

*THE FALL OF ANY DRAGON IS HEART RENDING
THE FALL OF THE LAST SORCERER . . .*

Chapter 1

1030 words

The last sorcerer dragon woke. The usual inescapable, chaotic thoughts were there. Thoughts too agonizing to speak bound his mind: *It is easy to see the future when you're alone in it. She is gone.*

Ao Rue stretched carefully, keeping his wings tight, his movements small. Cascades of gold dust slid down with his cautious stretchings. *Carefully! Softly!* It wouldn't do to disturb the small feline stretched across the warmth of his snout. Leave it to a cat to find the one warm place amid the penetrating cold of the desert night.

The serpentine body was still supple, still powerful. The silver lids lifted slightly. Even at first waking, the oddly-hued blue eyes glowed with energy long dormant. The pointed tail curled lazily back upon itself and flicked an annoying nugget from beneath a scale, leaving behind the protective coating of gold.

The dragon smirked slightly: *If ever the future remembers us, there'll be some aerodynamic justification for the tail's fine point. Perhaps? Once it had been a source of great pleasure. Now, it was a wonderful scale and tooth cleaner.*

The cat stirred, sensitive to his tiny movement. The dragon stilled. *Cats and dragons; dragons and cats. So it has always been. Cats are art; dragons are power. Cats' softness brought beauty to dragon eyes. Always posing, always graceful. Cats are soft warmth; dragons awesome glitter.*

This cat was old. Deeply hollowed in the flanks, given more to sleep than waking. Her fur was matted and uneven. She was never too far away. The dragon could hardly focus on her where she dozed between his eyes. But she was familiar. They had been together for a long time. A deep, pained affection flashed across his burning eyes, replaced quickly with arrogance.

It wouldn't do to let the little devil know. Who could guess how much longer she might live? And then our small joining would only be more pain.

As the dragon recalled the once-bright silver-gray fur, vaguely marked with dark stripes, the golden eyes, the once full and sleek body -- he wondered who she would talk to if he passed on first. A small snort of blue-gray smoke popped from the nostrils: *passed on first? Dragons always pick their own time! Well, they were supposed to, supposed to. In those dark, demon-filled days, nothing had been natural, nothing right.* The cat sighed with seeming pleasure as the small smoke cloud rolled over her, billowed up and out the cave mouth.

Still, cats had spoken less and less as, one after another, the dragons had their immortality ripped from them: *For what? Power? Glory? Destiny?* The furred creatures always seemed to know when a dragon would choose the Last Flight. They'd gather on the dunes and on the lingering warmth of the black stone slabs. Their eyes would raise toward the flash of incandescence as the dragon unleashed the full power of its fires. In unison, they'd cry out with the Pain Beyond Speaking, that long, eerie wail that comes both from nowhere and from everywhere. It was as if their little bodies held all the pain of the world. Their eyes wouldn't follow the sharp rain of gold and multicolored gems that fell from the

dragon's pyre to color the pale sand. Instead, they always watched something move away from the flash, something not even a dragon's sorcerous eyes could see. Later, they would shun the patches of glittering remains. There had been many dragons, and as time passed, the cats had fewer and fewer places to tread. Was this strange ritual their deep wisdom or only simple hope? No one knew. And if the cats did, they weren't telling anyone.

I wonder if there will be any cats left for my time? There are fewer and fewer each day. This desert is not comfortable for them. Were it not for me this nose nester would have been dead or gone long ago. Cats hardly speak anymore. They probably lack the interest. They're the last of the animals who remember how. They found us interesting. When I go, they will probably still know how to talk, but they'll be silent. Nothing will intrigue them enough.

Dawn cracked over the far plateau. A thin, eerie sound trembled the new day's air. The dew in the sand made it sing as the sun stole it away. The dragon dropped translucent membranes over his eyes, dulling the blue. The cat wisely slept with her tail to the cave mouth. There would be no rude awakenings for her! Leave that to kittens.

Will I fly today? the dragon thought. *It has been a long time. The air is so sharp: distances that were long for wings looked short. The thermals won't rise till later. Perhaps then? The good feeling of lazing high on an updraft. No, probably not. Solos were for the young, and they were back in the sea. Duets are best. Everything is more when shared. That is gone too.*

The dragon dropped back into fitful sleep. The cat waited and waited a bit more until she was sure he wouldn't wake. *It's not good to leave the great beast alone when he's awake. Not with what that dark mind holds.* She slipped from the great snout. Four puffs of gold dust rose as she landed. Dragons could go without eating, but cats rarely suffered such indignity for long. *Perhaps, a plump jerboa, as long as the little rat doesn't jump too quickly.*

The cat stopped before stepping out onto the brightening sand. Sharply, one paw at a time, she snapped the gold dust away. *The price of that lovely warm place. Why else would I stay if it wasn't for that heater? Thanks to all that the beast doesn't have to dust his snout too. Gold doesn't yield to tongues very well.* She took a few stretches to limber what she could and began to summon the kill mood. Then, she paused. The hunter looked back over her shoulder to the silver and gold shape. A deep, pained affection flashed across her golden eyes, replaced quickly by aloofness.