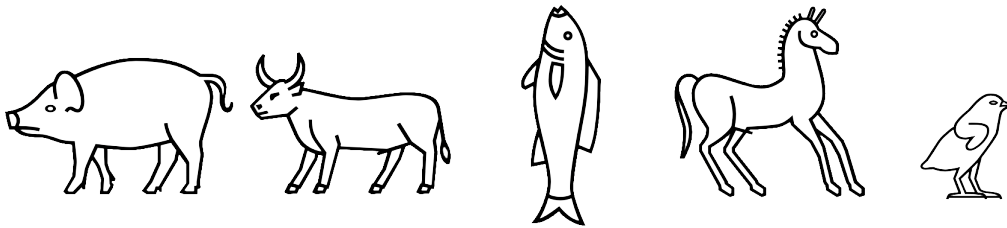


An excerpt from:

TAMIU

A Cat's Tale

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Illustrations by Fiorella Ikeue



FOURTEEN

The Domesticated Ones

Tamiu wandered around the Human Village. Some other Humans stopped to look at her, but other than Shibtuheddu, no one spoke to her.

She stopped outside the ring of broken trees where the pink Boars lived.

“Hey, pink Boar,” called Tamiu. “Have you been tamed?”

“We are Pigs,” said one of them. “I am Sahu. And we are not tamed. We are domesticated, like the Horses.”

Indeed, unlike the Boars, these pigs talked like mice. Like they’d forgotten the taste of meat.

Tamiu wrinkled her nose. “You say that like you are happy with it.”

“Aren’t you happy being a little Lion?”

“I’m not a Lion,” said Tamiu. “Not yet.”

“Well, we are not Boars,” said Sahu the pig. “Not anymore.” He flopped into the mud and began to roll around.

Disgusted, Tamiu walked on.

Next, she came upon the ring of broken trees where the horses lived.

“Hey, horse,” said Tamiu.

“Call me Sisu,” said a horse.

“My name is Tamiu, of the Cat Clan. Have the Humans trapped you here in their Village?”

“Trapped?” said Sisu, looking surprised. “No, no! The Humans protect us. We work for them, and they make sure we have all kinds of grass to eat. Even juicy apples and carrots sometimes.”

“Can you tell me,” asked Tamiu, “Just what is ‘work’?”

Sisu stepped closer to Tamiu and sniffed.

“A meat eater,” said Sisu. “No wonder you don’t know what work is. Your kind never does. Except the Humans.”

“I heard that work is Human magic.”

“Work is simple. Work is doing something for someone else, something they need, something that they can’t do for themselves. Or maybe something

they don't want to."

"Why would anyone do that?" asked Tamiu.

"Because they give you something in return."

"Is that how you were tamed?"

Sisu thought about this question.

"Maybe," she said.

Tamiu licked at a paw and turned around. She spotted a Human standing in the middle of a group of junglefowl. The Human threw seeds onto the ground, and the junglefowl began to peck them up from the dirt. Tamiu waited for the Human to leave, and then she called out to one of the junglefowl.

"Hey, junglefowl," called Tamiu.

"We are not junglefowl anymore," said the bird. "We left that life behind. We are called chickens. We are the Humans' favorite."

"Are you happy being domesticated?"

"Happy?" squawked the chicken. "What a crazy question. Do you see all these seeds? Where else in the world are there so many seeds, falling all around your feet, day after day? This is paradise!"

"But you do work for them?" asked Tamiu.

"The easiest work in the world," said the chicken. "We lay eggs."

"That isn't work," said Tamiu. "All birds lay eggs."

"But we lay eggs for the Humans," said the chicken. "They eat our eggs."

Tamiu started to feel sick again. "You let them eat your eggs?"

The chicken cocked her head. "Not all of them. And with so many seeds to eat, we can lay many, many eggs. It isn't so bad."

Tamiu shuddered and walked on. She came to the field where the

aurochs pulled broken trees, ripping holes in the dirt. She watched them for a while, watched the Humans shouting at them, pushing and pulling and hitting them with vines.

Another creature came up to Tamiu. Like a Boar or a Pig, but with a strong-looking body, longer legs, a longer snout, and sharp teeth. It sniffed at Tamiu a bit, wagging its tail happily. Tamiu ignored this. Then it sat down beside her, its tongue hanging out of its mouth. This creature seemed rather stupid.

“Those poor aurochs,” said Tamiu. “That looks like a miserable life.”

“Those are cows,” said the other creature. “Once they were aurochs, but now they’re domesticated, so they are called cows. They give the Humans their milk, and they pull the Human ploughs to help them grow wheat.”

Tamiu cocked her head.

“You know a lot about this place, despite your looks.”

