

Chapter 22
1275 words

Han Chung-li scrambled into the vaults of the chorten. Survival, raw life, were his only thoughts. He'd watched in disbelief as Ao Rue had stepped out of the web. *Lei-kung swore I'd be safe from that blue-eyed freak. Yolbas falling. Lei-kung so much dust in the wind.* The blazing halos of sorcerous light still stung his eyes. Everywhere he turned, they marked the darkness until he thought they hunted him like Demons. He ran everywhere, nowhere. He gritted his fangs to stifle cries of panic, whimpers of pain. *No one, no one must find me!* He slammed into walls, bashed his head against so many ceilings he was sure his skull was scraped bone raw. Some primordial urge drove him to the dark, into the depths, trying somehow to plunge back into the lost, black catacombs of mother sea.

Finally, there was nowhere else. Walls closed all about him. He couldn't return. *No retreat for poor, little Han Chung-li!* Madly, he clawed at the walls, dug at the floor, tried to burrow to safety. Broken and quivering, the shock of the end stabbed at his retching mind. He snapped at his own tail in madness. Spinning in dread, he chased himself into a frenzy, snapping and spinning to nowhere. Yet, some small scrap of cunning remained. He began to gather debris with his wings and claws. He gouged the oily filth from every corner of the cavern. Scraping every crevice, he pulled slime to his quaking body. Silt and rocks, he dragged them all to him and began throwing the mass over himself. Heaped the filth over his once shining scales. Throwing it in great slushing waves, he packed every wrinkle, every fold. He sagged exhausted to the floor. His belly and snout dropped flush until he was no more than a slick, gibbering, globulous worm, the meal in a snake's belly. Helpless, he begged his small gods for invisibility.

Slowly, very slowly, after an immeasurable time of breathing the slime, quivering at every noise, slowly, when no terror had shaken his nest, small thoughts returned: *Me -- sick. Me -- scared. Blue-eyed monster! Ugly, ugly, little cat. Smug cat! Lei-kung exploding dust! Flying gray imp. Yolbas clear-eyed again! General drawn and quartered in mid-air! How could they have abandoned me . . . me . . . so loyal me. No Demons. Lei-kung called, begged them. How could they have abandoned him? How could he forget me? So faithful, ever was so faithful me! Who will care me, protect me?*

Finally, he dared to peak out, smearing and picking the filth from his eyes to see. At first, it was too dark; then, suddenly, a great Demon bubbled from the crevasse. Desperately, he tried to scuttle back into his pile of filth, only to have it flake and crumble away from him. His fear became almost overwhelming. He realized he was in Lei-kung's inner sanctum, the cave of the Map that is the World. Against the dull yellow of the Demon, he could see the broken Map before him. Its lifeless pieces were scattered everywhere. It looked like a great claw had fallen on it in a rage beyond comprehension. In a small, dark shadow of his mind, Han Chung-li had a dim memory of blackening it, spitting on it, delightfully mocking out its lights.

"Small meal." The Demon's primal urges thundered down in him.

"Oh, great one, save me, protect me! Please don't destroy me!" The whining tones that had so often made Han Chung-li's life what he wanted flowed unthinkingly from his snout.

"What want, small meal?"

"Protect me! Save me! Once they find all those little females buried around the chorten, hidden in the caves, they'll come after me. Me, I'm only little. Helpless. They'll rip me to pieces. Make me hurt. Hate pain. Please, save me from pain."

"Do!"

"Do what? There's nothing can be done. It's gone. It's all over. The threads are broken; the center cannot hold. The dragons are themselves again. The Map of the World is smashed. Lei-kung, great Lei-kung, is gone. The great General, my wonderful master, my majestic lord, torn like a piece of seaweed, thrown to those winged sharks. Oh, how they fed; how they cried their joy."

"Do or die!"

"What do you want me to do! What can I do?" Han Chung-li's voice rose to a shrill scream. "Yolbas and Erh-lang are three times my size. They'd squash me like an anemone. Nü-kua is protected by Ao Rue and"

"BLUE HORROR!" The Demon's scream cut him short. Its surface was suddenly rippling, twisting, swelling. Han Chung-li's snout was filled with the pungent scent of fear. It filled the cave.

"Yes, that one. What can you expect me to do with him? He's a real sorcerer, a natural, like the old days. You should have seen what he did to the Web. Hung in it for a day, lurking like the viper he is, waiting to strike. Then, he walked out of it like he was out for a morning stroll." Han Chung-li couldn't believe anyone was what he seemed. "My eyes still burn from the fire of his magic. He made that arrogant cat appear out of nowhere. Then, he conjured a gray imp to do his bidding. No one can stand against him. Not you! Not anyone! His eyes are the power of the universe. They spin the planets and the suns. His anger could shatter the Earth, his might boil the seas. Even you fear him! Lei-kung told me: his name means Demon Slayer, Great Wizard, Pain -- all those things and more in the old tongue. That's why you didn't help Lei-kung, isn't it? You're frightened like me. What can I possibly do that you can't?"

"KILL CAT!"

"You're crazy. Mei-chou? We can't kill that cat." Han Chung-li was stunned by the Demon's insane demand. "She's the First of the First, the Guide. All nature will rise against us!"

"KILL OR DIE!" The Demon began to swell above him, to come closer. Han Chung-li felt his soul moan in fear.

"All right, all right. I'll do it." *Or try to*, he thought to himself.

The Demon drained back into its hole, leaving Han Chung-li to his own thoughts. *Kill the cat? The little cat. It would be so easy. A quick swoop, a sharp blast of fire, and I'd be away. In and out like a ferret. Who would know? Incinerate the tiny fur blob . . .*

no, fur turd, for Lei-kung's memory. Yes, I can do it. Hurt Ao Rue. Give pain. Never needed them! Hated General Heng-chiang anyway. Always watching me with the females. Impotent, old fart, could hardly understand what he said. Arm ached from swinging that sieve. All called me stupid. Dumb. Don't need them. Demon will protect me. Make me greater than Lei-kung.

Han Chung-li's tail throbbed with pleasure as he imagined his great power. *Endless females. All Mine! Now me! For me! Mine! All me! Linger over females. The little ones; love the little ones! The tinier, the better. Maybe dragonlings too. His tail gorged with warmth. Yes! Kill the cat! Kill the cat! Have to wait 'till night. Need darkness, like darkness.*

As Han Chung-li planned a safe route to slither out of the chorten unseen, a small part of his mind wondered why the Demon hadn't just killed him. Ecstasy rose and filled him as he realized why: *Too important. Too valuable. Going to be great. Just like Lei-kung. Greater than stupid Lei-kung, than stupid General, moron Yolbas. I won't die! His heart of cinder filled with affection for his mighty protector. Demon protect me!*