

~ *The Princess and the Guru* ~

Some say demons once made the world their playground. A humble kingdom, tucked away in the Himalayas, suffered for it.

These demons stole food, damaged homes, and harassed anyone they pleased.

In response to the threat, the king offered great boons if someone would venture out to find a protector. Those few who returned did so empty-handed. For a long time the king's people risked life and limb, until his daughter could watch no more.

"They're my people, too," the princess announced. "We're supposed to protect them. What good am I if I do not go out on their behalf?"

At first, the king would not hear of it. He did not want to send his only child and heir into the wilderness but—eventually—he accepted her wish.

"Of course," the king lifted his daughter's hand into the air for all the people to see. "It is natural for you, my daughter, the princess Sangmu, to find the protector we are looking for!"

The king told her to seek out Dragon—him being the strongest and most auspicious creature.

"My lord," Sangmu said when she found Dragon, "my kingdom is desperate for a protector. I am their princess, come to ask for your help with your magic."

"Princess?" Dragon mused. "I am sorry. I am already answering the summons of the Emperor to the East."

When Dragon lunged at her in all his terrible glory, cloaked in storm clouds, the Princess Sangmu stood her ground, even though she feared the worst.

Dragon extended a hand to the girl. Cupped between the five ivory-tipped claws was a blossom of fire.

"It takes a rare soul to see my power without trembling. For your bravery, you have earned the flame. Use it to help you find a suitable protector."

After Dragon, she found Horse, but neither could she stand as protector.

"Information is critical in times like these," Horse told her. "I'm the only one who can outrun the demons. I must pass news to the people." With Horse's blessing, the princess could run like the wind to hasten her search.

Ox was no different. He was so busy helping people farm the rice paddies, he could not

leave them. Ox shared his strength with her for when the burden of her task seemed too great.

Sangmu went town to town. Nobody believed the dirt-stained girl to be a princess. They hardly knew what she looked like. Besides, they had their own hardships.

It seemed neither man nor beast would help. Demons flocked to her in the wilderness like crows to carrion. Sangmu did her best to fend off the demons, but her strength fell short, her haste struggled. Dragon's fire dimmed in her grief. The demons left her battered and defeated, ready to bring misfortune to another.

Emerging from the nearby stream came Serpent, white as ash with jade green eyes.

"You have been blessed," Serpent said, "but you don't know how to use them."

Sangmu shared her plight.

"I am no protector," Serpent said. "There is one who could be. I can show you the way."

Despite the obstacles that blocked her path—both demon or natural—the princess never lost her momentum. Serpent, in his wisdom, helped guide her gifts. When they arrived at a cave, Sangmu found it to be vacant but for a large statue in the shape of a meditating man. Serpent crawled up the statue. When he rested at its navel, he transformed in a blinding silver storm.

Serpent was a man all along. A guru called Rinpoche. He wore long maroon and saffron robes folded about his person, a necklace of mala beads held in his hand. Rinpoche told her the protector she seeks is the one who brought him here.

"You see," the guru said, "I was disturbed while meditating. A demon cursed and transfigured me. There must be a host for the spell, otherwise it will spread and cause havoc. You can make up for my moment of weakness."

"What are you saying, Serpent, wisest of all creatures?" Sangmu said.

"A single virtue is all I possess," Rinpoche explained. "Whereas YOU have more. Should you become the new host for this curse, all the gifts of Dragon, Horse, Ox, and Serpent will remain within you. You can make up the weakness of one with the strength of another! No longer would grief hold your heart.

"But," Rinpoche added, "you would act not as a girl but as Tiger. Do this, and there would be no limitations on land, sea, nor sky. Nothing would be able to harm you or your people again."

After much consideration, Sangmu agreed to sacrifice her humanity for the future happiness of her kingdom.

Sangmu became swathed in the storm of burning silver, suspended in the air.

Tiger's roar boomed from the cave across the mountains. She strode through the sky, tail whipping behind her. When the demons confronted her, Tiger met them with her piercing stare and fearsome strength. In a howl of pale blue wind, she brought thunder onto them, burning dragonfire in her heart. After several attempts to overwhelm her with numbers, the demons fled.

Sounds of joy filled the kingdom as they celebrated with music, dancing, and feasts, but the king and queen were saddened when their daughter had not returned. Guru Rinpoche told them she perished while helping Tiger.

Rinpoche remained to advise the king and to spread the teachings of The One Who Is Awake.

Monasteries were built to continue the happiness Tiger brought to the kingdom.