

Chapter 24
2320 words

Mei-chou was struggling up the craggy slopes of the Bogdo-ola. Some called it the Mount of God, because they thought its peak pierced eternity, but for her, it was only the arduous way to her mentor's cave. And she had always wondered which god? *Probably varied from species to species. I wonder what the Jerboas' god looks like -- a giant rat? An impossibly benevolent cat that doesn't eat them?*

The trip wouldn't be anywhere near as much trouble if it wasn't for the figs she dragged along. Master Chu just wasn't very polite to visitors who didn't cater to his sweet fang. Of course, he insisted that the bunches of grapes, branches of figs, and occasional pears were roughage for his aging colon. Mei-chou knew better: *I wonder if there's any truth to the story that in his youth he once burrowed through a landslide to get one pear?* She remembered the time she'd had to lug a pear up the mountain: *My jaw ached for weeks! But he does so love his sweets!*

She finally arrived and gratefully pulled the branch of figs out of the icy wind into Lord Chu's warm cave. Mei-chou was always astonished by his beauty no matter how many times she saw him, no matter how old he got. The rational part of her knew she saw her mentor with her inner eye and not with the light of day, but love's gaze is always better than reality's. His dark-blue eyes were almost black in the dim light of the cave. They still shone within the lush fur of his ebony mask. His face and ears were framed by a creamy, camel-colored mane that circled to his full jowls. At least, Chu-Chu liked to call it a mane; Mei-chou thought of it more as a ruff. He'd say ruffs were prissy. But he'd also say that jowls had nothing to do with weight and everything to do with dignity. His mane blended back and down through rich, thick shades of chestnut and sable to black legs, paws, and tail. No color quite separated. They all moved in harmony, one into the other. The changes were so subtle that, when the light changed, there were moments of tan, chestnut, chocolate, and charcoal on his body. His most arresting feature were the oversized fangs that extended down over his lower jaw into the velvet of his chin. He thought they made him look fierce; Mei-chou knew it was only overbite. As a Himalayan Sealpoint, Lord Chu insisted he was one of the few felines indigenous to the Gobi. But Mei-chou had heard enough to suspect that he was the product of a momentary lingering between a Black Persian and a Siamese. Cats, for all their proclamations of civilized demeanor, were erotically prone to random couplings, to spontaneous trysts. Perhaps, they had something to do with their complete immunity to guilt, their absolute freedom from embarrassment. At times, Mei-chou admired the dragons' devotion, their exclusiveness. *Then again, she thought, look at the trouble fidelity continually causes Ao Rue -- first Chih-nil, now Nü-kua, and who knows how many before. Sexually, at least, Feng-po had been a better cat than a dragon. Rest his great heart!* Of course, such carnal and uninhibited observations, which in any way questioned the dignity of cats, could never be uttered within Chu-Chu's hearing.

When she got closer, she could see that his fur was even more matted toward his hindquarters than last time. As he got older, he was too lazy to reach all the way back to groom. Still, his long fur was the softest thing she'd ever felt. It was softer than the under fleece that the argali left on brambles as they dragged their wool against the thorns, softer than the goose down that balled amid the underbrush. Mei-chou had kitten memories of being curled in the hollow of his flank, half dozing, listening to his tales of days gone by and days to come. *My Woolly-Bully*. Her favorites were those that were the hardest to believe, and more than once he had called her a lazy dreamer. There was the one about the days before the Azghun Demons, when dragons fought among themselves, the days before the Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur. Her favorite, his silliest, was about how he had battled a rogue dragon, a dragon that had been killing cats. He always began with the stalk:

"I moved silently through a night with no moon. All in tender, tiny-placed paws, I blended from tap root to top star. I was one with the darkness, in harmony with creation. The great oaf blew fire, but always I slipped beyond the smallest, rummaging sparks. He thought he sensed me, but I was too sudden. Went for the eyes. You hear me, kitten; you have to go for the eyes. That's the only thing to do. Otherwise, there's no chance. Too much dumb muscle, too much fire."

Mei-chou always wondered why he'd been so insistent about her knowing how to kill a dragon. How could he think that she believed there was any truth to his bragging? No dragon would harm a cat since the sacred Bond. It just wasn't possible. Another of her favorite stories was about the Seven Great Feline Lords who slept under a great spell in some deep cave and the dragon that had crept in with them -- all to rest until the end of time and wake only for the last battle. Curled in his fur, the idea of greatness waiting in secret always made her feel secure and proud to be a cat. She imagined herself among the great lords, all aglow with the powers of her race, as she happily kneaded his side with her fore paws.

One of his silliest was about the future and a great naked ape called the Pendragon, who would one day rise against chaos to form a great simian fellowship. He would fall, betrayed by a friend -- always one of life's great, inevitable patterns of foolishness or fate. Then, he too would sleep somewhere on an island, waiting for the final battle. Mei-chou wondered if she should count all the beings Chu-Chu said were asleep in various places. She was sure he regularly lost track of how many he'd bedded down in his many tales. As much as she liked his stories, she knew that was all it were, just stories. Nothing wise or worthwhile would rise from those screeching and scratching monkeys.

Lord Chu was deliberately ignoring her as she stood in the entrance. *In trouble again*; she wasn't surprised. Pita, his current acolyte, moved around the cave attending to his needs. She was simply classically beautiful. Her slick, short fur was sharply marked in pure blacks and whites -- black on top, white on bottom, with the splash of white across her pink nose and a white question mark on her back. Mei-chou knew from past encounters that Pita was painfully shy and wondered how she dealt with Chu-Chu's gruff manner.

