

# MEET THE GUARDIANS



## Ming

Nine-tailed fox – a sparky elemental creature of fire who can shapeshift between a fox and a human girl!



## Miaow

A temple cat, usually even tempered and reserved – but sometimes a little bit grumpy.

## and Su...



A cheeky rat and the winner of the Great Race.

*Dedicated to my sister, who was born in the  
Year of the Rat and whose Chinese name is Ming*

EH

*To all who believe in magic*

PNQ

LITTLE TIGER

An imprint of Little Tiger Press Limited  
1 Coda Studios, 189 Munster Road,  
London SW6 6AW

Imported into the EEA by Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

[www.littletiger.co.uk](http://www.littletiger.co.uk)

A paperback original  
First published in Great Britain in 2025

Text copyright © Eric Huang, 2025  
Illustration copyright © Phùng Nguyễn Quang, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-78895-738-0

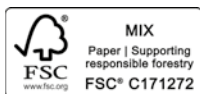
The right of Eric Huang and Phùng Nguyễn Quang to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK.



The Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) is a global, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of responsible forest management worldwide. FSC® defines standards based on agreed principles for responsible forest stewardship that are supported by environmental, social, and economic stakeholders.

To learn more, visit [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)

2 4 6 8 1 0 9 7 5 3 1

# GUARDIANS <sup>OF THE</sup> NEW MOON

THE YEAR OF THE RAT



WRITTEN BY  
ERIC HUANG

ILLUSTRATED BY  
PHÙNG NGUYỄN QUANG

LITTLE TIGER

LONDON



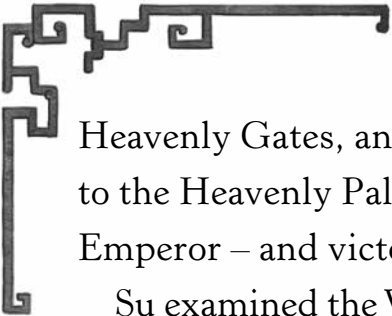
A decorative header featuring stylized grey clouds, a crescent moon, and several four-pointed stars scattered across the top half of the page.

# Prologue

Su

Su couldn't believe her luck. The cat was falling asleep!

She and Miaow were on the last leg of the Great Race – a competition held by the King of Heaven, the Jade Emperor. The first twelve racers to finish would have a year named after them for eternity! They'd persevered through many obstacles and now all they had left to do was cross the Weak River, then run through the



Heavenly Gates, and up the winding path to the Heavenly Palace where the Jade Emperor – and victory – awaited.

Su examined the Weak River. It didn't look like anything special, but no one had been able to cross. She watched a crocodile slide into the river, swim about halfway, then sink to the bottom. Moments later, they appeared far downstream, washed back up on the same shore. A tiger was attempting a crossing now. She leapt into the water and floated for a bit. As soon as the tiger began swimming, though, Su lost sight of the big cat, who disappeared underwater – just like the crocodile.

“Interesting ...” Su said. “The magic water only dragged her under when she started swimming.”

She scampered around Miaow in circles, squeaking excitedly.

“Go away,” Miaow yawned.



“Aww, who’s the sleepy baby?” Su teased with a mischievous smile, before looking back towards the river.

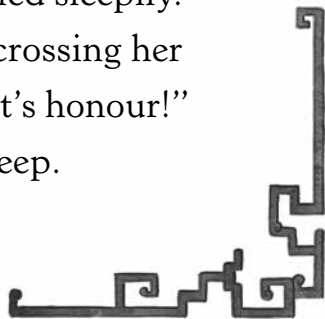
The ox was now ankle-deep, wading by the edge of the riverbank. He slowly took a step forward: the right hind leg first, then the right front leg. The left legs followed suit. Su’s eyes gleamed. The ox wasn’t going to swim across at all. He was big enough to just walk! As long as he kept one of his massive hooves firmly on the riverbed, the Weak River’s magic would have no effect.

This was her chance! “Why don’t you have a quick snooze?” she said to the cat. “Nothing’s happening, anyway. I’ll wake you as soon as someone makes progress across the river.”

“Promise?” Miaow mumbled sleepily.

