New Year's Curse

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My entry for FlameandAxe's Writing Competition in The Snake Year. My tale of why the Chinese New Year is celebrated.

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As the village slept, all was quiet. Lazy clouds floated in the morning sky, coloured with the sunrise. The mountains in the distance stood tall and proud, looking down upon the sleepers.

Just outside of this village was a small home. Inside lived a short man who went by the name of Chongan. Chongan meant peace, which was just the way he lived, peacefully. One event changed that.

Chongan was on his way to the market to sell a basketful of herbs and other plants that grew wild around his home. Upon arrival, the rush of people washed over him, making him one of them. He found his spot and set up. One woman came and looked through his goods, however she did not buy anything, simply moved on to the next stall. As the hours passed, people came and went. Some would stop to look, others would buy. As Chongan was packing up, a stranger walked up to him, dressed in black, with his face hidden.

â How may I assist you?â Chongan politely asked the man.

â I'm looking for a flower, a lily if you have one.â Chongan did not have any lilies but he knew where he could find one. He also knew that they could cleanse people and things from curses and jinxes.

â I'm sorry but I do not have one, however I know where to find one.â

â What is your price?â The man asked hesitantly.

â Two renminbi or something of equal value.â The man looked in a small pouch around his neck before pulling out a long, brittle-looking thing.

â Would you except this?â He held the thing out to Chongan. Taking it, Chongan looked it over. It appeared to have scales and was thin as paper. â It's a snake skin. Will you take it?â

Chongan had only heard of snakes from his father when he was little. This skin was defiantly a rare find. â I will, and I shall go find your flower.â The man thanked him.

â Thank you, you have no idea how much it means to me that you take it.â With that, he disappeared in the crowd.

Chongan was on his way home with the snake skin balanced delicately on top of the plants in the basket. When he got home, he placed it on a small table next to his bed. He admired the glint of shine it produced when hit by the sun's rays.

As the day wore on Chongan found the flower the man at the market had asked for, but when he brought it home he felt strange. He laid the flower beside the skin and went to bed, deciding he'd feel better in the morning.

His sleep was plagued by dark things that night. As Chongan tossed and turned, long creatures twisted in his mind. They had no limbs and made an aggressive hissing noise. Some had fangs as long as an arm, while others could crush you in under a minute. As these creatures moved from his dreams, a new nightmare took place. In it, Chongan could see the village of Wuyuan. One of those long, slithering creatures was seen creeping through the buildings, devouring villagers, and making chaos. Chongan watched from a far as it destroyed the village he knew so well. Once finished, the creature slipped into the water, hidden from view.

Chongan woke in a cold sweat. The only thought going through his poor mind was to warn the village of this vile creature. Throwing on what ever clothing was at hand, he grabbed a lantern before racing out the door and down the well trampled path.

â Wake up! Wake up! A beast is coming!â He cried as he ran down the streets. Most thought he was crazy, but others believed him. They came running from their homes, wondering what was happening.

â What is it Chongan?â A well known man from the market asked.

â There is a beast coming, long and powerful. It is going to attack the village. We must leave.â

â Leave where? There are no other villages for miles!â

â Then we must flee to the forest. Go to your homes, gather your families.â The small group scampered off to do just that when Chongan had another vision. He once again saw the snake creature, but this time it was avoiding him. It puzzled Chongan; nothing about him had changed except for his clothing. He was wearing a bright red outfit and the colour seemed to frighten the creature. It also feared the blazing lantern hanging at his side. The vision ended as suddenly as it had began. Shaking himself, Chongan had an idea.

When the small group returned with some belongings and their families, Chongan led them to his home sharing with them the new vision and his idea.

â Are you sure it will work?â

â It has to.â

Once settled, they set to work making paper lanterns and hanging them everywhere, inside and out. The woman were making red outfits for everyone. As a finishing touch, one of the men brought with him a bunch of fire crackers while the rest worked on a large lantern in the shape of the snake beast. When everything was finished, they waited.

The ground shook and the sounds of screams could be heard coming from the village. Chongan signalled the group to light all of the lanterns, set off the fire crackers, and dance around with the snake lantern. The snake beast heard the commotion and came to investigate, leaving the remains of the village behind. When it saw the fire and the red it hissed, narrowly missing being hit with a fire cracker. It took off over the mountains never to be seen again.

The group celebrated there achievement, but it soon came to an end when they saw the village, or at least what was left of it.

â A new year has started, we shall rebuild it better then ever!â One of the men said.

â Yes and we shall chase the beast away each year in honour of this new year!â There were cheers from the group which turned into the sounds of work as the sun rose.

Chongan had returned to his home to tidy up when he noticed the snake skin he had received from the man. It was as far from the lily as the table would allow, curled up as if it has been burned. Scooping it into his palm, Chongan took it outside and buried it, placing the lily on top.

â Never again shall you terrorize the villagers, snake. Your curse ends now.â

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