“Of course I do,” said the creature. “I’ve been here longer than anyone. I’m the Humans’ most beloved friend, and I’m the boss of all of these creatures in the Village.”

“What is a boss?” asked Tamiu. “Is that like a leader?”

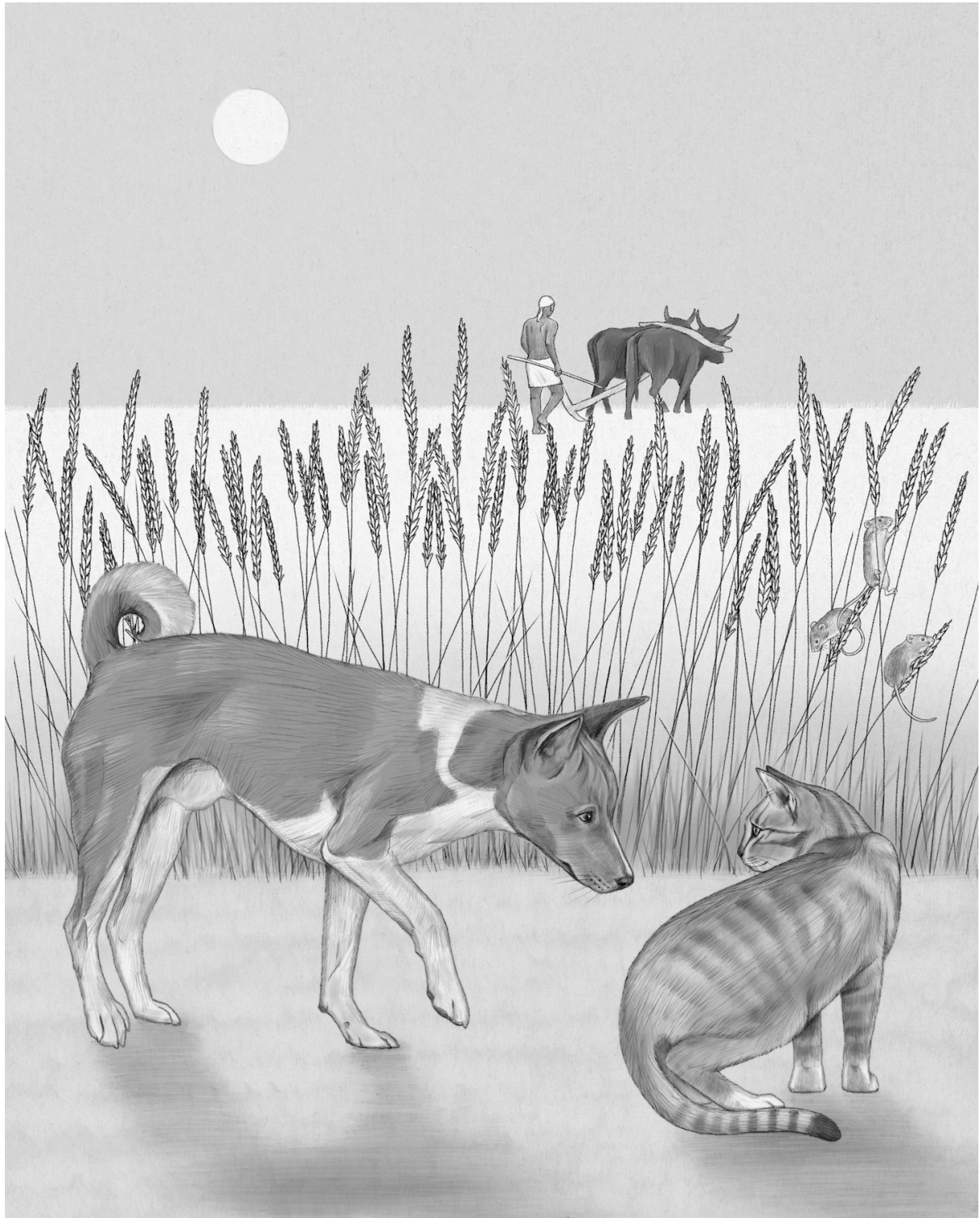
“A boss is like a leader, but one who isn’t a member of the group, and doesn’t help them in their work. A boss just makes sure the group keeps working. But I’m more than just a boss. I help the Humans do everything. I help them hunt. I help them control the other creatures. I even cheer them up when they are sad.”

“You almost sound proud of that pathetic life.”

“Of course I am proud. What honor could be higher than being of use to my Pack?”

“What’s your name?” asked Tamiu.

“Call me Dog,” said the creature. “And what kinds of things are you good at?”



FIFTEEN

The Easiest Thing in the World

“So you are Dog,” said Tamiu. “I’m a hunter.” She thought of saying more, but decided not to.

“What do you catch?” asked Dog, looking very interested.