After a brief nod in greeting, Mei-chou was relieved to see that Pita moved confidently and surely about her duties. She ignored Lord Chu's glares when she made the slightest noise. Mei-chou noticed that the procedure with the jerboas was still the same. They must be caught unharmed, carried gently into the cave so they didn't panic, and then left close enough to the large male that he didn't have to move too much to catch them. The cave's jerboa population seemed a bit high; in fact, there was now a content nest of them over his head on a ledge. Chu would have vigorously denied that he was growing old and slow. The explanation that he'd given Mei-chou was probably still current: "Ignorant kitten," his stock introduction, "an adept of my achievements has risen above necessity to the pinnacles of leisure and thought. It would not be at all seemly for me to be dashing around chasing rats! Would you have me bound by such pedestrian tasks?" Of course, there could be no answer, not from her at least.

Mei-chou realized she wasn't going to gain his attention by just sitting in the entrance with a fig branch hanging from her mouth. She set it down in Pita's direction, took a deep breath, and spoke, "My Lord Chu." His head swung slowly around; he fixed her with a haughty stare. *Oh my, I am in deep trouble this time!* "My Lord Chu, Teacher of the Great, Light of the East, Wisest of the Wise, may I enter." His nod was almost imperceptible. She walked across and sat before him, being sure to maintain the posture of respect. "My Lord seems disturbed with his most meager acolyte."

"'Disturbed' is too mild a word to describe my reaction to your pretension, ignorant kitten. I understand you've been passing yourself off as the First of the First. In a bit of a hurry, little Mei-chou?"

"Forgive me, master, but urgency necessitated it. I meant no disrespect."

"I am not dead yet. My wits are still far sharper than yours! My fangs and claws still sharp!"

"My lord, it is a minor matter. Not worthy of your wisdom. I did not think it merited your making the long, difficult journey down the mountain."

"You presume to think for me, me, the First of the First. Do you think me senile? How's this? The dragons are back on the land, they're tormented by their own, the fell power of the Northern Lights has been tapped, the Azghun Demons are abroad again, and yours is the only surviving blue-eyed dragon to stand against it all. Is that not an accurate description of the current state of affairs? How dare you patronize me!"

"My Great Lord Chu, forgive me. I am the lowest of the low. I do not deserve the slightest moment of your great attention." Mei-chou's mind spun: *How did he know? How do I tell him he's too old? How do I tell him I had to? How may I redeem this great insult?* She might be incapable of guilt, but she could feel shame. "My master, there is no forgiveness for my transgression. I will leave."

"Sit, ignorant kitten! Did you dare believe that the slightest act escapes my attention? Again you presume to know the thoughts of your better. As it is, what you have done is not a complete disaster." Relief swept through Mei-chou. "It is best that I stay here, far above the petty concerns of dragons and cats, and plan the great, overall strategy."

Involvement clouds the mind. Your Ao Rue should have told you that. And if he hasn't, you better tell him."

"My great lord, I am humbled that such a flawed tool as I could do your will." She was clever enough not to ask what the 'great strategy' was.

"Bury the pandering nonsense in the sand with your urine! Pay attention! This is the most important time of your short life. You must bring all your resources to it. The fate of our world rests on your lazy head. You must remember all your lessons. It may be too soon; your education is still unfinished, but you are the best that we have. Despite your obvious inadequacies, you will have to continue to be the Guide. Take good care of your dragon. You are very privileged; yours may be the last of the great ones." Mei-chou gave him her complete attention, but the fire was lowering in his eyes. His voice began to fade into irrelevance. "You know, Mei-chou, there was a time when every cat owned a dragon. Now they're all too stupid to bother with, too stupid to listen. Good for nothing but smoke. Had a little gray one up here awhile ago. Feisty little lizard. Still, he fumigated the cave for me. Shows even dumb, little dragons know their betters! Complained the whole time though; when he wasn't whining, he was chanting nonsense rhymes. Got Pita off my tail though. Females just don't appreciate the ambiance of a bachelor's place!" Mei-chou thought she heard a faint mutter of "smelly" from Pita's direction, but if she had spoken, Chu ignored her.

Now he was completely silent. His head had settled to his paws. He was asleep. *Just like his great heroes, waiting for the last, great battle.* Very carefully, Mei-chou leaned forward and touched her nose to his in a gentle, lingering moment. A faint, deep purr rose from him. She turned and moved as quietly as she could to the cave mouth. Just as she was ready to step out, his gravelly voice called softly to her once more, "Mei-chou, be careful out there. There's a hunter on the loose, and I think you are its prey." His head settled down onto a three-paw stack; he was asleep again.

As she left, Pita caught up with her. "My Lady, may I speak?"

"Of course, Pita, you don't need permission to speak to me. I'm not the First of the First yet."

"Your visit was good for him. He hasn't been this animated in some time. But don't be fooled. Be prepared. His time is coming close. He sleeps almost all the time now. I practically have to drop the jerboas on his tongue these days."

Mei-chou was surprised by what was a long speech for Pita, and she lowered her head as her surprise mixed with sadness. A world without her Chu-Chu, her Woolly-Bully, was too much to imagine. And it was hard for her to think of herself as even remotely ready. When she looked up, Pita had already run back into the cave, seemingly embarrassed by her boldness. As Mei-chou turned to go, she felt a chill; a large shadow passed over her.