

Chapter 6  
2580 words

Deep in the underground recesses of Lei-kung's palace, General Heng-chiang bent over a strangely shifting table. Beneath the magical gaze of his glowing brown eyes, its surface curled and humped with abuse. It was scarred by hues, angles offensive to the eye, all overcast by his muddy eyes. In his one real claw, Heng-chiang formed balls of void. As he muttered, he flipped them at the map. Crying black rents appeared where they hit. Black bubbles rushed and burst into the water. Blue swirled and gathered to the hole, was greedily sucked in and muddied over by brown silt. Then, it would quiet until another gesture broke the map again. As he limped to a new place and gestured, Han Chung-li scuttled after him. With a silver sieve, he caught the phlegm as it rose from the concentrating General's twisted snout. Han's swinging gestures formed a silver halo above their demented dance over the map that is the world.

From behind them, Lei-kung and Chih-nil watched their caperings. When their jerking movements hesitated, Lei-kung leaned intently forward, as if to launch himself into some void, and their movements quickened. Chih-nil ignored him; she was much more concerned with the ooze that crept up between her talons. It would take hours with a piece of lava to scour the slimy stuff from her pink talons. The floor wouldn't yield to any amount of cleaning -- scrape it down to the bedrock and the filth only seeped up again. She hated the room; it made her feel dirty. She wondered why they had ever made the great effort to get it open. Lei-kung had said it took the combined flame of six dragons to melt the seals on the two enormous adamantine doors; four of the dragons would never flame again. Whatever ancients had sealed this door had wanted it closed for eternity. The spells welding it shut had made the metal seals look like jellyfish. Until Lei-kung had discovered the power of the Northern Lights, they hadn't been able to budge them. Sickness and plague filled the crypt; the oily water caked at everyone's nostrils. The room was lit by tall crystal spikes in the walls. The crystals had taken on the oily slime of the floor; they were a smoky gray. As the feeble light from the deep ocean fought its way through, it took on twisting patterns that made phantoms in the air. Any natural light -- luminous algae and eels -- died quickly. And no matter how much sorcerous light they created, those skulking shadow creatures still lurked and moved in the cragged corners and preyed on each other in the upper reaches of the uneven ceiling. When they had first entered, the table had gleamed like a beacon seen by someone lost in a maze. Now their machinations had made it yet another call to some wasting disease that crept and rotted its way into the mind.

Lei-kung's whisper broke her grim survey, "The conjuring goes well. The fools actually believe this shaping is their own will." He leaned closer, caressed her creme tail, shuddered to look upon the beauty that every male wanted.

Chih-nil barely tolerated his touch and whispered back, "Remember your promise."

"Of course, of course." Lei-kung leaned forward as his minions hesitated again. Carefully he cracked his sorcerous whip delicately enough so they didn't know, sharply

enough that they maintained his purpose. He smiled crookedly as he made their wills so much broken air, then frowned as his concentration was weakened by noise behind him.

Chih-nil turned to see the swaggering form of Yolbas entering, calling loudly, "Yo, all. Looked all over for you. What are you"

"Quiet, fool, can't you see the draining is in progress; can't you see they're deep in the *Tu-suan*," she hissed. Yolbas instantly froze; he had no desire to earn Lei-kung's wrath or irritate Chih-nil's beauty.

Yolbas turned to see Lei-kung straining so far forward that his fangs were inches from the floor. Heng-chiang's and Han Chung-li's bodies had begun to jerk and snap as a portion of the world resisted the rending. Heng-chiang's golden claw began to thump hollowly again and again against his shrunken chest. Cracking sparks began to arc forward as the straining Lei-kung extended his wings, forcing Yolbas and Chih-nil to slip and slide aside like scrambling crabs. Han Chung-li's claw began to jerk up and down; the sieve tore at the water. Phlegm and spit scattered and clouded the water. Foul grace gave way to futile grunts. A portion of the map was a shiny, polished black. Heng-chiang's projectiles bounced off it. The silt was repelled. The one spot remained clean, the water over it crystal-blue. Foam began to roll from Heng-chiang's snout. Lei-kung's entire body vibrated like a stretched whip. Han Chung-li whimpered over and over. Yolbas and Chih-nil cowered from the twisting forces, bravado and beauty forgotten in quaking fear.

"Argh," Lei-kung cried as his fangs cracked against the floor, the spell broken. His two tools simply folded, limp snakes with neither will nor purpose. Yolbas rushed forward and peered into the fallen sorcerer's sickly-green face. He couldn't bring himself to touch the body.