“I can catch anything,” she said.

“Can you fly?” asked Dog.

“Do I seem like I can fly?” asked Tamiu.

Dog stopped to consider this. He looked carefully at Tamiu’s legs, her paws, her body, her tail. He walked in a circle around her, furrowing his brow and sniffing. Tamiu whirled around and swatted the air near his face, and he jumped back, squaring his shoulders. He suddenly looked very strong. This surprised Tamiu. Dog, too, looked surprised by how fast she was.

“No,” said Tamiu. “I can’t fly.”

Dog relaxed. “I was just about to make my guess,” he said.

Tamiu relaxed as well. “I can catch birds that fly, though,” she said. “And I can fight off Falcons and Hawks when I need to.”

Dog nodded. “That’s a very useful skill, if you’re small enough for Hawks to bother you. Can you catch mice?”

“Of course I can,” said Tamiu. “Mice are the easiest thing in the world for a Cat to catch.”

Dog looked very surprised by this. He cocked his head, looking Tamiu up and down carefully again.

“If that’s true,” he said, “then show me. Come this way.”

Dog led Tamiu past the cows, to a field where very tall stalks of grass

grew in long, straight rows. Here and there in the field were Humans, pacing back and forth with long broken tree branches in their hands.

“They are hunting for mice and birds,” said Dog.

“Why are they carrying those tree pieces?” asked Tamiu.

“To scare away the mice or birds if they find them.”

“Scare them away? You said they were hunting them. If they scare them away, then they will be harder to catch.”

“The Humans don’t care if they catch them. They don’t like to eat mice or birds.”

“So the Humans hunt prey they don’t like to eat,” said Tamiu. “And they hunt prey that they don’t care if they catch, and they hunt them by scaring them away.” She thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think these Humans are quite as clever as all the others say.”

Dog smacked his lips. “I don’t understand much of what they do either, to be honest. But they seem quite sure of it, and they can do incredible things.”

“Incredible things,” said Tamiu. “Like catching fish easily?”

“Sure,” said Dog. “They eat fish like the mice eat seeds.”

Tamiu looked out at the field. She saw a pair of mice ripping down a stalk of grass and eating its seeds. They finished, and ripped down another stalk, then another. Finally a Human saw them, and ran at them, shouting and hitting the ground with his tree branch. The mice scurried away.

“I’m not sure I believe that,” said Tamiu.

“It’s true,” said Dog. “If you stay here, you will see.”

“Whatever you say,” said Tamiu.

SIXTEEN

Anything You Want

“So you want me to prove to you that I can stalk these fields and catch a mouse,” said Tamiu. “Is that right?”

“Well,” said Dog, “if it’s as easy as you say it is, then I want you to catch as many as you can. Kill them, but don’t eat them. When you are finished, bring them back to the Village and find me.”

Dog started to walk off.

“Wait,” said Tamiu. “I know what this is. This is work.”

Dog stopped, looking back.

“Yes,” he said. “Everyone who stays in the Village must work.”

“That means I’m supposed to get something in return,” she said.

“What do you want?” asked Dog.

“I want to know where to find the Clan of the Lions,” she said.

Dog’s tongue hung out of his mouth, and he made a funny face that mimicked the strange curly looks of the Apes and the Humans.

“That is a big price, Cat.”

“Can the Humans find them for me?”

“Sure,” said Dog. “But not in one day. That will take some time. If you are as good as you say at hunting mice, then you can work here while you wait. Until then, do you want anything else?”

Tamiu thought about this. “What can you give me?” she asked.

“The Humans can get you anything at all. Anything, name your price.” Tamiu thought very carefully about this.

“Anything at all?” she asked.

“Anything,” said Dog.

“Then this is my price,” said Tamiu. She sat on her haunches and puffed up her chest proudly, curling her tail over her paws. “I want the Humans to make me a dry, warm, cozy den to sleep in when it rains. I want my den to sit on the tallest perch in the Village, overlooking everything from upon high. And I want them to bring me fish to eat every day.”

Dog listened carefully. He seemed to be waiting for her to say more. Finally, he said:

“Is that all?”

“What else could there be to ask for?” said Tamiu.

“My price was much higher,” said Dog. “As you want fish, I too wanted meat. But more important to me was unconditional love, and the promise of always belonging in the Village.”

“I have no need to belong,” said Tamiu, “for I have been able to survive all this time on my own, and I will always be able to. And I need not trade for love. How could anyone who meets me not love me?”

“Maybe your Clan is different,” said Dog. “In mine, we live and die by the Pack.”

Tamiu thought about this. “Where does the Dog Clan live?”

“Dog is just my personal name,” said Dog. “I am a Wolf.”

“You?” Tamiu thought this must be a joke. “A Wolf?! I have met the Wolves. You are no Wolf.”

