

Chapter TWO

2455 words

The jerboa had been quick today; each day they seemed swifter to Mei-chou. Cats are not very good at admitting they are slowing down. Fortunately, two of the rats had collided in their wild sideways springs. Otherwise, it might have been lizard. Mei-chou hated lizard; *cold meat!*

Now she sat at the entrance to the cave. Proud of her kill and wondering if she should bring a rat to the Ao Rue. *Catching another would be so easy. Demon take it! The Old Snake never eats them, never notices, never understands. Besides, it's getting too hot to hunt.*

She never paid much attention to the desert's desolation. "The Wall of Spears," the dragons had called it. "Gobi" in the common tongue; "Han-hai," meaning dry sea, in the high speech. Yet, as ever, she looked again at the writings that the Ao Rue had carved around the cave mouth with the tip of one of his talons. The most recent runes still shone with gold dust. Others were older, darker; stains crawled down from them around the lip of the cave mouth.

Ao Rue called it his "Anthology of Grief." Those cats and dragons who had come to seek sadness agreed. All could see that the verses were the products of a master intellect in great distress. Sorrows too deep for speech, unbearable, only slightly relieved in the writing. They were fragments, without style, too heavy for grace:

From the Flame Hills to the Glitter Sand,
The living waters hide and merge in their hidden places.
They boil with the fury of life.
Tumble and torment, bubbles swirl and rise.
They break and break and break.

Somehow the dragon's litanies of pain had given something to the soul-broken, the heavy-hearted, the exiled, the disgraced, the suicidal, and most of all, to love's fools. Mei-chou thought foolish lovers were all the rest rolled into one. Now only she was there to read the runes, and Mei-chou knew better than anyone what the arch of pitiful dirges and moans was. She called it "The Gate of Sighs."

She looked down into the cave. Ao Rue had begun to stir from his troubled sleep. *Soon, he'll wake. He will need me.* Saucily, she ambled in. It would be a little while yet. She knew his habits well.

There he was. Silver skinned, dusted with gold, rising into the shadows. Mei-chou had no idea how big he was, but he was larger than average. She knew there was a measure called a Li, and he was many of them long, wide, and high. Cats don't care about size. To them, everything was equal or smaller. She did know that she could easily lie on the pointed tip of one of his talons. She liked to tuck her front paws under her chest while she talked to him. His snout was warm and wide. It gave her plenty of room to roll, to turn and lie curved with one paw curled to her face and her belly up.

Mei-chou had always admired his lithe shape and color. She could see more of the curled body as she moved closer. It tapered; it was all taper. From bulk, it moved to delicacy. The great length was easy grace in the air. He was most beautiful, most himself, when he flew. *He won't fly again until the end.* She knew that, thought it, but would never

say it. His wings were hardly distinguishable from the rest of his massive form. They blended in like a resting heron's. The edges were touched with the coral color of the janästa fruit. He couldn't open them in the cave, no more than he could fully rise. She sighed, *He's spun his own stone cocoon.* Mei-chou remembered how they looked open. Their transparency belied their power and size. A dragon in full flight was a lens against the sky. Even the great pinions looked small when he was in the air. She especially liked the sharp, deadly pinions. Cats, like most, admire their own traits in others.

His color wasn't just silver, but a shifting variety of mirrored shades. His snout was stretched pewter, more dull and taut than shiny. His face and the beard-like tendrils that curled from it varied from granite to deep gray. Although Ao Rue said that his face had character, Mei-chou knew he thought he was ugly and unappealing. His talons were long and thin. She often thought the tips were made to play fine, gossamer strings. They were ivory and hooked a bit less than hers. The predator in her envied them. *I wonder if he'll ever hunt again? When was the last time he flew?* All that talons are good for is hunting.

