

MEET THE GUARDIANS



Ming

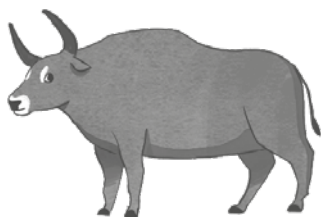
Nine-tailed fox – a sparky elemental creature of fire who can shapeshift between a fox and a human girl!



Miaow

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

and Xiao Nioh...



A big, strong ox who wants to be a dancer, instead of the warrior his dad expects him to be.

To Uncle Steve, whose nickname is Ox
EH
To all who believe in magic
PNQ

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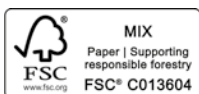
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GUARDIANS ^{OF THE} NEW MOON

THE YEAR OF THE OX



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LONDON





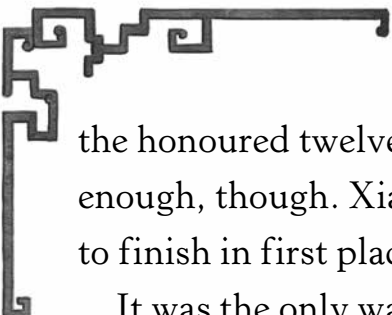
Prologue

Xiao Nioh

“Don’t let me down!”

Xiao Nioh remembered his dad’s words and narrowed his eyes. “I won’t,” he mumbled. “Not this time.”

The young ox was so close to finishing the Great Race, a competition held by the King of Heaven, the Jade Emperor. The first twelve animals to finish would have a year on the lunar calendar named after them. Xiao Nioh knew he would be one of



the honoured twelve. Just placing wasn't enough, though. Xiao Nioh was determined to finish in first place.

It was the only way to impress his dad.

His chances looked good – great, in fact! He was the only one making any progress across the Weak River, the last obstacle before the finish line at the Heavenly Palace. Xiao Nioh had watched other racers attempt crossings. The harder they swam, the faster they disappeared underwater, only to resurface off-course, far downstream. He wondered if the river was called Weak because it couldn't support anyone who tried to float or swim.

But what about walking? No one had tried that...

Wading in ankle-deep water, Xiao Nioh noticed how the currents wrapped around his hooves like a sea monster's tentacles and tugged whenever he took a step. As soon

as he planted his feet firmly on the muddy bottom, though, the river released him. The currents responded to every movement he made. When he pushed, they pulled. When he pressed ahead, they rushed back.

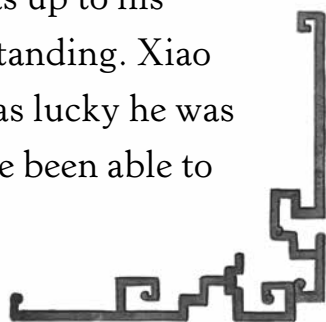
“It’s like we’re dancing,” Xiao Nioh chuckled. He loved dancing. “I’ll cross the river by walking a foxtrot!”

The ox took a small step forward and stopped. The river reacted just as he thought it would. Xiao Nioh smiled. This was going to work!

Wait, what was that? Something tickled Xiao Nioh’s tail ... now his back!

The sensation stopped. “Must be a leaf,” he decided and danced onward.

By the time Xiao Nioh was halfway across the river, the water was up to his shoulders – but he was still standing. Xiao Nioh grinned in relief. He was lucky he was so big. His feet wouldn’t have been able to



reach the ground otherwise, meaning he would've been at the mercy of the Weak River's magic. The ox continued on, losing himself in the rhythm and flow of his fluid foxtrot.

His father's voice echoed in Xiao Nioh's head again: *"Don't let me down!"* The ox stumbled but quickly regained his balance.

"I won't!" he insisted out loud.

At that very moment, the tickling returned, and he saw something small and fuzzy out of the corner of his eye. Was that a rat in his ear? Steps away from the other side, Xiao Nioh watched in horror as the rodent used his nose as a ramp to leap on to the riverbank and dash up the hill towards the finish line.

"Don't let me down!"

Xiao Nioh pushed himself to run faster than ever before.

"Don't let me down!"





He had to be first.

“Don’t let me down!”

The racers were neck and neck when they crossed the finished line. Fireworks brightened the sky above the Heavenly Palace to announce Xiao Nioh’s finish ... in second place.

