

THE SOUL BY WHICH WE MEASURE OURS

By C.H. Hung

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"I want you to be everything that's you, deep at the center of your being."

- Confucius

THE call from the Jade Emperor filled Tianlong with dread so thick she could taste its bitter tang on her tongue, like the ashes of dreams crumbling into dust.

Dragons were the luckiest creatures in the Jade Emperor's kingdom, but Tianlong had been born on the fourth day of the fourth month, as the fourth child to parents who were both fourth children, and four had never been a lucky number. So when the call came to fill the ranks of the emperor's heavenly guard, determined by a race, and the Dragon Clan decided to choose their representative by lottery, Tianlong knew the draw would not go in her favor.

The clan gathered for the selection on a wide plateau atop the tallest pillar mountain in the valley. Only one dragon per family could be entered, chosen by the family's patriarch. The names engraved on bone tiles clattered loudly in the jade jar as Tianlong's father gave it a shake. He smiled benevolently at the nine silent dragons standing before him whose names were in the jar, all of them young, unmated dragons entering their prime. The best of the clan. Except for Tianlong, who was by far the smallest and weakest dragon.

She shouldn't even be in the running, Tianlong thought, crouched low to the moss-slickened plateau on her short legs. Her peers swayed their serpentine bodies above her, not noticing or paying any attention to her, just the way she preferred. She wondered why her father hadn't put one of her brothers' names in the jar instead.

But with a one in nine chance of being drawn, perhaps she would not be called. Even she couldn't be so unlucky as to be chosen for this terrifying task of carrying the pride of the dragons in the Jade Emperor's race.

Sure enough, her father withdrew the tile that said Tianlong.

She fled before the echoes of the last syllable had finished bouncing off the peaks of the pillar mountains surrounding them.

“I don’t want to compete,” she protested when her father fetched her from her favorite peak, where she normally hid from her squabbling older brothers. “It’s embarrassing to lose.”

Tianlong curled around the craggy quartz-sandstone rocks of the peak, her claws dug fast into its nooks. Rising several hundred meters above the valley floor, the pillar was topped with delicately branching dove trees and nestled among a cluster of similar pillars even taller than hers, making it the perfect hiding place. If they weren’t found frolicking in the ocean, the dragons usually preferred to perch on the highest peaks. No one would look for a dragon on a lower peak, halfway between water and earth.

Plumes of white clouds draped around Tianlong’s mountain in delicate cirrus lace, camouflaging her hated black-and-white scales, mottled like the patterns of their carp cousins. And, like the carp, two thin ropes of white whiskers drooped from her nostrils, lowered now in deference to her father.

His own whiskers were raised, unfurling alongside his snout and trembling with suppressed impatience. If she pushed him much further, they would splay outward like a cobra’s hood, and then she would know she was really in trouble.

“*Ai ya*, Tianlong,” her father growled. “No creature is bigger, stronger, or faster than a dragon. You will easily win the race.”

“But I’m the smallest, weakest, and slowest of our clan.” Tianlong lifted her scales in agitation, as if by doing so, she could shake off her inauspicious colors. “Why would you put my name into the jar? Why not one of the *geges*?” she complained, referring to her older brothers.

Before her father could answer, the dark skies around them flashed, followed by the sharp crack of lightning and a low rumbling of thunder. The shriek of an embattled dragon assaulted them next, at a pitch too high for human ears, making Tianlong wince with its ferociousness. She clutched her rock even harder and fought the urge to flee into a cave.

Her father didn’t so much as twitch. “They’re busy.”

The explanation was much too polite. Her brothers were obviously brawling, and for whatever reason, her father didn’t think it necessary to stop them from tearing apart

the celestial skies. These sibling battles could go on for days, and the Jade Emperor's race was tomorrow.

"I don't have the luck to win," she said stubbornly.

"Bad luck can be overlooked." Her father's nostrils flared along with his whiskers. "But bad behavior cannot."

The barb struck home with painful finality. Tianlong ducked her head and her whiskers drooped even lower.

Her father knew she would do as she was asked, no matter how much she feared failing. It was what daughters did. Shape themselves to become what their fathers and mates demanded, what their clan needed.

And it was *her* name on the tile, after all. She had lost.

"It's your duty to represent the dragons, Tianlong," her father pressed, softening his voice as the only acknowledgement of his victory.

