



The Emperor's New Fur Coat

L. Shannon

*The Emperor's New Fur Coat is dedicated to a long-time, good friend,
Sandy wherever you are...*

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The Emperor's New Fur Coat

~ 1 ~

Once upon a time there was a young emperor, who tried to lead his people during difficult and troubled times. Emperor Ying Zong did his best to provide the leadership that his people needed but often he was forced to walk a delicate balance between appearances and what was the truth.

Emperor Ying Zong turned to his advisor. "Ping, who is next to be seen?"

Ping began his usual excessive verbal drivel. "Most Holy of Leaders, Most Gracious, Most Revered, Most Elegant..."

"Ping, who else is waiting?" he asked again. Ping had a habit of blathering on for hours in what the older man thought was appealing. Usually Shidibala which was the emperor's given name, was amused by Ping's antics, but today he had more bothersome things on his mind.

"Oh my Holy Wonder of Glorious Justice..."

"Ping... Oh, never mind. Guard, send in whoever is next."

The ornate doors closed behind the guard, and then immediately swung open again with a crash. Four of his royal guard escorted two men between them, each cuffed with the silver shackles marked with the imperial seal. The prisoners appeared strong and young, but they were filthy, covered in no more than tattered rags.

"What is this about? Who are these men?"

Ping stepped to his elbow with a ridiculous bow that dropped low over the carpeted dais. "These men, Chen and Cho, brothers of the Rho household, are charged with stealing."

Shidibala sighed. This was the fourth incident of theft this month. During such impoverished times, stealing even a crumb was taken very seriously. "What is the proof that they committed such crimes?"

"The brothers Rho were caught shortly after they stole chickens from a neighboring family." Ping swished his hand out with a flourish to present a brown feather. "This evidence was found with them at the time they were captured."

So these men were guilty. "What do the men have to say about the matter?"

“They have no defense, Most Honorable One.”

And of that the Emperor had no doubt since both men were gagged and could not speak at all.

Ping dropped to one knee before the emperor. “Waste not your precious time on such lowly matters as these petty, honorless thieves. Think instead of the celebration this evening and the new garments that have just been completed for your finery. Use your keen mind to worry over imperial concerns. Khayishan’s sons, your cousins, shall both be there as well as many young women for your consideration.”

That indeed was a worthy concern. His cousins felt they deserved the throne and his inheritance and perhaps they were right, but regardless, it could not happen yet. The unrest that they spread harmed their entire province. The only way to put down their effort was to present an impeccable image of wealth and success.

“Oh my Most Holy Emperor, let me take these tiniest of matters away from your mind.” Ping motioned the guards out. “Take them to join the work crew. There they can earn off their crimes.”

“Wait! Emperor, sire! Please wait!” A young woman ran forward toward the emperor’s dais. She was almost at his throne when one of his personal guards knocked her to the floor at his feet. “Please, Emperor Ying Zong. Please hear me out. My brothers meant no harm and committed no crimes.”

The young woman was dressed as poorly as her brothers. She was splattered with mud as if she had rolled in the rice fields and her hair was a snarled mess that straggled over her face and fell in long wet tangles fanning out around her body. Where she was pinned to the floor was quickly growing as foul and soiled as she was. “Lift the girl from the carpet.”

His guard immediately did as he commanded. The girl was lifted to her feet and placed once more on the lower stone floor.

“What is your name, girl child of Rho?”

Ping stepped in front of the girl. “Oh Master of the Empire, she is nothing and of no importance to your greatness.”

He stared down at Ping, letting one brow rise slowly to show Ping he meant to deal with this issue himself. And for once, Ping showed the keen intelligence that had earned him the position of advisor to three different rulers. He bowed low and backed out of the way, allowing

the girl once more into the emperor's sight.

“Well? What is your name, girl?”

She pulled free of the guard's hands and wiped her filthy hair back from her face. Even that did little to help since she was still so smeared in mud and the wayward hair fell forward again almost at once. “I am called Rho Chenzai.”

“And why is it that you have come to the summer palace to defend the innocence of these men?”

“Emperor Ying Zong, they did not commit the crimes they are accused of. I beg of you to release them so that they may return with me to our home.”

“Such who would steal from their neighbor can not be trusted within the welcoming walls of a home.” He looked over the men in question. They appeared no better than beggars. Surely any family home would be wealthier without such as them to steal all value and honor from a family name. “Your home will be better without these to dishonor your family.”

“No, please, our family needs the fine cloths that they produce to survive. That is our trade. Their skilled hands are our wealth and bound to our honor.”

Ping stepped to his elbow once more and said in a whispered voice, “Most Revered One, the sons of Khayishan have arrived and have asked for your hospitality. If you wish to see to them personally, I will discharge this.”