OX





Chapter 1

Xiao Nioh

Xiao Nioh peered around the curtain at the audience assembling in the Heavenly Concert Hall. For nearly half a year he had been practising a dance he was going to perform at the party to usher in the Year of the Ox – *his* year.

This afternoon's show was a sneak preview for the emperor and others involved in organising the year-long schedule of lunar new year activities. His new friends Ming

and Miaow had helped him every step of the way.

Xiao Nioh might have been nervous but he was also super excited, eager to debut his dance! He couldn't wait for the audience to settle so he could begin.

At last, the Jade Emperor took his place in the front row. At his side was...

"What's *he* doing here?" Xiao Nioh gasped.

A girl with flame-like hair pushed aside the curtain for a better look. "Who?" Ming asked.

"My dad!"

Xiao Nioh pointed to a giant ox in the front row between the Jade Emperor and a black-and-white cat named Miaow. The ox was Lord Chiyou, a powerful god of war whose adventures were legendary.

Xiao Nioh frowned. A familiar feeling of panic began to bubble up inside him, dousing every last spark of excitement. His dad wasn't supposed to be here!



A thin, bearded man with deep worry lines on his forehead appeared backstage. “We are twelve minutes behind schedule!” he scolded. As grand consul for the Jade Emperor, Tu Di Gong was in charge of nearly everything. Without him nothing on Heaven or Earth worked quite right. “What is causing this delay?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Xiao Nioh blurted out. “The preview is cancelled.”

Tu Di Gong shook his head. “Impossible! Do you know how long it took to find a time that suited the emperor’s schedule? It was a stroke of luck that your father, Lord Chiyou, was also free. The emperor instructed me to invite him as a special guest!”

Xiao Nioh was horrified. “My dad only cares about quests and battling monsters. He’s not gonna like the dance. I’m not doing it!”

“You’ve been practising for months, Xiao Nioh,” Ming said. “C’mon, you’ve got this!”

“I should’ve prepared a – a kung fu demonstration, or – or – something my dad would approve of. He’s gonna hate this!”

“But you love it!” Ming replied. “Dance! Not for your dad, or anyone else. Dance for *yourself*.”

Tu Di Gong clapped his hands together. “Yes, yes ... the show must go on!” He then turned to Ming. “On your mark.”

Ming squeezed Xiao Nioh’s shoulder. Then she stepped out from behind the curtain. In a blazing flash, the human girl transformed into a nine-tailed fox – an elemental creature of fire. Her magical tails unfurled a wall of flame to a thunder of applause.

Watching Ming, the ox recalled the dozens of rehearsals they had held over the past few months. He knew the dance number would be a hit, but as he gazed out into the audience, the immense figure of his father made him doubt himself. Xiao Nioh was sure his dad was frowning.

A flute trilled a long, clear note. Xiao Nioh closed his eyes and concentrated on the sound. He let the melody fill his mind and push out his anxieties about his dad.

Dance for yourself, he thought and took his place on stage.

As Ming's foxfire burned out, a cloud of smoke cleared to reveal Xiao Nioh to the audience. He wielded a long sword called a jian above his head.





The ox took a step, moving slowly to the gentle melody while rhythmically twirling the jian. A drum joined the flute, quickening the beat. Xiao Nioh twisted



and turned across the stage. He moved faster and faster while thrusting the jian as if he were battling an army of invisible demons.



Xiao Nioh noticed an unfamiliar rhythm beating beneath the music. It was applause! Lifted by the audience's approval, Xiao Nioh strutted to the back of the stage for the next move. A high note sounded. The ox threw the jian into the air, then somersaulted beneath it to catch the blade as it fell!



The audience erupted into cheers.

Xiao Nioh took a bow and saw his father clearly for the first time. The giant ox was clapping furiously. Was he ... smiling?!





Xiao Nioh smiled back. His father's approval was like a gust of wind in a sail. It filled the young ox with confidence as



he threw the jian to Ming, who was waiting in the wings. As he did, colourful ribbons uncoiled from his hooves.



With a confident flourish, Xiao Nioh pirouetted back to centre stage and pinwheeled his arms, guiding the ribbons to flow above him like twin water dragons. While the dance with the sword had been athletic and energetic, this dance was elegant and fluid. In the background, an erhu, pipa and gong now joined the chamber ensemble in a show-stopping tune. Xiao Nioh lost himself in the soft



but strong movements and gentle rhythms of the ribbon dance.





The performance was a hit! When the music stopped, everyone in the audience jumped up to cheer. Everyone ... except for his dad.