Lei-kung moaned; some life returned to his color. He inched his forelegs beneath himself and slowly forced his body back to life. "By the Twelve Sleepers, no one will ever break that."

"Break what? Did it work? Did it fail?" Chih-nil's reedy voice rose shrill and panicked. Her lovely face twisted ugly in its greed.

"No, no, it's all right, just that one spot. We don't need it all." Lei-kung calmed her.

Yolbas was nudging Heng-chiang's and Han Chung-li's still forms. "Are they dead?" He was more curious than concerned.

"No, they're all right. Leave them. They'll come around in awhile. They took most of the shock when the spell broke." Lei-kung began to smile again. *My two lovely little insulators*, he thought to himself.

"What were you doing here? What is this thing?" Yolbas said as he left the map. Lei-kung and Chih-nil looked at each other, sharing a common thought: *Can any being with blood in it be so stupid?* Lei-kung was too weary to resist Yolbas' question.

"We've begun the terraforming, started to drain the water. The map is the world. Whatever I, we, do to it happens outside."

"Oh, it's sympathetic magic, like sticking pins in a sim, simula, simulacrum," Yolbas was inordinately proud he remembered some of his schooling though he did stumble over the big word. "How did you make it?"

No, it's not a symbol; it is the world, and we didn't make it. It's the ancients' work. We barely can use it as it is. Without the power of the Lights, it mocks us with its indifference. We still don't exactly how it works."

Chih-nil interrupted, "But what about that one spot?" Lei-kung started to glare at her for the interruption, thought better of it even though he felt oddly uncomfortable discussing the spot.

"It's a seal. We're draining the water through the old air-filled caverns. It goes somewhere down deep in the earth beneath them. The spell on that one cavern won't yield."

"Why not? Heng-chiang and Han Chung-li broke the others, didn't they?" At times, even Yolbas had an insight, but he ruined it with his dim wit, as usual. Lei-kung resisted his own ego; he really wanted to tell Yolbas that the two unconscious dragons had done nothing.

"There's one spell down there that isn't old. It's as new and as bright as a minnow, more powerful than even the ancient ones were when they were first made. Shen-t'u knows what creature shaped it. It has to be some natural phenomenon beyond even our understanding. Omens and blood, nothing alive could have called up that much power!"

"Should we go look at it?" Chih-nil offered.

Lei-kung shuddered at the thought. There was a force down there that made him far more than just uneasy. He doubted he could even look at that seal. There was an independent quality to it that mocked his very nature. It was anathema. "No, it's of no consequence."

"So it's done. Soon we'll be on the land and in the air."

"No, Yolbas, terraforming is just not that easy." Lei-kung sighed inwardly. *I'd like to turn him inside out. All it would take is a word with the power still lingering in me. No, I need him to inspire the dragons. But one day . . . !* The thought of Yolbas inside out, his organs dangling from his spine, made Lei-kung feel warm, creamy. "This isn't like making a crab fight a lobster. The Rosary of the Dancing Northern Lights has given us enough power this dusk to start the water draining, but we must still raise the land. Otherwise, we'll spend half our time popping from island to island. The magnetic forces are new; they have odd effects on us. I can feel sight alterations within me. No real harm is occurring, but we can't do it all ourselves. The power's too great for a few of us to control. That's why we're getting all the other dragons together to tap it. You do remember tomorrow's Kaochang? You've memorized the speech I gave you?"

"Not all of it."

"You better, Yolbas. We need you. You are our leader. The dragons will follow you anywhere!" Yolbas preened within Lei-kung's false praise.

"We're going to share this power with all the other dragons?" Chih-nil snapped.

"Always out for yourself, Chih-nil."

"Aren't we all? Isn't everyone? Who does anything except for themselves?" The dragons nodded in agreement. Even Han Chung-li, having finally regained consciousness and making a few futile swipes to try to clear the phlegm, agreed. Chih-nil was no fool.

"You needn't worry. We will control the Spell of Changing. They will only shape and funnel it for us." Lei-kung neglected to mention that he, not his comrades, would really control it.

Yolbas rose to the moment. "My fellow dragons, this new energy that has gleamed and rippled for eternity in the northern sky will make us like gods. By willingly giving us the control over the master spell to raise the land, no dragon will ever again be able to deny us the power of the Lights."