"I don't want to let the clan down," Tianlong said in a small voice. She had shrunk so far into herself that she could almost hide the entire length of her serpent-like body behind the mountain's peak. She wished it were as easy to hide from duty and familial loyalty.

At this, her father gathered her into him, coiling around both her and the mountain's peak, like warm, comforting noodles in her belly.

She noticed for the first time how frail his short arms were, how dully his fire-red scales gleamed. Even the fresh, evergreen scent of his musk had grown stale and musty, reminding her more of the dank, moldy humus fields where mushrooms grew rather than of bright algae swirling life through the ocean's currents.

Her father was getting old. The realization brought with it a swift stab of hot shame for her headstrong rebellion. She should be making him proud instead of vexing him with her selfishness.

"The tiles have chosen you for a reason," her father said, "luck or no luck. Give us the best you have, and the race will be yours to lose."

She sighed her acquiescence. "All right, *baba*."

He patted her shoulder in approval. As another flash of lightning crackled across the skies, her father added, "But don't."

"Don't what?"

“Lose.”

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Dawn illuminated Tianlong’s fears in stark relief, the roiling gray clouds a mirror of her internal fears. The dragons unfurled from their sleeping caves, carved high among the jagged pinnacles of the pillar-like mountains where they made their home. Tianlong’s father yawned widely to welcome the new day as if he would swallow it whole.

“It is a beautiful day for a race,” he said heartily, even though drizzling rain trickled damp trails down his scales.

Tianlong hunched deeper into her family’s cave. She hated the dampness, which was truly unlucky for her since it was her family who was responsible for bringing rain to nourish the earth. Go figure she couldn’t have been born into a dragon family that oversaw the autumn harvest, or maybe even the ocean tides. Something that didn’t require suffering the dreary rain.

“Just beautiful,” she muttered, picking at a goose carcass without much enthusiasm.

Her father dumped another armload of geese and flopping carp in front of her. “Eat,” he commanded. “You’ll need your strength. Your mother tells me that Tiger Clan has already arrived, so we are already late.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, swallowing a carp to keep her father from nagging her any further.”Rat is the smallest and slowest, so their clan will likely be last.”

“Who cares about Rat?” Her father’s eyes narrowed. “It’s Tiger we need to be careful of.” He nudged the rest of her half-eaten goose toward her “Now eat.”

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Tianlong and her father slunk down from her family’s mountain head first, capering down the rocks with nimble and familiar ease. Near the bottom, her father leapt into the wide river that carved its meandering way through the valley of pillar mountains where the Dragon Clan had made their home splashing joyfully into the slate blue water. He twisted his body through the waves, undulating laterally just beneath the surface of the water as easily as a snake slithers through grass.

Tianlong landed on a rugged rock jutting above the waves and picked her way carefully along the river, hopping from rock to rock.

“Tianlong,” her father called, already a hundred meters upstream “Hurry.”

“I’m moving as fast as I can,” she yelled back.

“Get in the water and swim like a real dragon.” His annoyance resonated in embarrassingly loud echoes off the stony mountain walls that formed cliffs on either side of the river.

Tianlong prayed to *laotian*, the old father in the heavens, that no one else heard her father’s admonishment. She drew in a deep breath, clenched her jaw, and jumped in.

The water rushed cold and brisk over her scales, sending chill tremors down the length of her body and numbing her claws. Internal flaps closed off her ears and nostrils like the blowholes of whales, leaving her free to focus simply on swimming. Left to right, over and over again, the coils of her serpentine body made S-shapes through the water, propelling her forward.

She could swim for nearly an hour without pause, but Tianlong still came up for air more often than her father, who kept going while she gasped for another lungful of breath. He drew further ahead slowly and steadily, although never so far that he would lose sight of her if he looked back. Tianlong was sure he did it on purpose, to keep her moving faster rather than dawdle as she wanted to. Only a parent would understand the inner workings of their child so thoroughly that they needed no words to communicate, and Tianlong’s father was no exception.

The third time she broke the surface of the water to draw breath, Tianlong paused so long that she was forced to climb onto a nearby boulder lest she sink to the bottom. She squinted at the sky. The rain had stopped and the gray storm clouds still lingered, but now in the far distance, she could make out a ruddy orange glow limning the low hills that marked the boundary between the pillar mountains of the dragons’ home behind her and the sprawling, fertile lands of the human villages ahead. The Jade Emperor’s palace would not be far beyond the villagers’ vale.

