

NodrozOrigins: Lions and Tigers

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(2002)

A fresh group of Cubs join the Pai Zhua school to learn to harness and unleash their animal spirits. Among them are a Lion and Tiger, which worries Master Mao, because it is said that a Lion and Tiger will tear asunder what was once wrought.

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0 - Lions and Tigers

Pai Zhua School, Summer 2002

In a secluded area hidden in the depths of the west coast, there was a place of learning. A temple dedicated to the teaching of Pai Zhua, the ability to summon and use one's animal spirit in martial combat. Master Mao, a regal man of advanced age and small lithe stature, oversaw the running of the Pai Zhua School where young men and women scouted by Pai Zhua masters sent out into world came to learn the basics. These youths were called Cubs by older students. More than half of them would either quit or be dismissed before the summer was over.

The group of twenty or so young men and women stood on the training ground surrounded by buildings of the temple. He gazed around noting them. He started visibly suddenly. The Cubs noticed this and a hushed murmur erupted. Mao smoothed out his features. "Good morning. I am Master Mao. I trust you slept well," he asked in a faintly accented voice.

The students arrived late last night and had been given a place to sleep. They were awakened at dawn, given rice and milk for breakfast and were made to assemble here. There was another murmur of consent. Mao cleared his throat and laced his hands behind his back. "Yes, Master Mao or No Master Mao are appropriate responses here," he said.

"Yes, Master Mao," the Cubs said together.

Mao nodded and gave a faint smile. "You were all recruited and invited here for one major reason. Those who can see animal spirits in others have seen yours clearly," he said. He narrowed his eyes at the Cubs, unsettled.

"Forgive me, Master Mao, but why do you keep eyeballing me and that guy over there?" one of them asked. A young man with dark hair and warm brown eyes asked. He had short hair and stood at a ready stance. He was gesturing to another young man of the same age. His brown hair was slightly too long, his eyes were a green-ish blue and his face bore witness to native American ancestry. He shifted slightly.

Master Mao gave a tight smile. "It's rare to have lions and tigers in the same group," he answered. "But that means I'll be taking particular interest in both of you," he added. "What's your name?" he asked the boy who'd spoken.

The young man scratched his squared jaw. "Austin John Scott. AJ," he answered.

Mao nodded and glanced at the other young man expectantly. "Damien Henderson, Master," he drawled with a distinct Texas twang. "You're interested in us because you're the cat expert, right?" he asked.

"Are you a spirit seer?" Mao asked, intrigued.

"If that's what you call it," Damien answered.

Mao nodded again. He cleared his throat. "Beginning today your training will begin. Your training will be strenuous. Some of you won't make it," he warned addressing the entire class. "In the mornings you will be responsible for cooking your breakfast I suggest making a schedule amongst yourselves. The mornings will be dedicated to the basics of Pai Zhua with the emphasis on learning to release and control your animals spirits. You will then be responsible for cooking your midday meal. The afternoon will be dedicated to learning from a specialized Master.

"As Damien so accurately stated, I am the cat expert. I will tutor those of you feline animal spirits. You will all meet your masters' later today. Afterwards, you'll be responsible, once again, for feeding yourselves. The evening will be your free time," he explained.

"Spread out. We are beginning now," he stated. The startled Cubs scrambled to do as they were told. Mao began to teach them the basics of the discipline.

AJ Scott yawned and cracked his neck. He thought his brother was a slave driver when it came to teaching karate. He made a mental note to never introduce them. Ever.

Raising a brow he watched some of the other Cubs approach him. Among them was that Damien guy. Also amongst them were a couple of pretty girls. An Indian girl with wide almond shaped eyes and long straight black hair was chatting amicably with a willowy blond with bright green eyes. Damien was didn't seem to be pleased to be swept up along the wake of the blue eyed blond guy who was making a beeline toward AJ.

