

Chapter 3
625 words

Mei-chou was proud. Her tail was erect as she moved toward the waking Ao Rue. A jerboa dangled from her mouth. *A good kill! Hot blood!* She set the rat down between the great claws. She knew full well that she'd carry the uneaten gift out that night yet again. Ao Rue woke slowly. *No moaning and groaning this morning. Is he healing?* Gold slid about as he stirred.

"So, Mei-chou, we greet another day of emptiness. Haven't you anything better to do than play claw sitter?" The swirling blue eyes passed indifferently over the jerboa.

"Aren't you going to play with your 'Anthology of Grief'? Not morose enough?" Mei-chou quickly returned his sarcasm.

"No, not today, you of small body and large mouth."

"I'll let that pass if you tell me what happened before I met you."

"Happened? It all fell to ashes. The center wouldn't hold; that's what happened."

"Spare me the self pity. I was there at the end." Mei-chou knew what would happen if she allowed him to wallow. "Can't you be sensible? Where did it begin?"

"The beginning. Most dragons knew little of their primitive origins. They were too smug, too militantly ignorant to learn." Ao Rue began what seemed to be memorized. "Perhaps, it's because we rejected our bestial stirrings?"

"Ok, Ok, not another scholarly lecture. Give me a break. Just tell me. How did you ruin it all?"

"Me? Ruin it all? Never, I never. . . ."

He's fading again, Mei-chou thought. "Hey, worm. Not you. The others. What happened with the dragons in the sea? In general. You know. As you saw it. You were there."

"I was there and I wasn't there."

"We both know you weren't much good at getting involved." Mei-chou ignored his defensiveness. "In fact, you ran off to Mud Pit Hollow because you were such a great warrior and lover."

"Tiger turds! Wretched fur ball! You're not going to be happy until you get it all."

"You got it."

"And I'll have no peace until you do."

"It's good for you."

"What's this? Cats know what's good for dragons?"

"Hey, at least we're not almost extinct. Unlikely to be. Are you going to tell me or not? I could go lie on a warm stone. At least it won't insult me."

"Go ahead. Go! I don't need you here."

"Fine. Rot in your memories for all I care!" Mei-chou stalked off to find her stone.

Ao Rue stared after her. *She'll probably get into that strange belly worship of the sun,* Ao Rue thought. *Do cats have religion? Never! They worship themselves.* Her final remarks ate at him. Most often he tried to ignore the past, avoiding it in sleep, in mindlessness. Still, it bound him. His memories stalked his mind like relentless predators. Now that she was gone, he thought for a moment to seek out the dragonettes in the sea.

No. I stink of death. Hunting the Demons fouled me. I'm not fit company. Too old anyway. They don't want me

Life was bearable when Mei-chou was about; even empty banter was better than thinking, and there were times, many times, she was far more interesting than a lot of dragons he'd known. *Known? They were gone. Known! What did I know. I knew nothing. Dragonettes had answers, millions. Age brought memories and only questions. Answers died! Memories were inescapable.* Indeed, Ao Rue's memories were like the sand after a rain. The crust, the clumps, all looked solid, but when he tried to pull them to him, they crumbled. It was as if the stone betrayed him. All moments broke within him into grit and pain, always ever sharp, like the day the dragons decided to leave the soft sea for the damning land.