“*Baba*,” she called out, and her father poked his head above the water. She pointed at the strange glow. “What is that?”

Her father glanced over, then shrugged. “Whatever it is, it is no business of ours, and our own is pressing enough. Let’s keep going. We’re almost there.”

Tianlong frowned, her gaze riveted by the orange, now flickering and throwing up a bright luminescence against the dark underbelly of the storm clouds. The unmistakably acrid scent of ember and char tickled her nose. "I think that's fire."

"Even more reason for us to keep going," her father said. "We are creatures of water. We certainly have no business with fire." He slipped back under the river's waves, apparently satisfied that the conversation was settled.

But Tianlong didn't follow. She stood on her boulder, her long, sinewy neck stretched toward the fire, her nostrils quivering as she read the wind's grim news.

Creatures had died and were still dying. Some of the Ox Clan, domesticated by humans to do human work, and some of the Dog Clan had perished in flame. Rooster Clan, too, had lost many of its members. Surely they all had known better than to linger when the fire started, Tianlong wondered. Why hadn't they run?

"Let's go!" her father called, his head bobbing in the river. "The Jade Emperor waits for no one."

Tianlong started to obey automatically, but a distant roar sounded, and a rush of sparks flew so high into the air that she flinched. Flames leapt tall enough to brush up against the clouds. Thick puffs of light gray smoke rose lazily to smudge the sky.

Even though she was small for a dragon, Tianlong was still several times bigger than the largest creature in a human village. And the ferocity of that fire made her heart jump. Surely she could still help whoever was left.

All she had to do was disappoint her father.

Dread filled her mouth again, sticking it closed. She wanted to be a good daughter, a good dragon that her clan could be proud of despite her size, especially on this most prestigious of days with the emperor and all of his kingdom watching to see who would be the most worthy to serve in his heavenly guard. Dragon Clan must be represented in the guard. Tianlong had to win for the pride of her kind, and to do so, she had to get to the Jade Emperor's palace on time.

But she also couldn't do nothing as this fire swept aside anything and everything in its path. She could smell fear on the wind, and it wasn't coming just from her.

She climbed out of the river and trundled across the grassy banks toward the hills.

"Tianlong!" her father roared from the riverbank. His whiskers flared from his nostrils, perpendicular to his body. "Get back here and do your duty!"

“I will, *baba*,” she threw back over her shoulder. “I promise. But I must see to this one thing first.”

“Tianlong,” her father growled in a final warning, his body half-raised from the water.

The fiery orange glow grew brighter. There wasn’t much time to lose,

“I promise,” she repeated, and raced ahead. She heard the crackling first, roaring so loudly as it whipped the winds about her in a frenzy that it nearly drowned the cries of the villagers caught within the firestorm. She crested the last hill and reared on her hind legs, gasping at the inferno, the blasting heat so hot that the edges of her scales began to curl. Steam hissed from her rapidly drying body, the moisture sucked up greedily by ash-laden gusts.

Tianlong ignored the pain of her scalding. She scanned the buildings, most of them already engulfed in flames. The shared common structures, constructed of plaster and wood, were still standing, but most of the smaller homes that had been built with cheaper, flimsier wood and mud had already burned to the ground or were on the verge of collapsing.

Movement drew her gaze to the middle distance, just beyond the largest building of the village, which she assumed was some sort of central governing place. A narrow river of mud-stained water no wider than a couple of meters, barely wide enough to accommodate her body, had failed as a fire break. Flames raged on the far bank as well, licking through green fields of soybeans.

Tianlong sniffed, then coughed and closed off her nostrils. Judging by the smell of the smoke, the flames had caught on the abundant fertilizer strewn through the fields rather than the legumes themselves. But it wouldn’t be long before the fire grew so hot that even the green plants caught flame.

Huddled in the middle of the creek were the villagers, each one holding on to another by hand, the water coming up to the waist of the adults. The swiftly flowing river tugged at the humans, threatening to drag them under with the current or push them further downstream, while the fire raged so close at the edge of the river banks that Tianlong could see the humans’ skin reddening. Babies squalled in their parents’ arms, who desperately tried to keep them above water, and small children wailed, clutching anyone who could keep them anchored to the group.

Tianlong wondered why the villagers weren't simply swimming downstream to get away from the flames until she spied the dam. A blockade of timber wood a couple of meters tall created a drop-off and a waterfall that surely the smallest and youngest children would not survive.