AJ wasn't overly sociable. He blamed being a twin. His sister Randi and he were each others' friend for a long time. Only when AJ and his family moved from Angel Grove to Stone

Canyon did they really start stepping out their shells. AJ met and befriended a guy named Winter Baker and was all but enveloped into the Baker clan. Winter was older than AJ but he and his sister had skipped a grade before the move. So he was slightly wary as the group approached. The blond guy, the ring leader, offered a big friendly smile. "Hi. I'm Evan. Evan Chamberlain," he greeted. He was making it his mission to meet every Cub in his group. Especially the loners like AJ and Damien.

"AJ," he said slowly.

"I'm Zoe Myers," the blond girl said, running her fingers through her pixie cut hair.

"Divya Majumdar," the other girl greeted.

"And you know his name," Evan said, jerking a thumb at Damien. "Wanna do dinner? Some of the others are breaking into groups so they don't have to cook as much. Lame if you ask me. We'll definitely have to work out some of kind schedule or else it'll get out of hand quickly. We barely survived lunch," he said good-naturedly.

"Sure," AJ said. There was no reason to refuse.

"Great," Evan said. He looked toward the kitchen when they heard a loud crash and muffled curses as two groups argued over who's turn it was to cook. He grimaced. "Yeah, definitely we'll need to make a schedule," he said.

Damien actually gave a crooked grin. "You believe in schedules, don'cha?" he drawled.

Divya looked at him astounded. "Wow. That smile coupled with that accent. I think I'm going to faint," she said dramatically and put the back of her hand to brow. She slouched back against Zoe for support.

Zoe snickered. "Get ahold of yourself," she said.

Damien's grin stretched wider. AJ snorted and Evan chuckled. He was going to like this group. He had a good feeling. "I do like schedules," he answered. "But just winging it for now, I vote we wait," he said.

"Agreed," Zoe answered.

"Definitely," Divya nodded. "Oh, hey. What do you guys think all that stuff about Lions and tigers was about?" she asked, looking back and forth between AJ and Damien. The two of them eyed each other warily.

The crunch of an apple interrupted the silence. They saw a young man sat on a barrel nearby. He was a little older than them, horrendously thin but strangely fit. His light brown hair was too long but his brown eyes were merry. "I can answer that," he said.

"Who are you? You aren't one of the Cubs," Zoe said curiously.

He shook his head. "I'm not a student here. Officially," he said and gave a wolfish grin. "Name's RJ." he said and took another bite of apple.

"You said you were going to tell us about the lions and tigers thing," Divya reminded him.

RJ nodded. "There's a prophecy of sorts that makes all the old Master's worry. Something about a Lion and Tiger tearing asunder what was wrought long ago. They get antsy any time a lion and tiger come around at the same time. Wouldn't worry about it too much," he said and gave a shrug. "Any of you working with Master Finn?" he asked.

"I am," Divya answered.

RJ pulled a small leather bag out of his tunic and tossed it at her. She caught it deftly and looked at it curiously. "Give him that for me. And when he gets ticked off, don't show fear," he said and hopped off the barrel. He gave them a wry wave. "See ya round," he said and wandered off, his loping gait covering ground until he was soon out of sight.

AJ watched him go. He glanced at Damien. The other guy raised a brow. They seemed to have a similar thought. They both turned and walked away from the group, leaving the other three watching them.

Divya scrunched her nose. "Well that sucks. I thought we were getting together a great group here. The three hottest guys in this place were almost all ours," she complained to Zoe.

Zoe laughed. "Don't give up yet. They're letting some silly nonsense get to them. Delivered, might I add, from a seriously fishy guy. No offense," she added.
Divya giggled at the joke.

Evan sighed. "Come on, we'll make enough for them, too," he prompted. The two girls agreed and the trio went to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

Damien Henderson had been born and raised in west Texas. His grandfather had been full-blooded Apache. He'd also been a medicine man. Damien never got to meet him so he had no idea if the ability to see animal spirits was inherited from him or not. He'd always known his animal spirit, a majestic lion. Starting from a young age, he often spirit walked with him.