The scales were as smooth as his taper, smaller than anyone might imagine. Mei-chou thought that this dragon was far more delicate than even he suspected. Ao Rue's body had few marks; he had never been an enthusiastic fighter. Not like Yolbas, the Tiger Prince, or Heng-chiang, the Sniffing General. Those two had been scored like dried, spoiled apricots. *Ugly, deep ugly.* Ao Rue's scales were packed and edged with the gold dust from his bed. He glittered with it. Mei-chou knew it for filthy stuff. It got into everything. It had something to do with an ooze between the scales. Mei-chou didn't like the ooze either. It was just another irritation she endured. The Dragons' need for gold had been great. It had kept Lu-hsing, the Finder of Gold, and his enslaved minions very busy. It got tossed in their lairs, and even the tenderest bellied dragons quickly ground it to dust. Now Ao Rue moved too little to wear it off, and it was all over the desert anyway. There were many empty dragon beds.

Ao Rue was waking. Mei-chou added a dignified haste and bounced to the top of the middle of the five talons of the right claw. She slipped a bit but hid it well.

"Awww," Ao Rue moaned in waking. His pain was only silent in sleep.

"Every good dragonette deserves a dream." Mei-chou started as the great eyes sprung open. *Too far this time?* His eyes were sleeping magic. Even in their usual, half-lidded state, they were hypnotic. They were azure, finely starred. He had been only one of two dragons Mei-chou had known with blue. Usually they were black or green or brown. Dragons' eyes normally glowed. Ao Rue's were the more magnetic because they also reflected his silver skin. Fully open -- *When had he fully opened them last?* -- his eyes were the mark of a sorcerer in full arousal, filled with awesome powers -- confident, majestic, compelling. Cats were the only creatures who didn't automatically just fall into their depths.

"Ah, the little princess. Is it light again?" Ao Rue's voice rumbled softly, somewhere a little above bass, slightly stained with hoarseness. "I expect you want your smoke."

Mei-chou relaxed. *Safe for another day.* "Of course! I've been out."

The great head rose to a formal height. "Well?"

"Camel spit! You want that fealty dung again? Watch your head; you'll bump it on the roof."

"I am the dragon. It is as it should be, always has been."

"But we're the only ones here." Mei-chou always had trouble with his difficulty with reality and his pomposity. "And it's been a long time since we've bothered."

"All the more reason for things to be as they should be."

Must have been an unusually horrible nightmare last night. It must have been about Nĭ-kua, Mei-chou thought to herself.

"Well, do you want your smoke or not?"

"I need this! Here it comes; stop me when you've had enough. All Hail to Ao Rue; Master of the Barkul Range. Sole Conqueror of the Bogdo-ola. Keeper of the Oases of the Inexhaustible Spring, the Gate of Sand, and the Mud Pit Hollow; Hero of the Battle of the Ravine of Baboons. Slayer of the Last and Mightiest Demons. Friend to Feng-po, Earl of the Wind. Oh, Great Ao Rue of the Word, Teacher, Scholar, Poet of the 'Song Never Sung,' 'Anthology of Grief,' et cetera. Keeper of Wisdom. Student and Teacher of the Soul. Bondmate of the Fair Nü-kua "

"STOP!"

The feline recoiled from the boom of his voice and chuckled inwardly. *That always stopped his nonsense. Any reference to Her.* Mei-chou waited now, wishing she could catch some of the smoke that had accompanied his cry. It would be awhile before he could speak again.

"Mei-chou," His voice was measured; he was calm again.

"What?"

"In the future, you can leave out the Mud Pit Hollow and the Ravine Battle and the 'Song Never Sung' and the"

"HEY, all of it's true, isn't it? You were in charge of Mud Pit. Not one of the more glorious of assignments, I know. And did I lie about the Ravine? Remember, I was there. I know what happened." A rumble rose in the great silver body. "And her and that 'Song Never Sung.'"

"CAT, enough. And get rid of that 'et cetera.' It's cheap."

"And you were never cheap? And she"

"ENOUGH."

Mei-chou quieted. She was in no real danger, but she could feel the fire begin to rise in Ao Rue, and the lids had come up a bit.

"I do like the 'Sole Conqueror of the Bogdo-ola.' That was my best moment." Ao Rue was pleased for an instant.

"Like it? You aren't serious. That was the stupidest thing you've ever done. The one time you summoned it all, you did it for her."

"We do what we must do. We must all cross *K'u-ch'u-chiao*, the Bridge of Pain."