“I promise,” Su declared, crossing her fingers behind her back. “Rat’s honour!”

But the cat was already asleep.



Stifling a giggle, Su sprinted to the riverbank. With a running leap, she landed on the tip of the ox's tail and scurried up his back. Unaware of the hitchhiker, the ox continued his steady pace across the river, one hoof after the other. A few slow steps later, the water was nearly level with the ox's shoulder. Su tiptoed up his neck and took shelter in his ear. As they approached the far shore, Su emerged. Using the startled ox's face as a launchpad, she zoomed down his muzzle, leapt off his nose on to dry land and sprinted for the finish line.

The ox quickly gained ground, charging up the hill, but Su was too far ahead.

“Woo hoo!” Su squealed as the sky above the Heavenly Palace lit up in a dazzle of fireworks to announce the first winner of the Great Race: **RAT**.







The header features a whimsical night sky scene. At the top, several small, four-pointed stars and dots are scattered across the white background. Below them, a crescent moon is partially obscured by a cluster of stylized, swirling grey clouds on the left. To the right, a larger, more dense group of similar clouds is depicted. The title 'Chapter 1' is centered in a large, black, serif font, with the character 'Su' positioned directly beneath it in a smaller, black, serif font.

# Chapter 1

Su

“Welcome back! Welcome back!” the Jade Emperor boomed as Su entered the throne room. This was the first time the rat had been at the Heavenly Palace since winning the Great Race. And it was her final visit before the upcoming lunar new year – the one named in her honour. The Year of the Rat.

As the honorary animal for the year, Su would be leading parades, judging competitions, and bringing good luck

and cheer on a year-long tour across the land. There was still lots to do to finalise preparations, though – and not much time. The first new moon, heralding the start of the Year of the Rat, was a little over a week away.

Su's whiskers twitched.

“Don't worry,” the emperor reassured her. “Tu Di Gong has everything under control.” He pointed to the grand consul, who entered the throne room with his usual agitated shuffle.

Tu Di Gong was in charge of details, including the permissions that were needed before anything on Heaven or Earth could officially begin. Paperwork was Tu Di Gong's life. He held an eternal lifetime of scrolls in his arms.

Following the grand consul, and carrying even more scrolls, was a girl with long black hair that faded to flaming red with bright

white tips.

“Tu Di Gong! Ming!” the emperor called out. “Over here!”

The girl spotted Su and squealed with excitement. The scrolls dropped to the floor with a clatter as she transformed into a glowing nine-tailed fox: a magical fox with nine white-tipped tails that burned with a radiant fire. She trotted over to the rat and gave her a warm nuzzle. “Hi, Su!”

“Hi,” the rat replied, her whiskers twitching again. “Um... How are you?”

Ming’s tails glowed brightly. “I’m great! It seems like it was only yesterday we were all competing in the Great Race – you, me, and ... Miaow.”

Su cleared her throat. “Just like yesterday, yeah. How, um... How is Miaow, anyway?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Ming said, flashing a sly smile.

A black-and-white cat entered the throne



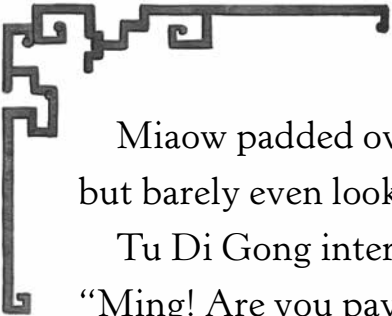
room behind two humongous half-human sentries. They were the Jade Emperor's palace guards, Ox-Head and Horse-Face, and they carried a writing desk, a set of brushes, an ink stone and an ink stick.

"Right here is perfect," Tu Di Gong directed them, and sat himself at the table.

"Miaow!" Ming called out. "Look who's here! We were just talking about you."

Su stiffened. This was the first time she had seen Miaow since the Great Race. "Hey, buddy!" she blurted and blushed.





Miaow padded over and sat beside Ming, but barely even looked at Su.

Tu Di Gong interrupted the reunion. “Ming! Are you paying attention?” he fussed. “We’re here to file the paperwork you’ve neglected to complete – again.”