The river had been diverted to irrigate the farm fields. The villagers couldn't pass the dam. Not without help.

She moved down the hill, flanking the village and the worst of the fire, until she slipped into the narrow river upstream of the terrified humans. The water flowing over her fevered scales brought cool relief. She had never been so thankful for her water heritage.

A few of the humans had caught sight of her and they shouted in alarm, pointing and gesturing at her as she trod toward them, her claws sinking wrist-deep into the thick mud at the bottom of the river. The muck forced her to move slower than she would have liked, churning up thick clouds of debris that clouded the water even further. The mud coated her in a layer of muck that protected her from the worst of the heat being thrown by the fire raging on both sides of her.

A small child turned his head and stared at her with wide brown eyes, his wailing abruptly halted. He was hanging onto a man, presumably his father, like a monkey baby clinging to an adult, arms wrapped around the man's neck and his tiny feet hitched up around his father's rib cage.

The boy's flaming cheeks broke into a toothy smile that must have hurt, but he didn't seem to care.

"Long," he said. "*Shuilong*." And he reached his chubby fingers out to her without fear.

Water dragon.

Yes, Tianlong thought. That's right. Her family commanded water in the sky and in the earth, and here she was, bathed in its element. Fire raged, but here was a river at her disposal.

She dipped her snout below the surface and sucked in a great quantity of the river's water, then rose high, high, high up in the air. Some of the humans screamed, but most of them froze in place, staring at her looming over them.

She blew water, spraying it in a wide arc above the humans' heads and raining it down on the wall of flames coming from the village. The first arc disappeared in a sizzle of evaporating mist, but the next arc hit the sputtering fire and won. Flames died, one by one, as Tianlong continued spraying water from her throat, more than she'd sucked in, an endless stream that battled back the inferno until the river bank was a steaming, muddy mess of char and debris.

She turned her snout and swept her water breath over the soybean fields, dousing the smaller flames even quicker than she had the inferno in the village. Only when the last ember had died did she let go of her breath.

By then, the humans had scrambled out of the drained river and gathered near the half-burnt shell of their communal hall. Their strange chatter filled the air as they checked each other for injuries and made sure everyone was accounted for. She eyed them for a moment to make sure no one was crying, then she dropped back down to all fours. She'd emptied the river of water, and it was nothing more than a channel of mud now.

The effort of drawing on that much water had cost her an enormous amount of energy, and she laid down in the squishy muck to catch her breath. Baba was right, Tianlong thought. She wasn't much of a dragon.

The hot breeze of the fire's aftermath stirred over her body, ruffling damaged scales that fell from her hide and sank into the mud. She would hurt for a while, but she would regrow new scales. Perhaps the angry red flesh that showed beneath would finally add some lucky colors to her pattern.

"Shuilong."

The boy's tiny voice lifted Tianlong's head. The sight that greeted her made her want to sink into the mud after her fallen scales.

Along the river bank, the villagers lined up to peer down at her, whispering to each other. Worse, they were staring. At her.

Tianlong lowered her head and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the scale-prickling sensation of being stared at and talked about and judged. She wished she were anywhere else, that there was a cliff or cave or tree or something that she could hide under or behind.

The soft touch of a hand on her nostril startled her eyes open. The boy stared solemnly at her. In his other hand, he held out a rice dumpling wrapped in bamboo leaves, partially smooshed with its sticky rice filling oozing out one end in a cold, congealed clump, but it was a dumpling nevertheless.

Behind him, the villagers stood in silence, hands clasped before them in gestures of reverence and respect.

It took Tianlong a moment to understand. The dumpling was an offering of thanks, of gratitude and celebration.

She had never been thanked before.

She rose to her feet and with the gravity befitting the situation, took the dumpling from the boy. The luscious scent of salted duck eggs and sesame oil and sautéed mushrooms filled her nostrils as she unwrapped the dumpling and popped its sticky rice contents into her mouth, chewing slowly to honor the villagers' gift. They didn't have much, and had even less now that their homes had been destroyed, yet they had still given her food from their sparse stores.

Tianlong swallowed. "Thank you," she said, though she didn't know if the humans understood.

Warmth flooded through her, from her tongue down her throat to her belly, spreading to all four limbs and down to the tip of her tail. The exhaustion fell from her as easily as her burnt scales. Surprised, she flexed her claws, sensing the renewed energy flowing through her tendons. She had thought to rest a little while longer, but she now felt as if she could fly the rest of the way to the Jade Emperor's palace.