"That's noble. Great drama. Amazing courage. Look what it got you." Mei-chou was getting irritated. Unconsciously, her tail had begun to whip. *Why had he insisted on throwing himself away?* "And can't we skip, at least, the honorific? Can't I just call you Rue? The 'All Hail' is silly. Who's listening? So, where's my smoke?"

"Smoke, you always want your smoke. Sometimes I think that's the only reason you hang around." Ao Rue latched on to the subject change quickly, gratefully.

"What else? You're not such great company, you know."

"Get ready." Ao Rue lowered his head and began to aim. Mei-chou sat up, eyes closed, nose pointed toward the great snout. A quick "puff" and the cat momentarily disappeared in a cloud of blue-gray smoke. As it passed, she was left with a beatific expression, eyes closed, neck stretched out, head high, a low rumble rising from her thin body. She was surrounded by a hoard of springing sand fleas. As they tried to leap back to her body, they bounced and ricocheted, finally giving up and disappearing. Ao Rue's head lowered to his forelegs until he was almost level with his little princess. Momentarily, his lids lowered.

"Ah, that's much better. You dragons are such great flea chasers."

"It seems much more than that."

"So you always say. It's just good to be pest free. And it's part of The Way of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur."

"The Way? Are we going to get into that again." Obviously, it was one of the dragon's favorite subjects only when it was to his advantage or when he was being perverse.

"What wrong with The Way? Every creature has a way, even dragons. That's why you lost. You couldn't follow your own kind. Always making your own rules. Always questioning. Always thinking, brooding. Dragons aren't creatures of real feeling." She knew well, though, that he was.

"Venom! All scorpion venom!" Ao Rue was warming. "Do you cats think your *Tu-suan* Way is so exalting. Always making such a fuss about completion, exact calculations. You plan everything out as if you were going to remake the world. Everything arranged, organized; that's why you can't stand to gamble or have anything moved. If I shifted a pebble in here, you'd be a wreck for a week! I swear you think the fate of the cosmos hangs on your every consideration."

"Nonsense, *Tu-suan* is only a method or a technique to be twisted or exulted by the minds that use it. Dragons proved that. And do you think your comrades were better than cats? Always lording yourself around in your natural sorcery. Look at the old bitch, Chih-nil, the Eternal Spinster; stunning on the outside, dried up on the inside. No one was good enough for her. And look what you did to this place. Once there were oceans and islands here, open water; now it's probably the only place in the world locked away from the sea. Dry salt everywhere, all death-head white. 'Wall of Spears,' indeed! 'Dry Sea' is better. You locked yourselves up in your own pompous dryness. No wonder you're almost extinct. Look what came of your world shaping, the idiotic Grand Plan. My eyes burned for months with the flashes of dragons on their Last Flights. Stupid, tragic suicides. Glitter sand everywhere."

"It wasn't the Grand Plan that doomed us all. It was the battles with those hoards of shapeless and nameless Azghun Demons. They poisoned us. They were our bane. But I won!"

"Won? Won?" Mei-chou did disbelief well. "You kill the enemy. You kill yourselves. Terrific, a great victory. All Hail. Anyway, you were never part of the Grand

Plan; you couldn't stand not being heard. No wonder you were alone. You were never poisoned by the Demons. You knew something no one else did. Nĭ-kua wasn't poisoned. You two"

"We don't discuss her, cat!" The great head began to rise.

"And you, the Great Poet, the Great Power. You with your words and your love. You're *fengshui*, the fantasy of the water and the wind. You believe so much in what can't be seen, can't be touched, that you have nothing. Question that, worm; look at you hiding in this hole. And her, you deserved her."

"WE DO NOT DISCUSS HER." The head snapped up. The eyes began to open. Then, just as suddenly, the power passed. Something like a great sigh escaped the shuddering body. The head sank down.

Mei-chou knew talk was over for this day. Soon she could climb back to her place on his snout. She knew also that the stories would start again tomorrow. *Self-pitying worm, what else does he have?* He would sleep again now. As his great eyes began to close, she looked into them. They would never open wide again. Mei-chou believed that; the wisdom of her race had told her. He couldn't believe anymore. Without belief, there is no hope. Without hope, no future and no power. He would rise only once more.