However, he'd never attempted to set it free of his body.

After four weeks of trying, he hadn't succeeded yet.

On a rare free day, he found himself in the lush jungle-like forest surrounding the Pai Zhuq School. He had a lot to think about. He'd known he wasn't going back to Texas to stay after the summer. Just long enough to officially quit school so he could relocate and continue studying Pai Zhua and get his Master's Stripes.

His mother changed things up on him. She moved to California with her new husband.

Damien heard a slight sound. He cocked his head. Staying low to ground, on bare feet, he moved toward the sound. He could now make out voices. Moving closer, he peered through the foliage and was surprised to see that AJ guy talking to a stranger. Damien had been careful to take stock of everyone at the School, including RJ, who seemed to come and go at will while managing not to be caught.

The older guy talking to AJ was not someone he knew. About the same height as AJ, the guy was built like a brick house with wide shoulders and chest. He had the same dark hair and warm eyes as AJ. They also had the same jaw. A brother? What was he doing here? Damien frowned. Their voices weren't the sound he heard before.

He moved away. A wild feral smell hit him full on. It was a smell he was familiar with. His paternal grandfather was a hogger. Somewhere nearby was a wild hog. He uttered a curse under his breath and made his way back to where he'd seen AJ and the other guy. Looking annoyed and frustrated, AJ was now alone.

"Where did the other one go?" Damien demanded as he emerged from the brush, looking around.

AJ jumped slightly. "Geeze. Where did you come from?" he asked.

"Never mind that. It's dangerous. Where'd that other guy go? There's a--" Damien didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. A wild angry squeal and the crashing of underbrush heralded the arrival of a very large, very angry wild pig. He was heading straight for AJ and Damien.

Damien pushed AJ out the way and sprang backwards. He landed awkwardly and fell on his butt. The pig wheeled around and came straight at him.

AJ got to his feet as the hog barreled toward Damien. First Jason and now a freakin' wild hog? Could this day get any worse? He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly.

The hog cried out again and turned around, heading toward the new annoyance.

Damien managed to scrambled back to his feet. The two of them instinctively took stances.

"Grace and Power! Unleash the Tiger!"

"Majesty and Strength! Unleash the Lion!"

From each of them large animals leapt. Damien's lion was bluish green while AJ's tiger was white and black. The two big cats came at the hog with roars. The hog squealed and made a U-turn and make a hasty retreat.

There was a tense moment when the two cats paced around each other as AJ and Damien watched. Then they touched noses, rubbed against each other and dissipated.

Damien fell back on his butt again. AJ collapsed to his knees. Damien suddenly grinned. "Well, I reckon we ain't gonna tear asunder what was wrought," he declared.

AJ laughed. "I reckon," he agreed, mimicking Damien's accent. The two of them fall back in fits of laughter. It was a nervous release of fear and relief.

Evan, Zoe and Divya were heading to the kitchen when AJ and Damien emerged from the forest, chatting good-naturedly and laughing about something. They were stunned. Forgetting the kitchen, they walked toward the two guys. "Are you guys friends now or something?" Zoe asked.

AJ and Damien looked at each other assessingly. "I reckon. You reckon?" Damien asked.

"I reckon," AJ agreed. They began laughing again, leaving their new friends staring at them curiously.

Divya beamed. "Great. Let's get something to eat!" she prompted.

"Yeah, we were just headed toward the kitchen," Evan said.

"I could eat," AJ said.

"Me, too," Damien agreed.

"Then you're heading the wrong way," a different voice interrupted. They turned to see RJ standing nearby. "Follow me and I'll introduce you to the food of the Gods," he said.

"And what would that be?" Zoe asked dryly.

"Pizza," RJ said and began walking off with every expectation that they would follow him. Tired of the bland fare available at the school, if RJ knew where to find pizza, they didn't hesitate to follow him.

-The End-