

DRAGONHEARTED

The Fine Spell of Words Alone

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To all the girls out there.

PROLOGUE:

The 12 Guardian Animals

Along time ago, the Jade Emperor was a lot closer to mortals than one could imagine. He was, in fact, the first emperor who came to Earth to sow the seeds of a great civilisation.

Since most of the people were farmers and needed to know when it was time to grow and harvest crops, the Jade Emperor came up with a lunar cycle made up of twelve years, with twelve months for each year. Though this was a system that suited the people, they found it tedious; whenever they started counting from the first year, a flood or an earthquake would occur, and they would lose track of time. They soon lost their patience.

‘Let’s plant crops as and when we like,’ said the chief farmer, but the Jade Emperor stopped him.

‘Listen, I have devised a solution to this problem. We are vulnerable, but perhaps, we could ask for the help of the animals made by the creator goddess Nuwa.’

‘And how will we do that?’ asked a villager. ‘They can help us plough the fields and provide us with meat, but how can they guard against natural disasters?’

‘I’m glad you asked. During this month, we shall stop eating meat of any kind so the animals can live and grow in peace. At the end of the month, we will conduct a race. The first twelve animals to make it to my palace shall be bestowed with a gift to protect everyone. Fair enough?’

Everyone nodded.

The Jade Emperor asked for an audience with the animals in a cave, and declared to all that there was to be a race. The animals grunted, growled, chirruped, and stamped their hooves in agreement. The Jade Emperor floated away, wondering which twelve of all the animals in the world would show up on his doorstep.

Some animals, like the eagle, cared not for such trifles. He was already man’s hunting companion,

a revered creature, and he felt it was necessary to step aside to give other creatures a chance, like the dirty brown rat he held in his claws. Besides, the rat had pleaded with him.

‘Mister Eagle, please. If you have any heart at all, let me prove myself. I’m not as much of a menace as people think!’

The eagle glared at him imperiously and released the rat from his claws. The rat responded to the eagle by bowing, and scurrying to whence it came, but it was caught by a rather fat, snarling cat.

‘Dinner is served!’ she said, licking her lips.

‘Not quite,’ the rat said. ‘All of us are prohibited from eating one another till all twelve guardians have been chosen.’

The fluffy white beast snarled, but then asked, ‘What do you mean, twelve guardians?’

The rat began to explain. The cat cleaned herself while she listened, and as she listened, her pupils dilated. She liked this idea, for people always thought of her as lazy and good-for-nothing, and she wanted to use this race to prove it wasn’t true. ‘Well then, rat. I believe we would both like the world to think of us as useful guardians to Man. So how about an alliance? We would greatly benefit

from each other. I could carry you across my back, and you could lead the way, since you have sneaked in and out of the Jade Emperor's palace.'

And so the animals made alliances among themselves – the cat would work with the rat, the ox with the tiger and the dragon; snake and rabbit would slither and hop as fast as they could, and the goat would help the horse with her sure-footedness. The Monkey King alone would represent all monkeys and apes, for he was handsome, agile and clever, while the pig, rooster, and dog on the farm would set off together at dawn.

When the sun rose, all the animals made their way to the starting line and waited for the God of the Earth to give a signal. As they waited, they saw that many mountains had formed in the blink of an eye, but there was no one to say start. The goat then realised that the race had begun and sprang ahead with the horse. Together, they made their way up the mountains with surprising speed. Not to be outdone, the rest of the animals charged, with the Monkey King swinging from tree-branch to tree-branch, the tiger clambering up, and the rooster flying ahead to scout for traps. Each of these animals worked together to climb up the mountains, and of course, the rat could be seen scurrying ahead, leading the cat.

After they crossed the mountains, they realised that Mazu, the Goddess of the Seas, had widened the river till it became a vast ocean. This obstacle didn't prove to be a problem for the snake and the dragon. The snake slithered on ahead, taunting them with the sinuous motion of her body.

However, the dragon was kind, and he stretched himself out from one shore to the other end, allowing all the other animals to get across the ocean by using his body as a bridge. They were about to make their way across the river, when the dragon saw that a nearby village was suffering from a drought. He soared up into the sky and used his powers to make rain. While the dragon was distracted, the Monkey King made a raft using lots of branches to ferry as many animals across. Soon, they all made their way to the shore.

When they reached land again, there was no rest. Feng Bo, the God of the Wind, created a large cyclone, and soon all the animals were whirling around in it. They squirmed and struggled, but could do nothing to resist it as they got sucked into its centre.