"Thank you," she said again, this time in wonder.

The boy smiled and bowed with his hands clasped to his chest, backing away a few steps before turning and scrambling up the river bank to rejoin his village.

Tianlong mimicked the bow as best she could, although it was difficult with her long, narrow body. The villagers waved as she launched into the air.

Catching a nearby thermal, Tianlong soared.

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Travel went much quicker with the villagers' blessing and without Baba.

Tianlong found where she'd left her father, but he was nowhere to be seen, so she flew onward toward the Jade Emperor's palace, following the river's winding course as that was the only route she knew.

Just before the sweeping tile rooftops of his palace came into view, she glimpsed a sodden brown bundle floating on a log in the middle of the river. She dipped closer to the water until she saw that it was a young rabbit, his wet fur plastered so closely to his body that he almost looked like Rat. His long ears drooped along his back.

"Why, Rabbit," she called out, "are you on your way to the Jade Emperor's palace, too?"

"I was," he said sourly. "Making good progress, too, until I slipped and fell into the water. I'm too heavy with all of this water in my fur to swim to shore."

Flush from her encounter with the villagers, Tianlong circled lower. "Here," she said, "let me help you."

She blew her water breath, sending a gentle wave of water that carried the log with Rabbit to the river bank. He hopped onto the grassy shore and scampered up its slope far enough to make sure he wouldn't fall back into the river, then shook the water off his fur. The tiny nub of his white tail fluffed back into a cotton ball. His long ears flopped upright and twitched at Tianlong in thanks.

"Many blessings of peace to you, Dragon," he said, and streaked through the brush toward the Jade Emperor's palace, his tan fur blending into the landscape.

Tianlong cruised the rest of the way, following Rabbit's tracks. She landed in the courtyard of the Jade Emperor's palace, her talons clacking against the stone cobblestones to announce her arrival.

She found her father quickly, his huge dragon form towering over the other parents sitting in the spectator stands lining one side of the courtyard. He glowered at her, his whiskers held quaveringly at his side. He wouldn't dare insult the Jade Emperor by displaying negativity. She would get her scolding at home later, in private, to save face here.

But she let her father's disapproval slough off her back like so much water. She'd done a good thing today, and she was proud of herself. No matter what happened with the race, she would be able to take home something just for her—the memory of a

small boy placing his hand trustingly on her nose and offering her a misshapen, but precious, dumpling.

“Dragon!” boomed the Jade Emperor. He threaded his way past Rat dancing in the middle of the courtyard—huh, she thought, so Rat hadn’t been that slow after all—and Ox chewing placidly on his cud, past Tigress prowling restlessly, and Rabbit settling down on his long haunches, unperturbed by neither the ruckus nor his ordeal in the river.

The emperor was dressed in long imperial robes of brilliant gold and yellow, embroidered in azure and vermilion and green with the celestial symbols of his office. Long, black moustaches hung down on either side of his face, reminding Tianlong of dragon whiskers, matched by a long beard that hung down to his waist.

Tianlong lowered the front half of her body to her elbows, managing a passable representation of human genuflection.

“Emperor,” she said. “I represent the Dragon Clan in your Great Race, as called to service.”

“So you do,” he replied. “So you do. Well done, too. You’ve placed fifth in the race. Seven more spots left in the guard.”

Tianlong blinked. “I don’t understand. I thought the race was to take place today.”

The Jade Emperor chuckled and rubbed his hands together in child-like glee. “Yes, it was. And it did. How quickly each of you responded to the summons was the race. The race started as soon as the summons was sent out.”

Tianlong met her father’s storming eyes and understood, her heart sinking below her feet. That’s why Baba was so angry with her. Not because she’d stopped to help the villagers, but because the Dragon Clan had already lost the race when the first representative had arrived.

Truly, Tianlong was unlucky to be the dragon who’d lost the pride of the clan. Who’d lost to...

“Who won?” she asked faintly.

“I did,” Rat said, breaking into another little jig. Ox glanced at Rat and raised a brow, but didn’t stop chewing cud long enough to say anything.

Dragon had lost to Rat, the smallest creature in the race. Tianlong would never live this down. She wanted to sink through the earth and pretend this day had never existed. Not even the glowing memories of the little boy could save her now.

