

# THE TIGER'S WHISKER

Adapted from a Korean Folktale



Shin walked through the field, nudging his cattle along with a stick. As he passed his neighbor's house, he noticed Jae working in the cabbage field. Jae didn't look up as Shin walked by.

Jae was 12 years old, like Shin. He and his family had just moved in. Shin had hoped to be friends, but Jae didn't seem interested. When Shin asked if Jae could come outside, his *umma* always said he was busy. And when Shin saw Jae in the yard, and greeted him with "*Ahn-nyung!*" Jae didn't answer. That made Shin feel hurt, and a little angry.

Shin guided the cattle into their pen. He thought, it must be lonely moving to a new place. Why doesn't Jae want to be friends? Shin decided to ask Auntie Min for advice.

Auntie Min wasn't really Shin's aunt. She was a wise old woman in the village. Everyone came to her for help. Some said she could do magic.



The next day, Shin got up before the sun. He walked down the long path to Auntie Min's house.

Sipping tea with Auntie Min by her fire, Shin explained his problem. She gazed into Shin's eyes. "You want very much to make friends with this boy?" she asked.

He nodded. Auntie Min said, "You must bring me a tiger's whisker."

Shin gulped. There was a huge *horangi* living in the hills behind his house. Everyone in the village feared it, and the best hunters were unable to capture it. Shin had heard the tiger weighed as much as four men! He couldn't imagine going anywhere near it, let alone plucking its whisker.

"That—that's impossible," Shin mumbled.

But Auntie Min smiled and shook her head. "Not impossible. But very difficult. You'll have to use your head, and stay alert."

Shin bowed and thanked Auntie Min. He was thoughtful as he tended the cattle that day. He squinted up at the hills, looking for the tiger.

The next day, Shin woke early once again and headed into the hills. His stomach fluttering with fear, he found the cave where the *horangi* slept. He heard some growls from deep inside.

Shin forced himself to sit on a rock outside the cave for a few minutes. He took some deep breaths to calm down. He knew the tiger could smell him—and maybe he was hungry. Shin was prepared. He reached into his pocket for some *bulgogi*.

He unwrapped the lettuce leaf and tossed some meat into the cave. Shin ate a couple of bites himself. Then he got up and walked home.

The next day, Shin went to the cave again. This time he sat on the rock a little longer. The next day, he stayed even longer. After two weeks of visiting, Shin heard rustling near the mouth of the cave. Fighting his instinct to run away, he peered into the darkness. He saw golden eyes glittering back at him. But the tiger didn't pounce. He watched Shin for a while, then ambled back into the darkness.

Every morning, Shin sat quietly on his rock. Each time, the *horangi* came a bit closer. Shin wondered if the tiger hid in his cave because he was afraid of hunters—just like people feared his mighty claws and teeth.

It was a hot summer morning when the tiger ventured far enough to lie at Shin's feet. Day after day, Shin returned to his spot. One morning, with his heart beating wildly, Shin touched the *horangi's* furry head. Soon he was petting the tiger softly.

Then one day, after months of waiting, Shin spotted a loose whisker about to fall from the tiger's nose. Carefully, Shin reached toward the tiger's face. He gently closed his fingers around the whisker, and slowly pulled it away. Shin let out a long sigh of relief. He made his way back home.



The next morning, Shin hurried to Auntie Min's house. Auntie Min smiled and said, "Ah, my brave young man returns."

Shin held out the tiger's whisker proudly. He was eager to see what she'd do—maybe create a potion to make Jae be his friend. Auntie Min grasped the whisker in one hand. Then, moving quickly, she tossed it into the fire.

Shin gasped. He thought of all the mornings he had sat by the cave—risking his life because of Auntie Min's advice. He felt like shouting at her, but he didn't want to be disrespectful.

With tears stinging his eyes, he said, "What—but—why?"

Auntie Min walked over to Shin and put her hands on his shoulders. She told him, "You have been patient and understanding with this *horangi*. You accepted his fierce nature, and waited for him to feel comfortable with you. Now, if you truly want to be friends with Jae, you must do the same with him."

Shin walked back home. He thought about Auntie Min's words, and the enormous tiger he had befriended. As Shin neared home, he saw Jae walking in from the field.

Shin looked at Jae for a moment. Then he called out in a friendly voice, "*Ahn-nyung*, Jae!"

Jae walked hurriedly past him, as if he were frightened. But Shin saw Jae glance quickly in his direction. Shin smiled to himself, and thought of the tiger and his whisker.