At last, the dragon came back from the village, and started rescuing all the animals. While doing this, he noticed that the cyclone was travelling in a

particular direction, and shook his long body so that all the animals fell off his back and were caught in the cyclone again. Every creature swore and cursed at him. 'Be calm,' he told the animals. 'For the cyclone will lead us to the Jade Emperor's palace.'

Only the cat did not listen to him and continued to struggle. While all the animals landed safely at the foot of the palace, the cat was chucked into a nearby tree. No one noticed except the rat, and he made it a point not to say anything to the rest.

As the animals approached the palace, they were stunned by the ornate marble floors, the red lacquered pillars, and the golden throne upon which the Jade Emperor sat. There was a bright, orange flame in front of him, and it seemed to beat like a human heart. The rat then knew the race wasn't yet over – perhaps that was the last obstacle. He leapt over the crackling flame and came face to face with the Jade Emperor. All the other animals saw what the rat had done, and one by one, the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the goat, the Monkey King, the rooster, the dog and the pig jumped over this glowing ball of fire.

The Jade Emperor watched them in silence. Finally, with all the animals gathered before him, he spoke.

‘Well done, all of you. You understood that to make it here, you had to work together. And now, to commence the New Year, we shall do this. Since the rat was the first to understand what he had to do with the flame, he shall bring it back to mankind. Every year, each animal will pass the flame to the next animal, so it will not die out.’

‘Why is this flame so important?’ the snake asked.

‘The passing of the flame means that life will continue here, and life is what connects us, man, animal, or immortal. You must understand that it is your duty to guard mankind, to be benevolent to such beings even though they are capable of destroying all of you.’

‘Why?’ the tiger bared his claws. ‘Shouldn’t we devour all of them instead?’

‘No,’ the Jade Emperor raised his hand. ‘They are capable of great evil, but also of great good. What you should do is live alongside them, despite being abused, killed or eaten, for as long as an animal guardian is near, mankind will be protected from any great evil that tempts them. All of you will be a bridge between them and the immortals, and one day when all of them are enlightened—’

The Jade Emperor never did finish his sentence because the cat came in, growling. She swiped at

the rat and shrieked, 'Traitor! You abandoned me! I deserve to be a guardian animal as much as you!'

The Jade Emperor petted the cat to soothe her and said, 'Very well, you shall be made an honorary guardian as well. Every single one of your descendants will belong to a human tribe, and you will watch over Man every year alongside each animal.'

The cat was silent, too stunned to speak.

The Jade Emperor continued: 'In time, you will be able to see why this is so, but for now, the race is over, and your responsibilities will commence. Each of you will be the guardian animal for a tribe, and the rat shall spread this gift of fire to each and every one in order to show that despite his size, he has qualities that Man can learn from.'

The rat raced towards the flame and the first tribe, but the cat chased after the rat, which made him run faster and faster till the flame got to his chosen tribe. Since then, the cat has endlessly tormented the rat, and the rat has tried his best to avoid her.

Many years have passed, and these animals have never forgotten their responsibilities, always making sure that Man and Nature live together. Man has forgotten this tale, or maybe the story

itself has changed. Over time, Man has slain the guardian dragons of the world till they no longer exist, which has upset the natural balance. It is at the end of this tale that our story starts, for endings always give way to beginnings, like how the end of a year signals the start of a new one.

CHAPTER ONE

I pushed Four Eyes under a desk, put my hands on my head, and shut my eyes as glass shattered around me. Was this it? No, it couldn't be. I wasn't ready to slay a monster. I had no idea why the heavens had assigned me, a ten-year-old girl, to slay one, but we'll get to that soon.

Ah Ma, my grandmother, says you don't have to use big words to tell a story. All you need is excitement, surprise, and characters with good hearts. I sure hope my story has all that. Ah Ma says everyone has a story. It contains your past, your present, and future. You tell it and tell it and even when you die, the story doesn't end. It goes on and on in other people, and it's better than any book.

What she never said was that even the most unlikely stories may be true, and that I would be caught in the middle of one of them.

My name is Xin, but my full name is Ling Xin Long. Ling is my surname, and the other two characters mean 'Dragon-hearted' in Chinese. If you were Chinese, you'd think it's a pretty strange name since it's usually boys who have the word 'dragon' in their name, not girls. Well, my Dad told me that they were expecting a boy and had chosen the name Xin Long. All my cousins before me (Who are all boys! Can you imagine?) have the character for 'dragon' in their names, and my father felt he had to keep up the family tradition.

I also broke a rule. Miss Gan tells me not to use brackets in my stories, but I don't understand why I can't use them if I know how to.