He acknowledged Ping's news with a nod and turned back to the girl. “Mistress Rho, I see no evidence that these men did not commit the crimes in question. They were caught almost within the act of their thievery. And neither they nor you show any likelihood of being producers of fine cloth when what you wear is little more than tattered rags. Your brothers will be added to the workers of the imperial gardens until suitably taught the meaning of worth.” Before she could offer any more than a single cry of objection, he motioned the guards to proceed and swept from the room to deal with his treacherous cousins who were already plotting his removal from the throne.

~ 2 ~

But young Chenzai of the ancient Rho family was not so easily turned aside. She knew that the Emperor was only a man, and men could be as fickle as the spring breeze. And she also

knew that her brothers could only be kept chained for so long before their wild natures would need to be set free. So Chenzai returned to her home where her parents and younger sisters mourned for their brothers. Each would have to work twice as hard to produce the cloth that the brothers would have made. None had the careful skill to work the silks as Chen and Cho did so easily.

Their mother wept and their father fretted, but Chenzai set her mind to better tasks. She thought hard about what could be done to free her brothers and in the end knew that the only way was to convince the Emperor. So that day while the others worried and fussed, Chenzai set about the beginnings of a plan. To get in to see the Emperor, she primped and scoured away any signs of hard labor from her face and body and then she used the fine silks that her brothers had created and fashioned them into a lavish robe to flow over her plain shift and cover her bare feet.

Chenzai returned to the palace and slipped inside to the great hall where the Emperor was celebrating some occasion with others who should have had more worthy things to do.

The Emperor was among three other men speaking about politics. She moved in close and listened to his pompous display. Within moments she realized that he was doing all he could to impress these men. She also realized that she wasn't likely to catch him alone this evening as she has hoped.

Still she watched on and was appalled to see all others grovel before the Emperor with obvious falseness. How was she to treat him as any other man when others treated him like a god to be worshiped? And the other women... Ying Zong barely even acknowledged their presence. Not that she could fault him for that as the women were indeed almost invisible with their faces and hands hidden and their demeanor demure enough to make Chenzai want to laugh.

Chenzai had always been different, in personality as well as family from the other women of the province. And tonight whether that difference might save or damn her was yet to be seen.

Either way there was no point in acting like the others and becoming invisible. For her plan to work, to save her brothers, Emperor Ying Zong had to see her. Not only that but he must be intrigued enough to want to see more of her.

* * *

Emperor Ying Zong smiled at his cousin just as warmly and just as falsely as his cousin smiled back. Already he was sure that the rumors of this cousins plotting against him were completely accurate. Not only did they plan to claim his throne, they had no qualms about killing

him if that was what it would take to remove him.

When another guest motioned for his attention, Ying Zong leapt at the excuse to leave the far from endearing company of his cousins. As he walked past the double doorways that led to the balcony, the cool breeze welcomed him with a caress that he could not ignore. Without a second thought, he stepped through the doors and into the warm night with its gentle breeze.

Then suddenly from the main room behind him one of the women dashed out and crashed into his chest. He waved off a nearby guard and set the woman back on her feet. Before he could even ask from what she fled, she pulled from his grip and climbed the rail of the balcony as if to jump the dangerous distance to the ground.

Just as she would have slipped into the night, he caught her arm and dragged her back to safety.

“Here, stop your struggling, girl.”

Her slight body sagged against him. The sudden, warm weight was curiously inviting. Her eyes turned up and met his gaze, stunning him into silence. They were soft blue, such an unusual color.

Her eyes widened and she tried to pull away. “Emperor Ying Zong! My gravest pardon. I meant no harm and only wanted to escape.” Although she trembled under his hands, her gaze was steady.

“Escape from what?” he asked. Surely no man would bring harm to such a lovely and delicate flower.

“One of the... he tried to... I was afraid and fled.” Her slim shoulders rose and fell as if she couldn’t explain her own actions.

Her luxuriant silk robes shifted and molded to her body in such a way that made him ache to touch both the silk and the petite body which it caressed.

“Please sire, please take no offense at my improper behavior. I wished only to leave here and escape any attention.” Her tiny hand brushed over his arm and the contact was lightning even through his own elaborate robes.

He couldn’t take his gaze from neither her cloudless eyes, nor the perfect oval that framed them. “There is no need for you to throw yourself from the balcony and risk death. You shall come to no harm now.”

“Oh thank you Emperor Ying Zong. You are truly generous.”

“Please call me Shidibala.” His given name slipped out past his tongue for the first time since he was given the throne. “What may I call you?”

“I beg for your forgiveness once more. We met today. I am called Rho Chenzai of the House of the Tiger.”

