The Great Race: A story of the Zodiac Animals

Long, long ago lived the Jade Emperor, ruler of the Heavens and Earth. He thought there should be a way to measure time and wanted to give names to the twelve years of the zodiac. But how should such important names be decided?

The Jade Emperor decided to hold a Great Race in which all animals of the land would compete. The race would be held across a fast-flowing river. The first twelve animals to finish the race would each have a year of the zodiac named after them. It was to be one of the highest honours of the land.

When Cat and Rat heard news of the Great Race, they felt both elated and overwhelmed. The best friends both wanted to be among the winners, but neither were confident swimmers and the river was treacherous indeed. Together, the neighbours hatched a plan. Before the race, they would sneak up on the back of Ox, who they knew was skilled at river crossings. Ox would provide them with a safe passage over the rushing water, delivering them quickly to the finishing line.

The day of the Great Race arrived. Cat and Rat weaved their way sneakily through their fellow competitors and leaped onto Ox’s back. Ox was a huge beast with a thick skin. He did not notice the two nimble animals atop him.

As the start drew closer, animals from near and far gathered on the river bank. Beside an old raft, Monkey, Rooster and Goat whispered amongst themselves. Under a tree, Horse stood tall while Snake slithered quietly around Horse’s hooves. Tiger stood alongside Rabbit, who was perched on a rock. In the air was the barking of Dog and the snorting of Pig.

Soon, the race began. Thrust into the rushing river with practiced and powerful strides, Ox surged ahead of the other racers. Upon his back, Cat grinned widely. Suddenly, Rat gave his neighbour a shove, pushing Cat off Ox’s back. Cat hissed viciously, surprised by her friend’s betrayal. She fell helplessly into the waters below.

Nearing the far river bank, Ox was in first place. Suddenly, ambitious Rat leaped down from Ox’s back onto the land. Rat had secured first place while the Ox, ever-patient, conceded second place. The Jade Emperor smiled. Rat and Ox would be the first two animals of the zodiac.

With a surge of water, Tiger leaped from the river and landed heavily on the bank. The weight of her sopping wet coat had slowed her down. Nevertheless, she was proud to have risked a dash across the rushing river, winning third place.

Rabbit, who had been leaping speedily from rock to rock and avoiding the water at all costs, slipped and fell into the river. He panicked, knowing that any delay could cost him fourth place. While he looked towards the finish line, something bumped into him from behind. A log had been floating down the river. He quickly grabbed hold of it. Floating was helpful, but the current pulling him downstream was not. Rabbit was sure he would miss out on a place in the zodiac all together. Suddenly, he felt a gust of wind push him from behind. Thrust upon the river bank, Rabbit took fourth place.

As the Jade Emperor looked proudly upon the first four animals of the zodiac, he heard a whooshing sound above his head. The Emperor glanced up as Dragon landed gracefully on the ground.

“What slowed you down, mighty Dragon?” the Jade Emperor asked.

Dragon replied, “Almighty Emperor, as I was flying I noticed a village on fire. I could not pass without assisting the villagers. With my strong breath, I extinguished the flames before returning to the race”.

“It must have been your breath that pushed me ashore,” cried Rabbit, who was grateful that the panic of the race had calmed.

The Emperor and the animals’ conversation was interrupted by the sound of more splashing. One bound away from the river’s edge was Horse. Proud and tall, she strode towards sixth place. All of a sudden, out of the corner of her eye, Horse saw sneaky Snake. Snake had wrapped himself around one of Horse’s hooves and was uncoiling himself now upon the land. Terrified by Snake, Horse reared up, shying away from her natural foe. Snake’s cunning wisdom had landed him in sixth place and Horse in seventh.

Before the race had begun, Goat had made friends with Monkey and Rooster. Rooster had spotted an abandoned raft by the river’s edge and had decided that, together, they would ride the raft across to the other side. Goat and Monkey cleared away the reeds to push the raft onto the water. Because of their teamwork, they finished the race in good time. The Jade Emperor was proud to see how they had worked together. Goat was awarded eighth place, Monkey ninth place and Rooster tenth place.

Dog, whose coat had been filthy before the race, bounded out of the river in eleventh place. “Why, Dog!” exclaimed the Emperor. “You are such a strong swimmer and yet you have finished close to last.

” Dog sat at the Emperor’s feet and explained, “The water was just so lovely and I needed a bath. I’ve been splashing and playing to clean my coat!”

The Jade Emperor and the other zodiac animals laughed, looking back towards the river to see which animal would claim the final place.

For a long while, they couldn’t see any other animals. Emperor wondered when the final winner would arrive. Then, to everyone’s surprise, Pig trotted out of the river. He had been hungry and had decided to stop for a snack.

“Filling my belly with such delicious food made me tired,” he yawned. “I’ve just awoken from a nap!” As the twelve animals congratulated one another, Cat pulled herself from the river. Alas, she had arrived too late after being cast into the water by Rat. She had missed a place amongst the animals of the zodiac. Even to this day, Cat holds strong to her grudge against Rat, stalking and hunting him whenever presented with the chance.

And so ended the Great Race. The Jade Emperor announced the new names for the twelve years of the zodiac.