

Chapter 26
3025 words

Mei-chou cut through a wide, high-walled canyon as she descended the Bogdo-ola. Her thoughts were filled with the dying Chu-Chu: *So old. Senile, I guess. So fat. Hardly moves at all. Pita makes his last days soft. Good! His strange, demented stories. Mind wanders more each day. Dragon slaying, indeed! Wonder if there ever was such a tomcat? As much chance of that as a smart ape!*

If she had not been so preoccupied, she probably would have heard the raver that waited for her. She was both surprised and annoyed at her lack of vigilance when he lurched out from behind a large outcropping of rock. Mei-chou looked right and left. The canyon walls were too far away to run. She couldn't out race his fire despite his obvious clumsiness. There was nowhere to go. So she sat down, began to clean her paws, and acted like he wasn't there at all.

"Now you are mine, fur turd!"

"Oh, hello, did you say something? Who are you?" Of course, Mei-chou recognized Han Chung-li, but she had decided that the best tactic was to keep him off balance. *This one is deep dumb. He shouldn't be too hard to handle.*

"I am General Han Chung-li. The rightful and blessed successor to the glorious Lei-kung, you stupid cat!"

"Oh, you're a general now. Who appointed you?"

"That's dragon business. Nothing for you sub-creatures to worry about." Smoke began to rise from his nostrils. Mei-chou remained undaunted. Dragons never frighten cats. Not only are they indifferent to any dragon's magic, much less this one's poor excuse for anything, but cats fully enjoy the smoke of their anger.

"So, what can I do for you, General?" She shifted slightly to try to catch the full effect of the smoke.

Han Chung-li paused for a moment to remember what he was doing on this cold mountain. "I am here to complete Lei-kung's majestic work, to serve the great power of the Northern Lights, to lead the Azghun Demons to bring dragonkind to its full potential! And Lei-kung had special plans for you cats. You have a place in the master plan. You will serve!"

"You sure that's what you're here for? I remember you saying something else when I called you and told you to come here." Now Han Chung-li was doubly puzzled. She was right. He'd come with some other purpose. And now he couldn't remember her calling him either. "Well, General, while you're trying to get yourself together, I'll continue on my way. Catch you later."

Mei-chou almost believed she'd get passed him. He was shaking his head. It looked like he was trying to roll the pieces of his brain into their proper holes. She strolled toward him. *Mustn't show any fear! These primitive types can sense fear.* At that moment, a Demon streaked from somewhere; it hovered before Han Chung-li's snout. He snapped to attention. With his right talon, he threw a spray of gravel in Mei-chou's path.

"Now, I remember! Prepare to die. You are mine, fur turd!"

"I would have thought you'd learned from Lei-kung that nothing you maniacs think is yours really is. Don't you know that there are beings and things you can't own?"

"You won't confuse me again!" The smoke came in great billows from his nostrils.

"These plans you have. Tell me about them. You know, us cats don't yield to regimentation very well. We don't care for such things." Now another development was an added cause for her concern. Up behind Han Chung-li's head, Mei-chou saw Chu-Chu. Sleep was far gone. His eyes were wide; his concentration complete. He was playing out the ageless discipline of the stalk: ears back, body low, tail-fur fat with anger, its tip twitching. His fine, gossamer fur lifting in the faint breeze, he moved on the dragon with murderous intent.

She remained poised, if concerned: *The old dear, he'll have a heart attack. Where's Pita?* Confidently, she looked up at the rearing dragon, his fire rising like bile. "Dragon, you cannot harm me. I am the First of the First. Friend to Ao Rue, last and greatest of the sorcerers. I summon the Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur."

Han Chung-li laughed grotesquely -- shrieking. He almost choked on his own joy, drawing in more air than he let out. "Your words are nothing. You inferiors have no minds worthy of note. You are good only for orders and menial tasks. I will think for you! I am the first of the new dragons! We make our own bonds. There will be oaths of fealty and submission to us. All of nature will yield before our superior power and intelligence." His mouth opened; flames began to lick around his tendrils.

Mei-chou stood firm. *So this is how it ends. Cooked by a half-wit!* Then, from out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lord Chu spring. She knew the distance was too great -- *too much age, too much weight.*

Lord Chu looked like a dolphin in the sea. His body was stretched out, a smooth blur in the air. Just before he got to Han Chung-li's head, he opened up. All four legs were fully extended. Every claw caught the red glow of the dragon's fire. He screamed his success, Han Chung-li's first sign of disaster. The dragon had no time to turn his head. Chu's front claws stabbed into the dragon's eyelid. Immediately, his hind legs began to snap up and down. He raked the naked eye with his claws. Han Chung-li wildly swung his head from side to side. His wings beat the ground, throwing great clouds of dust and stone. His pinions and claws ripped splinters and hunks from the granite. He flung fire everywhere, but all his struggles couldn't dislodge the squalling monster that was taking his sight.

"Run, Mei-chou, run! Hide, hide, until I finish him off."

Mei-chou was paralyzed. All she could see was her Chu-Chu's beautiful fur charring as fire rushed from Han Chung-li's snout and ricocheted off the rock.