He studied her in disbelief. How could this possibly be the same girl who had been so covered in filth that the servants had complained to have to clean after her presence? Could it be that she had become this beautiful flower before him? And only in the space of a few hours. “How can it be? How have you come to this private celebration?” Thoughts crowded through his mind as he finally caught the one that mattered. “You are of the House of the Tiger? The House of Rho is that which carries the mark of the tiger?”

“Yes. Our house has always been known for its fine silks and centuries of honor.” Her voice was quiet but proud and deservedly so if what she said was the truth.

“The Tiger is also known for its warriors and assassins.” Surely such a small girl was neither. Yet, she had claimed that her brothers were the weavers of the fine silks. The House of the Tiger was rarely seen, but always welcomed, for as their friends, a man could gain a protection like no other and to be their enemy was to meet death.

“As for how I came to the celebration... The Tiger is invited to all. My father wished to come and speak to you regarding his sons and their freedom, but he grew ill and left before the opportunity arose to speak with you. He asked me to stay.”

The shock of his situation dawned on Shidibala. He had imprisoned two sons of the Tiger for common thievery. If the father was already offended then he was as good as dead. And if he was not already offended, he was sure to be soon enough. “I cannot let them go free.” It would show weakness to his enemies, and rise up chaos within the province. Too many of the common people looked at his every action for the sign of their own safety. “But I could change their labor to a more fitting role for the honor of their house.”

“I see. Is there nothing I could offer or do that might convince you?” Chenzai shifted ever so slightly, causing the silk to catch the light and dance over her enticing body. “Is there no way that I may charm you into releasing them completely?”

“You offer your charms for their freedom?” Her words could be the answer that he sought. He truly couldn’t completely free her brothers at this time, but perhaps he could build an alliance with her and her house, one that might hold off his enemies and lead to the release of her

brothers.

“I would offer anything for the freedom for my brothers.”

“Chenzai of the House of the Tiger, I would give you one moon to convince me of your charms, and then I will release your brothers from any harm.”

~ 3 ~

Chenzai looked upon the nearly full moon as she stood at the window of Shidibala's private chambers. The emperor was comfortably asleep on his plush bed and she was running out of time to free her brothers. Shidibala had sworn that he would honor their bargain, but she sensed a new reluctance in him. True to his sense of fairness he had moved her brothers from the garden and given them fine looms so that they might work their magic with the finest silk threads that could be found. And true to her word she had offered Shidibala every charm for which he had desire.

But such duty had become much pleasure. Truly she cared for him so deeply that she could feel the magical bond that would tie him forever to her. It was this magic which ruled the hearts of her family. For in the House of the Tiger, love was no small thing. For they were not of flesh that lived short lives but of magic which stretched on eternal and to be loved by one such as her, was to be both blessed and cursed with the wild magic.

And part of that curse would take her brothers under the full moon. Long tradition in her house sent them out to hunt as the wild wolf would under the three nights each month so that they would contain the beast for the rest of the time. For her and her brothers those three nights were when the moon was fullest. They were not yet old enough to hold off their wild needs when the rest of the family changed and went out to hunt.

That was in fact what had taken them out the night her brothers were caught for stealing chickens. Although they had been found with blood and feathers, both were from wild fowl not from tame hens. Soon they would again take the form of wolves and feel the need to run and hunt.

“Chenzai?” Shidibala's voice rumbled through her. When she did not return to his side, he joined her at the window. His body pressed against her back. His arms slid about her in a warm embrace. “What is it that has you out here watching the moon instead of resting at my

side?”

“My dearest Shidibala, a month has passed. Will you release my brothers from their service here? Will you allow them to return to the House of the Tiger?”

His silence filled the night so loudly that even the call of night birds and the rustle of wind, stilled, waiting with Chenzai. His embrace tightened. His lips pressed a lingering kiss to her bare shoulder. “I cannot.”

Chenzai trembled, locked in his betrayal. After all they had shared, she knew he was filled with honor and surely would not break his word lightly. Still she could think of no reason to continue to hold her brothers.

“Chenzai, they must stay here in the palace under my protection. It must not appear that I have made any mistakes in my rule. Too many enemies would use their release to make me look incompetent and foolish.

She breathed in deeply trying to remain calm, but emotion welled up in her at what he was casting aside. “You fear looking foolish in front of foolish men, but if you don’t do what you know in your heart is right, then you shall feel the fool and indeed be the fool.” She pulled out of his arms as she felt tears welling up, betraying her weakness.

He would soon know the truth about the magic. She could ease him through his first change, but would offer him no reprieve until he would honor their bargain. Until he regained his senses, she would offer him no kindness.