“I know that I have changed some.” Dog made a sad face. “But I had no choice. I had become a Lone Wolf, and I was close to death. That’s why I joined the Humans.”

Tamiu thought of Upuaut. She didn’t want this strange Dog-Wolf

creature to see her sadness, so she turned away.

“I will catch your mice now,” she said. “Tell the Humans in the field to stop chasing them, and stay out of my way.”

SEVENTEEN

The Work of Fire

The mice of the fields were used to being chased by the Humans, who were awkward on their two legs, and slow. They were used to being chased by Dog, who was fast and powerful but noisy and clumsy. They had never seen a Cat before.

Tamiu stalked the fields, making short work of them. She wanted badly to eat them because she was so hungry, but she focused on what Dog had said, and on the delectable aroma and flavor of fish in her memory. She just had to wait. When the sun had set, Dog called out to her from the darkness of the fields.

“Did you catch any?”

“Yes,” answered Tamiu. “And I am still hunting.”

“But it is night now.”

“I can hunt better at night, now that it is cool.”

“You can see?” Dog sounded skeptical.

Tamiu thought the question was silly. “You can’t?”

Dog came running up to her, his tongue hanging out stupidly. He noticed the pile of mice she had caught.

“You are a truly gifted hunter,” he said, impressed.

Tamiu flicked her tail, turning away. “This is what Cats do,” she said.

“In the Human Village,” said Dog, “no one has to work at night.”

“How silly,” said Tamiu. “Night is when Cats do everything.”

“Bring the ones you caught,” said Dog. “The Humans are waiting.”

Tamiu gathered up the pile of mice by their tails in her jaws, and she followed Dog.

In the center of the village, there were piles of broken tree branches with little Fires prancing on top slowly eating them, and the Humans gathered around these. They poked the Fires with smaller branches. On the ends of some branches they had skewered pieces of meat, and were holding them up to the Fires as if teasing them with the meat but not letting them eat it. Despite all of this, the Fires stayed in their places. They growled quietly but did not roar. They pranced and flickered, but did not spread.

“What are they doing?” asked Tamiu.

“They’re cooking,” said Dog. “It makes meat tastier.”

“Aren’t they afraid of the Fires?”

“What is there to fear? They created these Fires, and they live only as long as the Humans need them.”

Shibtuheddu came over to them and crouched down. Tamiu dropped the mice at her feet.

Shibtuheddu counted them and then gathered them up into a bundle. She stood, holding the bundle up to show to the other Humans.

“Behold!” cried Shibtuheddu. “The magic of Tamiu the cat! Newest member of our Village!”

The Humans gathered around to look at the bundle of mice and then at Tamiu, amazed. When they had all had a chance to see, Shibtuheddu threw the mice to a Fire, which began devouring them immediately.

“Those were mine,” said Tamiu, regarding the Fire uneasily. Her stomach rumbled.

Shibtuheddu turned to her, smiling.

“With us, Tamiu, you will never have to eat mice again.”

Shibtuheddu gestured at another Human, who approached Tamiu and laid a big, fat cooked salmon at her feet. Tamiu sniffed at it. Its skin looked crispy and it smelled even more delicious than the ones the Bears had caught. She looked up at the Human suspiciously.

“Eat your fill,” said Shibtuheddu. “You are one of us now.”

Tamiu bit into the salmon, and an incredible taste and texture filled her mouth. Salty, oily, and savory. Crispy on the surface, but juicy and flaky within. Nothing in the Woodlands had ever tasted like this.

“That,” said Dog, “is the work of Fire.”

EIGHTEEN

The Counting Magic

After eating, Tamiu napped beside one of the Fires. It was warm and the earth was soft. A little while later, Dog poked her with his snout, waking her.

“What do you think?” he said, gesturing at a group of Humans. Tamiu looked at them. In the light of the Fire, they were tying tree branches together into a tower.

“What is that?” asked Tamiu.

“Your new home,” he said. “You asked for a high, dry den overlooking the Village.”

“All this for some mice,” said Tamiu.

“They say you can hunt at night if you prefer. You caught ten mice today. Can you catch ten again tomorrow?”

“Of course, if there are ten to catch.”

“The Humans count everything,” said Dog. “It is called math.”

“More Human magic?”

“Yes,” said Dog. “They count and weigh everything. Meat. Fish. Trees. Wheat. Themselves. They always want three things, if they can get them: surplus, profit, and growth.”

“Growth I know. What are the other two?”

“It is mysterious even to me. All we need to know is that for the Humans, more is always better, and less is always worse.”

“Then eventually I will catch all the mice,” said Tamiu. “What then? Will they still bring me fish?”

Dog cocked his head.

“What a strange question,” he said. “I guess we will have to see.”

