

## **Whiskers on the Silk Road**

by Charles Cheung (8 years old)

Curling and snuggling up in a cozy basket, licking his paws in a camel caravan, the white furry creature peeked through his green eyes at the desolate and yellowish horizon. Strong gusts of wind stirring desert sand rustling his thin nose, he could smell pepper and cinnamon in the air. His name was Sevibone- a Persian cat with fur the colour of snow, and eyes like green glass. He had been born in Kazakhstan, a country in Central Asia, where his world was filled with wool, spices and gems.

Rogi, a superstitious merchant, believed Sevibone would bring luck. He kept him close and would summon him by ringing the bells slung beside the camels. Sevibone also made himself useful by keeping rodents away. And so, mile by mile, they journeyed from the west to the east over mountains and valleys, along the corridors and endless deserts to Chang'an in China.

The dry, clean scent of sand and camel fur gradually turned into perfume of wet earth, woodsmoke, herbs and aromas. The air grew heavy and the sounds grew dense. Among cheers of the crowds and firecrackers, the camel caravans marched through the canyon walls of Chang'an through the stone gate under the stern gaze of Tang soldiers in bronze armour. With his feline hair and ears standing upright, Sevibone peered from his basket, his eyes wide open. The strange music, the ladies in colourful costumes dancing with flowing sleeves, the laughing children singing an unfamiliar sound, the clink of copper coins from the stalls, this city was buzzing like a hive. Chang'an was a new rhythm for Rogi and Sevibone.

Rogi set up his stall, selling pepper, cinnamon, and wool near the Western market. Sevibone, while mostly dozing in the sun, explored every corner of the city, claiming every rooftop his territory, turning every single thing he saw into his toys, even the ceramic porcelain, which he tried hard to

squeeze into for a nap. A wanderer by night, he hunted plump mice in sacks that held more grain than he had ever seen.

Dashing through the alleys, long and short, chasing moths of silk was one of Sevibone's daily challenges. With leaps and bounds, he performed a spectacular, twisting jump to a moth on a lantern in the temple opposite the Western market. Extending his front paws, he shot his claws towards the moth like a furry cannonball. The moth, however, fluttered straight through the cat flap and vanished. Sevibone had no time to figure out where the moth went, but a new, overwhelming smell filled his senses. It was the smell of muddy puddles, canine musk, and strangely, meat. Sevibone froze, every hair on his body standing upright.

Slowly, he looked up.

There, in the courtyard, was Golden Fortune- a massive, brownish dog who lived in the temple. He believed the entire Chang'an, especially this courtyard, was under his protection. He had been lying in his favourite soft patch of mud, snoring peacefully, when a white missile exploded and rolled into his area. For a long, terrible moment, they just stared. Golden Fortune's brain, which worked at a fierce speed, processed the intruder standing in front of him. He had never in his dog's life seen such a white, hairy, creepy creature. A deep, rumbling growl started in his chest, a sound like thunder. The growl woke Sevibone- he was ready to fight too his green eyes locking onto his enemy's brown ones. What they didn't know was that there was an observer.

“Golden Fortune! Enough!”

The human voice was from a young woman, the daughter of a city official living next door. Her name was Moon. She watched Sevibone not only with fascination but with love and admiration. Never in her life had she ever seen an animal so exquisite and so adorable. Slowly, she knelt and extended a hand. Sevibone approached. There was an unfamiliar scent. On Moon's palm was a dried fish from the Yangtze River. Sevibone's eyes lit

up at the first bite- the unique sweetness, firmness, and earthy taste of the fish lingered on his tongue forever.

Sevibone began to visit Moon. They would sit in the courtyard, reading poetry, practising calligraphy or playing with a yarn ball under the tree. Sevibone loved curling at her feet, enjoying the moments of peace and silence away from the chaos of the city. Moon called him, “Jade Eyes”, and sometimes spoke to him of small sorrows and quiet joys, her words washing over Sevibone in a gentle breeze.

Rogi’s business grew. Long queues were at his stalls from dawn to dusk. His profit was not counted in coins, but in gold.

Seasons turned. One evening, as autumn chill arrived, Sevibone was curling on Moon’s lap by a charcoal fire. From the street came a familiar jangling sound— the bells, the command of Rogi. He was leaving. The camel caravans were reformed, bound for the west with a load of silk, tea and rolls of paper.

Sevibone lifted his head. It was the call of the desert, a flash of memory pulling at his heart: the sky full of stars, the taste of sand on the wind, and the galloping of the camels. Moon’s hand stilled on his fur. She understood.

“You hear the Road, Jade eyes?”

She lifted Sevibone and carried him to the courtyard gate. Rogi was there, checking saddlebags.

Rogi looked at Sevibone, then at the girl’s kind, sad face. He opened his arms. Moon placed Sevibone into the familiar basket, now lined with a piece of silk handkerchief Moon had secretly tucked inside—a pale yellow piece with the Chinese character of her name “Moon”.

Then, the caravan began to move. The basket swayed with the old rhythm. The gigantic stone gates of Chang'an passed overhead, and the endless road stretched like a bolt of silk.

Nestled in the silk handkerchief in the basket, Sevibone, the cat who had walked the Silk Road, closed his teary jade eyes dreaming of the silk moths and the human warmth, carrying the desert's sand in his fur, the mountains' chill in his bones, the sounds of a dozen languages in his ears, and the scent of the fish from Yangtze on his whiskers.