“Seek me out when you wish to regain your honor.” And with that, she swept up her long silk cloak and leapt from the window out into the night.

~ 4 ~

“Chenzai!” Shidibala searched the darkness, but caught not even a glimpse of his fleeing lover. He hadn’t expected her to understand the great pressure he was under to balance his duties with his desires. But also hadn’t expected her to leave him.

Aloud he said, “There are hundreds of other young women.” But in Shidibala’s heart he knew that none would fill the place that Chenzai had left behind. If she did not return in two days, he would go out and search for her.

Two days came and went and still the Emperor did not free the brothers, nor did he find Chenzai. On the second night he retired early, with a feeling of unease running through him. All

he wanted was to find Chenzai waiting for him within his chamber, but the room remained achingly empty. Surely a walk in the moonlight would clear his muddled thoughts...

And the next thing that Shidibala was aware of was waking in a field completely naked under the glare of the morning sunshine. How had he gotten here? How would he return to the palace without being seen lacking his clothing? He stood slowly and looked around to gather his options. Then suddenly three men on horseback pounded onto the field. His two cousins and Ping rode toward him.

Ping dived from his steed's back and immediately began to remove his own robe to offer it, but the smirking laughter of his cousins brought Shidibala up short. Although he didn't know yet what brought him to be here, he wasn't about to lose face in front of his enemy.

"Thank you, Ping, but I will not require your robe."

"But Emperor Ying Zong, you need it much more than I do."

"No, Ping. I came for a walk in the morning sun and decided to enjoy the air. I shall return to the palace just as I left."

When Ping looked as if he would object further, the emperor waved him away and turned to begin the walk back to the summer palace. The walk back was not long but somehow had become very public. He used every move to portray his regal air and refused to show any weakness or embarrassment to those he encountered. All the while he tried to imagine what could have led to the predicament in the first place.

By the time he reached his chamber and sank onto his bed, his mind had drifted back to Chenzai's last words to him. She had sworn that he would be seen as foolish and indeed he had been.

Did she have the power and hatred enough to place a curse upon him? How else could she have known?

He couldn't risk another night wandering the province without clothing. He summoned Ping and had him release Chenzai's brothers. He declared that they had worked off any possible crime and were now free to choose their own path. Because of his generous care of them, both offered to continue to work the silk for the palace, so long as they could live in the House of Rho.

"You mean the house of the Tiger?" he asked, wondering if they would confirm Chenzai's words.

Chen offered only, "I mean our family home."

"Will you take me to your home?" Then he could talk some sense into Chenzai and convince her to return with him. "I must seek out your sister, Chenzai."

Both brothers shook their heads and Chen answered, "We cannot. If you are meant to find her, then you shall."

Shidibala's heart tightened in fear. These two men were his only link to Chenzai. With them free he might never see her again. "And if I have you imprisoned once more?"

"Then I believe you are not meant to find her in neither this life nor the next. If she wishes to be found, you will find her tonight under the full moon." Cho bowed deeply and then both men left the palace with the speed of gazelles.

~ 5 ~

Shidibala paced his room, wishing for the moon to rise faster. As it lifted above the horizon, he felt a strange shiver run through him, as if some part of him that had been long buried wished to push to the surface. The longer he stared at the moon, the stronger the feeling became. And before long, he felt that inner part shatter and rend his body and there in the reflection from his finely polished floors was not a man at all but a pale and shimmering wolf. His clothing hung in rags and he quickly shook free of their remains. With the coming of the wolf was a sharp clarity of the senses. He easily picked up the gentle scent of Chenzai and followed it out the window. From there it was a dangerous jump the ground below and a long run past the forest and across the field. He trailed her for miles and came to an ancient forest where he at once knew must be her home.

The house of the Tiger was close.

Then with an unexpected crash, he was tumbled to the ground by another wolf body. This one was lean with light cream colored fur. Color and size mattered little because the blue eyes staring down at him were Chenzai's.

He had found her. Or rather they had found each other. And for this night they did nothing but run, play and enjoy the moonlight.

This time when morning came, Shidibala awoke in his own bed wrapped in the arms of his blue eyed wolf-woman.

And they lived happily ever after, at least for a time...

~*~

~THE END~

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About the Author



L. Shannon came into existence in June 2004. In the time Shannon doesn't spend writing or bothering hubby, she shows dogs, gardens and watches over her Butterfly Koi ponds. Writing started off as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a war against reality. L. Shannon's books are her way of jumping from the ship of the mundane and everyday to swim through the surreal waters of the paranormal.

You can read more about me and my writings at where I try to showcase my past, present and future work. You can contact me with comments at Also feel free to stop by my blog at where I often let my characters out to play, off leash, so to speak.