"Save the speech until the Kaochang. But you're right. We must maintain their enthusiasm and excitement for the terraforming. You've got to keep them thrilled, Yolbas. We don't want anyone thinking about what they're actually giving us."

"What about Ao Rue; he frightens me," Han Chung-li had found the courage to join in.

"Ao Rue's nothing!" Yolbas answered. "I'll rip his lungs out."

"Don't speak too quickly. He'd probably rip yours out. And remember what his magic did to my only friend, Chang-Lao." Yolbas rose indignantly at Lei-kung's seeming insult although the memory of Ao Rue's rage on that long passed day daunted him. Lei-kung stifled him. "Don't be a precipitous fool, Yolbas. There's more to that dragon than meets the eye. The aura of magic is so strong about him at times that I think he could melt my brain. Force isn't the answer; keeping him insecure and off balance is. As long as his self-esteem is shark vomit, he's easy to discredit. You saw what we did to him at the last Kaochang." They all laughed. Lei-kung didn't. The memory of Chang-Lao was still bitter even after so many years. "Besides, he believes so firmly in his arcane knowledge that he has no tact, no political sense. Without that and with an ambition so pathetic that it does nothing more than glue his snout to a bunch of unreadable tablets, he'll gain no support. Anyway, if he gets out of hand, I'll sic Chih-nil on him again." They all snickered, remembering how she had almost run him into the sand. "He never did figure out what hit him."

"If he's so smart and so powerful, what if he is right? What if this is the wrong thing to do?" Chih-nil had the prudence of a born conniver.

"Right? Wrong? It's all meaningless. We will control all dragonkind. Truth is only worthwhile when someone pays attention, when it pays off." Lei-kung knew exactly what he was doing.

"Yea, what about the earthquakes? I can feel them starting already."

Chih-nil was starting to irritate Lei-kung. *Just wait until I have you sucking at my tail like a lamprey. Then, we'll see what a masterful seductress you are!* "Yes, my dear, certainly, Lui-ing, the God of the Shaking Earth, will be busier than ever before, but the

water has the advantage of being a great shock absorber. Later, with our new power in full glory, we can quiet him."

"Yes, yes, and when we rule dragons and all the world, we'll have a Chorten, our own pyramid, to live in," Han Chung-li's enthusiasm had overcome his fear. "We can all live in the sacred pyramid and have all the females we want." His only motivation, lust, was clear; no female thought him worthy of a look.

Yolbas embraced the vision, "Wow, that's really a great idea. A place for dragons to come to thank us."

"Yes, all us specials can be together." Han Chung-li was overjoyed. Lei-kung's and Chih-nil's stomachs soured at the thought of living with the pathetic sycophant. "Once we have the Lights' power, dragons will build it, just like Heng-chiang's little corals built the palaces. Oh, I want Nü-kua first; please, can I have her?"

"No, she's mine." The dragons turned to find Heng-chiang's humped form standing again in a cloud of his own mucus. For a moment, his shape was so vague that they thought one of the crypt's tormented phantoms had spoken.

Yolbas was shocked. They all knew Heng-chiang's injuries had long made him impotent. Then, he saw the sniffing general's glowing expression as he emerged from the fog of his own drool. Repugnance flashed through Yolbas as he remembered what Heng-chiang did with the young, both male and female. It had nothing to do with sex.

"Yes, absolutely, she's mine. Contend with me, Han Chung-li, and I'll eat your feeble brain right out of your skull!"



In a less manipulative part of the world, a group of small, furred mammals sat on one of the tips of the Barkul Range. Islands now, they would soon be snow-covered mountains again.

"The water's receding."

"Yes, the dragons are coming back."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Don't know. If they haven't solved the Azghun Demons, it sure is a big mistake." A kitten in the back yowled at the mention of the dread name. The adults looked over their shoulders in disdain.

"Do you think they did?"

"Not likely. They're not exactly the smartest group around, and the sea will have made them lazy and overconfident. It's been too easy for them. Extreme power and control breed stupidity."

"That's true; size doesn't equal brains. Still, it will be fun to talk to the blue-eyed ones again. At least, they were interesting."

"Don't hold your breath. I don't imagine they needed many thinkers down in that womb."

The group turned, the gradually emerging land of no further interest for awhile. There was no point worrying about anything until it was real. Some would wander off by

themselves to hunt jerboas, others to nap or groom. A few might get together and murder a few pit vipers . . . a poor excuse for sport.