"Get, girl! Move! Once, do as I tell you!"

Mei-chou responded automatically to that old tone. It was kitten and teacher again. Obediently, she turned and ran beneath a ledge into a crevice. Her ears were filled with the fury of the spitting, screaming tomcat. Han Chung-li's roars filled her with terror. She

cowered in her hole, trembling in fear. Horrified at the thought of life without Chu-Chu: *Who will tell me? It's not time! Too soon! Too soon! Who will care? My Chu-Chu.*

Suddenly, all noise vanished -- the total silence of a world without ears. Despite her fear, concern dragged Mei-chou on her belly back to the canyon. She could see nothing amid the holocaust. It was as if the fire of the earth had punished the mountain. Great shards of rock were thrown and broken everywhere. The white granite was cursed with blackness. There were places it had melted and run, forming macabre sculptures of beings beyond madness. All had been scoured by evil, scourged by a dark pain. Mei-chou fell in upon herself in despair: *He is gone. I didn't help!* Then, something moved and moaned beneath the thrown slabs. As she ran to it, she almost didn't recognize him. So little of his rich colors remained. He was black with char, too brittle to touch. So little blood. All burned away. Yet a shadow of bright life remained.

"Couldn't get to that other eye. Couldn't get across the snout. So far, seemed so far. Dragons must be wider between the eyes these days. Are you all right, kitten. You were my best student!"

"Lie still; I am here." *Ao Rue, where in the seven hells are you when I need you!*

"Wasn't much of a dragon. Would've liked to go out on a big one."

"Oh, Chu-Chu, it was the great father of all dragons. Nothing could have stood before him. Not now, not in the old days." *Ao Rue, Ao Rue! He's fading.*

"Was he really big?"

"He was a monstrous rogue. All the ancient blue-eyed sorcerers couldn't have stood before him, my brave Chu-Chu. I should have helped; I should have!"

"No, this was no job for a kitten. And don't call me Chu-Chu. Best left to us adults. How I miss your mother." He had begun to babble in pain.

"I knew if I waited, if I was silent, I'd have you again, stupid cat." Han Chung-li had returned. His head was tilted so he could see them with his one good eye. Blood welled from scratches across the bridge of his snout. Chu-Chu had almost made it. "Gonna cook some kitties now, I am, I am." He was clearly in great pain, almost incoherent. Yellow ichor formed a shiny smear on his scales, clotted in the tendrils below the ripped eye. Its flaccid membrane was pink with diluted blood. "Cook you slow, I will. My agony will be nothing to yours." His head reared back; his jaws opened; Mei-chou curled herself around Chu-Chu. His gathering fire mocked her meager protection.

Nothing's happening. His head was coming forward again. Mei-chou braced and cringed. Hugged Chu-Chu. *Again, nothing.* Han Chung-li's head wavered in confusion. Mei-chou looked up, gently cradling Chu-Chu's head as it slid from the curve of her throat. Han Chung-li's swinging head finally brought his good eye toward the summit of Bogdola. He screamed in terror.

Ao Rue had come around the Mount of God and was plunging down upon the canyon. His rushing body blew a valley in the peak's snow; white waves leapt away in great sheets from the stone as he roared down. Silver sparks trailed the edges of his wings. His speed burned and cut the air. He threw his anger before him. Ao Rue flew through his

own fire. Again and again, he burst anew out of flame. He was the purity and might of lightning without storm, thunder without noise. His eyes blazed in great whirlpools of blue. Billows of energy streamed from his scales. Great swells of broken air cracked in his wake. He rode all his power to Mei-chou's call! His talons reached out for Han Chung-li.

"Now, the fear is yours, little general." Mei-chou had risen to stand astride Chu-Chu. "He is your death. The perfection of fur and fire. He has stilled your hot breath. He has taken your fire; now, for Lord Chu, he will take your life!" Han Chung-li, half-blind, turned in panic. He scrambled down the mountain. Too witless to fly, he banged against the stone. Ao Rue was almost upon him.

"No, No, Ao Rue, here. Here, to me, to me!" Mei-chou's cry stopped Ao Rue so quickly that he had to sink his talons into the granite to keep from flying by. As he cracked out of the stone and moved to her, concern marked every step. He offhandedly threw a blue orb in the direction of the fleeing Azghun Demon; it popped out of existence.

"What is it, Mei-chou; I came as fast as I ... Oh, no!" He had seen the black body. "Who is this?" His voice dropped to a whisper.

"This was Lord Chu, the real First of the First. My teacher. I should not mourn; I should not. He wouldn't like it. This is as it should be. He had a full life. He died saving me. It was important to him. Important that he die for his student. Important he die this way." It was all Mei-chou could do to talk, but it was no time to let Ao Rue see any weakness in her. "He died a hero. Now, at least, I know. I never believed his stories. He was the dragon slayer. He was the legendary tom! Our greatest hero. Legend incarnate. To think I never knew. So much wisdom and courage in one body. Can anyone be this much again? Chu-Chu, my Chu-Chu, Chu-Chu!" She had begun to shake.