I have to take you all the way back to the first day of Primary One for this story. Mum and Dad had already left for work, and Ah Ma was braiding my hair so that I wouldn't get into trouble at school for having an Unkempt Appearance. I sat in the chair, eating my bread and trying to drink my milk.

'Xin, you're going to the same school your mother went to when she was your age,' she said. 'Promise me you won't do anything to make us worry.'

‘Of course I won’t, Ah Ma. Ow!’ She had combed through a knot.

‘Please bear in mind that not all children see things the way you do, OK?’

It’s like she knew what was going to happen next.

School was dull except for art class. We were supposed to draw how we celebrated Chinese New Year, but I thought that was dumb. I had been having dreams of dragons, and wanted to see if I could draw one. I looked down at my piece of paper, and saw the dragon from my dreams right in front of me, except he was smaller and could curl up into a long necklace. His body was deep blue, and he had piercing but friendly eyes. His scales shimmered, reflecting the sunlight in a rainbow.

‘Hello,’ he lowered his head. ‘Why do you seem so sad?’

‘School is boring and I have to do this stupid drawing.’

‘Why don’t you draw me?’ he asked. ‘It’s been too long since I last posed for a portrait.’

‘Really? What kind of portraits did you pose for?’

‘I think they painted me on one of the Imperial Palace walls,’ he yawned. ‘But that was a long time ago. Try not to make me look ugly, OK?’

‘OK!’ I smiled. He smiled back as much as he could, but he looked funny. I laughed.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked me.

‘Xin Long,’ I said. ‘And you?’

‘Xiao Lan. I think two dragons like us should stick together, don’t you?’

I talked to him as I drew, and even though my classmates gave me funny looks, I didn’t care. For a small dragon there were a lot of things to fill in, like his eerie-dessent scales and the glint in his eyes. It took me two pieces of paper to draw him. Mr Chen, the art teacher, saw what I was doing and walked over. I hid my work behind my back, but it was no use.

He said, ‘Xin Long, I asked you to draw how you celebrate Chinese New Year, and you drew a dragon. Dragons don’t exist in real life.’

I hate it when Adults talk to me like that. ‘Then why do people write about them?’

‘They’re stories that people make up to feel better about themselves. Dragons are not real.’

‘But they *are* real. My Ah Ma says that if you can imagine something, it’s real, and it’s even more real if you can see it. Xiao Lan is real to me.’

‘They are not. I suggest you learn how to follow instructions and turn the dragon into a dragon dance.’

‘But Xiao Lan thinks it’s important that people know he’s real.’ I stared at Xiao Lan. He was puffed up, indignant (I think that’s how you use this word), and about to blast a tornado in Mr Chen’s face, but he restrained himself.

‘Xin Long,’ my teacher’s voice sounded like a dark Monday morning. ‘Draw your celebration properly.’

‘No,’ I said. He stormed off to his desk. I stuck my tongue out at him. I continued drawing Xiao Lan and talking to him. Then, someone tapped me on my shoulder. It was a girl with very long hair tied into two ponytails.

‘Is that dragon yours?’ she asked.

‘You can see him?’ I gasped. She nodded. I grinned.

‘He’s my friend. You can be friends with him too if you want,’ I said, hoping that she wouldn’t go away.

‘OK. My name’s Shu Ping.’

‘I’m Xin Long, and this is Xiao Lan.’

‘Cool,’ she said. ‘My mum told me that dragons exist, and now, I finally get to see one!’

‘Your parents must be pretty great,’ I said.

‘Nah, it’s just me and my mum. Hey! This is a great drawing!’ She picked it up. ‘Let me bring my crayons over so we can finish it.’ School was starting to get better now that I had a friend, even though I had to re-do my stupid Chinese New Year drawing. Mr Chen went to call my parents, and Shu Ping and I went off to play when the recess bell rang.

When I went home, I got a lecture from Dad about Respect for Authority, Instilling Discipline in Oneself, and Following Instructions. Mum waited till he had finished and gone out of the room before patting me on the head and telling me that I was a little Too Old for an Imaginary Friend. I had to wash the dishes as punishment, and I made faces the whole time.

Although my parents couldn’t see Xiao Lan, Ah Ma could. She only smiled and offered him some chicken wings at the dinner table. I was surprised – I thought, she would say that dragons didn’t exist, like Mr Chen. Instead, she told me the story about the twelve zodiac animals. My Ah Ma is better than books because she remembers everything.

Sometimes, I think she knows everything in the world, but keeps quiet.

From then on, Xiao Lan never really left my side. He would sit on one of my shoulders or loop himself around my neck to keep himself warm. I fell asleep with a smile on my face – I had two new friends.