund figure of Turtle. The spectators watched in disbelief as he plodded down the road making painfully slow, awkward progress. Rabbit was nowhere in sight.

About two hours later, Turtle was nearing the Finish Line when Rabbit suddenly burst from the Forest in a mad sprint. He streaked up the road with lightning alacrity. Hearts swelled and voices were raised as the crowd saw the great speed with which Rabbit was gaining on Turtle.

Fearing Rabbit had decided to double cross him, Fox slipped into the crowd, looking for a quick escape route.

Turtle saw Rabbit racing up behind him as well, and he lunged forward, legs kicking and heaving his great weight with a clumsy leap. His stumpy little legs staggered over the Finish Line as Rabbit raced up on his heels.

While there were some cheers that went up from Turtle's close friends, like Toad and Frog, a wave of suspicious glares and muttering washed over many of the spectators. Raccoon and Squirrel walked off in disgust while Sparrow and Crow watched in brooding silence from the bows above. They didn't need Owl's infinite wisdom or Hawk's sharp eyes to know that something was up.

Badger immediately confronted Rabbit. "Hey Rabbit!" Badger was burly and broad, a snarl twisting his lip. "What was that about? Why did it take you so long to get through the Forest? Did you get lost?"

"Uh, well I uh, got off to a great start, you remember?" Rabbit referred to the way he had taken off like a shot at the beginning of the race, dashing down the Millcreek Path before turning onto the long, looping Forest Trail and out of sight. "But I can't run like that for a

long time, you see? I got way out ahead of him and had to stop and rest. But then I was so tired I fell asleep!"

A look of utter disbelief filled Badger's black eyes.

"I did it!" Turtle gasped between heavy breaths. "I won!" He huffed some more before adding, "It's true! I saw Rabbit (gasp) in the Forest (huff) *resting*." He winked heavily and smiled all too obviously at Rabbit. "I passed him by," Turtle said to the crowd. "I saw him asleep under a tree! I tiptoed slowly passed him. Like this!" Turtle got up on his toes and demonstrated a few careful steps.

"What?!" Badger was incredulous. "Tiptoeing terrapins and narcoleptic hares!? That's ridiculous! I can't believe you fell asleep!" Badger pointed a black, curved talon at Turtle. "I can get through the Forest and back faster than he can, and you're even faster than me!" He glared at Rabbit. "You should have made that run in five minutes! You must have been really tired! How many hours did you sleep? Five? Six?"

To be continued...

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