Ming’s flames faded. She sighed and turned away.

Su fidgeted. “So, uhhh... No hard feelings, right?”

Miaow looked away, his tail flicking.

“You didn’t care about finishing the silly race anyway, did you? So I did you a favour – and you became a Guardian of the New Moon instead! So ... you’re welcome?”

What Su said was true. Neither Miaow nor Ming had finished the Great Race. But they had proven themselves to be resourceful and kind, so the Jade Emperor asked them to become Guardians of the New Moon. It was their job to ensure every

new year began and ended auspiciously. This meant looking after the racer honoured that year – in this case, spending a lot of quality time with Su.

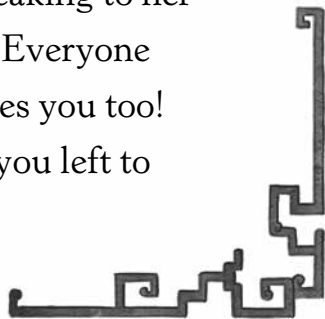
Throughout Su's sorry-not-sorry apology, Miaow said nothing, which wasn't unusual. The cat wasn't really the talkative type. But something about his silence right now was different. Deeper. Su could sense it.

"Now, now, Miaow," the Jade Emperor soothed, bending down to stroke the cat's head. "Let us turn from the past to the new moon ahead, and the first Year of the Rat."

"You're right," Miaow admitted after a brief pause. Then he addressed the rat.

"Hello, Su."

"Oh, I've missed you, buddy!" Su gushed. She was so relieved he was speaking to her that she was almost in tears. "Everyone back home at the temple misses you too! It hasn't been the same since you left to



work for the emperor.”

“Have the monks found a replacement temple cat?” the emperor asked. “I could suggest some candidates.”

“Not yet, although I know they’re keen to find a cat who can actually catch rats and mice. I mean, let’s be honest – Miaow was ... below average.”

“Su!” the emperor scolded. “Enough of this. We must discuss the schedules Tu Di Gong has prepared.”

Su nodded but kept talking. “Miaow might be great at banishing ghosts, but he is a terrible mouser. I nearly always outrun him – and not because I’m faster. I’m smarter! I didn’t win the Great Race by being the fastest, did I? Haha!”

Miaow hissed.

“I’m just joking!” Su squeaked as the cat pounced, taking cover under Tu Di Gong’s writing desk.



At the same time, the Jade Emperor reached for Miaow, accidentally knocking the cat off balance. Instead of landing on top of Su, Miaow crashed into the writing desk, scattering Tu Di Gong's documents across the throne room, and hurling the ink pot into the air.



Tu Di Gong gasped as his face and body were splattered with ink, as if he had just lost an argument with a squid. “This is unacceptable! The cat and nine-tailed fox are not ready to be Guardians of the New Moon!”

“Hey, I didn’t do anything!” Ming protested. Her tails of fire darkened as she spoke.

“Exactly!” Tu Di Gong declared. “You have not done *anything*! Not your paperwork. Not the Health and Safety training. And clearly *nothing* to resolve the animosity between the cat and rat!”

Tu Di Gong now directed his lecture at Miaow. “It is precisely this animosity that makes you an unsuitable Guardian as well.

Your Majesty, the cat and nine-tailed fox are not ready for the assignment. And neither is the rat a suitable—”

The emperor raised his hand. “Ming and Miaow, you have accepted roles as Guardians of the New Moon. It is your duty to guide Su as the Year of the Rat unfolds. Your personal concerns must be resolved and put aside.”

The pair nodded in silence.

“Su,” the emperor continued, “you must enter the new year embracing your best qualities. Your social nature, quick sense of humour and wit have served you well, but be mindful of how they affect those around you. Only together as a team can we shape the Year of the Rat into a joyful one for all.”

Su also nodded.

“If any of you feel this is not possible, I invite you to withdraw. If need be,

we shall cancel the Year of the Rat.”

Su felt the weight of the Emperor of Heaven’s stern gaze. “Are you in or out?” he asked.

All three looked at each other, then replied in unison. “In.”