The others gathered around her, a chorus of curious voices, polite and congratulatory. Tigress's cut through them all, asking the one thing on everyone's minds that no one but Tigress dared to voice: "What took you so long, Dragon?"

Tianlong thought about lying. Perhaps the summons got lost on the way to her clan. The mountains were high and hard to reach, after all. But, no, the message had arrived by pigeon. Or perhaps another had been chosen to race, and he'd woken up deathly ill, so Tianlong was chosen at the last second and had a huge deficit of time to make up.

No matter what kind of excuse or story Tianlong thought of, nothing felt right. She didn't want to share her experience with the fire and the villagers. It felt like boasting if she said anything.

But Tigress had asked, and now everyone—including the Jade Emperor—waited for an answer.

"A village caught fire and some humans fell into trouble," Tianlong said. She related the tale quickly and without embellishment. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the parents descending from the spectator stands to listen, including Baba. It made her want to finish her story even faster, and she tripped over her own tongue to do so, stuttering finally into uncomfortable silence.

"That is some story," Tigress said into the hushed quiet, almost—but not quite—snickering. She, too, was cognizant of the Jade Emperor's presence and was making a colossal effort to be polite.

"I must apologize on behalf of Dragon Clan," Baba said in a low, deferential rumble. A few of the young racers startled a few steps back at the sound of an elder dragon speaking. "I discovered on my way here that the fire was caused by lightning, accidentally sparked by my battling sons." His whiskers fell with shame. "They fight for the right to rule our clan next."

Tianlong tamped down the tide of disgust rising in her throat. Her brothers would be the death of her. Of the entire clan.

“She didn’t tell all of it,” Rabbit put in. “I got caught by the river and would never have made it here if it weren’t for Dragon using her water breath to help me gain land again.”

A murmur rose from the other contestants as Tianlong decided right then and there that she’d rather die than go back to her clan’s mountainous home. Helping Rabbit had wound up costing Dragon a higher rank in the race. No one would forgive her for anything she’d done this day.

The Jade Emperor raised his palms, and silence descended once again.

“Dragon,” he said seriously, the twinkle gone from his wise brown eyes. “You didn’t place first, as we all expected of the biggest, strongest, and fastest creature under the celestial skies.”

“No.” Tianlong hunched her shoulders, as if by doing so, she could more easily carry the weight of her mortification and regret. “I didn’t.”

“My villagers are lucky that you came along, Dragon,” the emperor continued. “For that, we will be forever thankful. The rest of the heavenly guard would do well to follow your example.” He nodded to the remaining seven creatures who had filed in as Tianlong related her story, unnoticed by the crowd until now. She twisted around at his glance.

Snake bobbed and weaved a greeting, one cousin to another, riding on the broad back of Horse. Sheep, Monkey, and Rooster chorused a hello, and Dog panted a lazy grin, her fur still dripping from her river crossing. Fat, happy Pig grunted from where he flopped on his side on the cobblestones.

The emperor spread his hands, palms open to the sky, in a gesture of benevolent benediction. “You won something greater than a race, Dragon. You won us, for you taught us to think of others, and not only of ourselves.” Tianlong’s heart beat faster. This did not sound like words for a loser. Behind the emperor and across from Tianlong, her father’s mouth dropped open in surprise, and his whiskers relaxed.

“You have earned your place among my heavenly guard,” the Jade Emperor said to Tianlong, “as the only creature of myth and legend in the zodiac. And for that, great Dragon, those born under your purview will forever be fortunate indeed.”

Tianlong dropped to all of her knees. “Emperor,” she managed. “I am not worthy.”

Unbelievably, the emperor pressed his palms together and bowed to Tianlong. “On the contrary. For your generous heart, your steadfast will, and your quick courage,” he smiled, and the clouds parted to let the sun shine through, “yours, Dragon, should be the soul by which we measure ours when we aspire to ascend to these heavenly gates.”

One by one, the race contestants bowed to Tianlong and murmured, “*Tianlong*.”
Tianlong. Celestial dragon.

Her father sank down to his knees, his whiskers drooped the lowest she’d ever seen them. The barest hint of a smile played about his lips.

“See, Tianlong,” he said under his breath so that only she could hear. “What did I tell you? The tiles chose rightly, as did our Jade Emperor, when choosing the best among us. You have the biggest heart, strongest will, and fastest courage of us all.”