"Easy, my little friend." She was almost hysterical. Ao Rue found himself wishing he could hold her. "There's still some life. I think I can save him, heal him." The swirling blue sight rose in him. "Yes, a small spark. Nothing's broken inside. The fur and flesh will come back. Climb up on my claw while I hold him, Mei-chou; I need to feel you with me."

Ao Rue carefully slid one claw under Chu-Chu's brittle body. Covered him in a light clasp with the other. Mei-chou climbed up on top. Blue light began to pulse within his folded claws as he concentrated. She could feel the magics that moved from him to Chu-Chu. They were summer breezes, budding flowers, small things stirring in warmth, awakenings, the warm loam, tender shoots. Despite the moment, she felt good, healthy. Ao Rue lifted his head. He let out his breath in relief. Mei-chou jumped down. Ao Rue opened his claws to let her look within. Chu-Chu was curled up, happily sleeping. His new, pink skin was already covered with a light fuzz, a promise of wonderful fur.

"You are the one!" The words burst from Mei-chou like birth. Ao Rue looked at her. He was stunned to see her staring at him in open awe. Or he thought he had; the look vanished so quickly that he questioned its reality.

Just as Mei-chou thought to say something and as Lord Chu began to stir, Pita arrived. She was tearing, sliding, skittering through the rocks and sand. One shoulder was

marked with blood where she'd scraped a boulder. For once, a cat didn't seem to care about being awkward.

"Pita, you're a mess. You're not even smart enough to groom!" Lord Chu had climbed down out of Ao Rue's claw and was standing. He was shaky but working to recover his dignity.

"You old fool, what's the matter with you. I go out for one second, for one jerboa for myself, so not to touch your precious larder. And what do you do. You wander off. Get lost. I've been all over this mountain looking for you."

"Watch your tone, silly kitten. How could I get lost? Why I knew every crack of this mountain before you were born. I have been protecting Mei-chou."

"You're too old even to protect yourself. Get back to the cave where I can take care of you. Leave this First of the First stuff to Mei-chou; you're too old."

"I hardly need your protection, madam." Nonetheless, he began to move. "I'm not that old. I've been doing some dragon slaying."

"Those stupid, old stories again. I do believe you've started to believe them yourself." She walked at his flank, herding him in the right direction. "Don't give me any of that nonsense. You get your tail to bed. You look terrible. What did you do to your fur? I can't trust you for a minute. You'll be the death of me."

"Just who do you think you're talking to, pink-nosed Pita! Why I remember when the best you could do was get a teat in your mouth. Don't use that tone on me, little Pita. It wasn't so long ago that your eyes weren't open. Funny thing, you were, stumbling into everything."

"How dare you, you senile lout."

As their yelling faded into the distance, Mei-chou smiled. Ao Rue was nonplused: "Why is she so furious with him? Doesn't she think he did the right thing, was noble?"

"Ao Rue, how can you be so powerful yet so naive. She's not angry, just relieved. She loves him."

"He's twice her age."

"Age isn't the critical factor. Genuine affection is; loyalty is. Rare commodities in this age or any other for that matter. There are some that say that the young, like Pita, are to be avoided. Too mercuric, too fickle. I don't know. There are few rules in such things. Look at us. Inter-species friends. Good love? Luck, maybe? More likely the wisdom to pick well. Who knows?"

"Yes, you're right." Ao Rue was recovering his poise. "I'm so pleased I found Nü-kua now when I'm smart enough to know what she is. She is so special. She makes me more than I ever thought I could be. It's good to find the right one." Ao Rue was obviously proud that he could interpret the moment in his own terms.

"Well, try not to be too quick. It's early yet."

"Mei-chou, you're being cynical again. Isn't Nü-kua at least the equal of Pita? After all, Pita's only a cat."

"Only a cat?" Mei-chou quickly stifled her anger. "You might also entertain the idea that fidelity isn't species-specific. Look at your gray herons."

"Enough. It's not up to you to question Nü-kua; she is mine. Anyway, Lord Chu can now rest without being disturbed again."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Chaos is loose in the world. We all may yet play roles none of us expected. But that's something no one can predict. For now, I must thank you. Bless all that's holy that you were nearby. If you hadn't seen us." Mei-chou let her voice trail off into a future she didn't want even to think about.

"I didn't. I was off looking for Wen Ch'ang and the whales. You called me!"

"I did?"

"Well, I heard you. Now that I think of it, how can that be? I know dragons and cats are bound, but telepathic contact?"

"Maybe great moments do summon great powers. We'll probably never know. Now I must go fix something. I never believed he was a hero. It just seemed he was born old, a creature of mind, not courage. I need to tell him he is a hero and, more importantly, that I know."

"I have to go too. As much as I'd relish going after Han Chung-li, I have an important kaochang; I hate meetings. Do you think Lord Chu will listen to you?"

"Chu-Chu? He'll make fun of me, but it's something I have to say. And he'll listen. He'll pretend not to, but he'll listen."