

Chapter 28
1485 words

If Ao Rue hadn't been so preoccupied with Nü-kua and trying to listen to Mei-chou, he might have sensed the vindictive presence beneath his feet or smelled the rotting flesh. Han Chung-li had crawled into the cave near the ravine's rim hours before. He had known nothing of a kaochang; all he'd wanted was to escape the jeering females, the bullying males, and the memory of that hideous brown imp that had taken his eye with magic beyond imagining.

The world had become too much for Han Chung-li. All his senses were veiled with confusion, all his reactions filtered through hate. His body was no better than his mind. There may have been a time when his looks would have let him approach the little females he mindlessly craved with some degree of normal appearances. Now he was too marked to lull anyone. His body was torn and ulcerated. He couldn't remember when he had fed well. Some kittens had been his last meager meal. His skin crawled tight around his bones in hunger. With only one eye, he could hardly fly. When he tried, he slammed into things. Rocks had gouged and scraped the scales from his bones. His infected eye ran with yellow pus and watery blood. It pooled in the ridges of his snout and dripped from its tip like phlegm. He continually rubbed at the socket with his foreleg. It gave him a certain kind of pleasurable pain, like wiggling a loose baby tooth with his tongue. As he worried it, he was smearing the virulent mixture into his other wounds. They had all begun to fester. No dragon would come near him. His female prey drove him off. The males chased him from the gold-laden caves. He had no fire to defend himself. Ao Rue's spell had worked well; Han Chung-li was a flameless, flightless worm. Without the gold dust to replace the balm of the sea, his scales had become brittle. They had broken away, opening his sensitive skin to the ravages of sun, wind, and sand. The infections and dryness now made his scales molt in large, dead sheets. What few patches remained served only to highlight his running sores. He was an emaciated piebald of running red and yellow.

His fitful dreams were still haunted by that mighty brown imp that had appeared from nowhere. *So sudden! So quick!* Han Chung-li still didn't understand his own memories: *From nothing. Horror. Crawled out of my ear? My eye aches so!* He rubbed at it again. The pain brought him some awareness. *A maggot from my brain? Imp of the id? Ran flame over it. Burned good. Hungry! Smelled good. So hungry! Voices? What voices? Females? Tasty females? Voices in the cave? Eye aches.* He rubbed it again. *Sweet pain. Good hurt!*

Faint voices flirted with his fevered brain. Ghosts from his past? *General, is that you? I'm coming; I'm coming.* His talons clutched fitfully for his sieve. Fear rose in him when it didn't come to claw. *My General, do not punish; do not hurt little Han Chung-li.* The voices grew louder and softer, oscillating in and out, messages forcing their way into the sunlight from a dusky, nether world. Louder, softer, louder. *Lei-kung, oh dread lord!* A vision of Lei-kung rose before him -- black, braided thread held high. Han Chung-li scuttled back against the stone, flinching from the whip that was stone black even in the

cave's shadow. *No, dread lord, no, mercy, me, Han Chung-li, faithful, ever faithful. No bad; no bad.* Lei-kung's image faded. *Been good, dread lord. Been so good; feed Demons; love Demons.* Louder, softer, louder, the voices moved in and out, away and then near. He thought he heard Ao Rue. Again, a sick vision came. The sorcerer appeared before him. *Ao Rue, Ao Rue, no more. Will go. Never again. Give back fire! Please fire.* A brown amorphous monstrosity sat on Ao Rue's silver snout. *You dead. Burned you! No imp. Ugly beast. You dead! Give back eye.* The imp swelled, grew larger until it loomed over Han Chung-li. *No, leave good eye! Claws, no!* The imp's bloody claws writhed and hung over Ao Rue's snout. Despite their stony edges, they clenched and twisted. *No, claws; bloody claws!* The imp's indigo eyes burned maiming from its dark mask. Its mane crackled with an aura of bright magic. *No more! No more!* Its poised body was framed by Ao Rue's spinning blue orbs. Beneath the double gaze, Han Chung-li shuddered; he couldn't stop quaking. He bunched his faded muscles against his terror. They failed.

Han Chung-li covered his good eye with his claw, tried to drive his head into the security of his sharply plated shoulder. He found no softness in himself, only bone. Again and again, he raked at his empty socket. Madly, he pulled at the flesh, hooking the sharp talons. The tips caught. He dragged down against himself, bowed his neck. His talons snapped free of the bone. Flesh ripped, and gangrenous shreds caught in the curve of his talons. He licked it away. *Clean, must be clean. Females! Clean!* Rip and lick, rip and lick, over and over, he parodied primordial grooming. Rip and lick, rip and lick, until he collapsed to the cave floor. The dust puffed in and out of his nostrils; he scrubbed the grit with his hanging tongue.

Slowly, as he lie there, his heated brain cooled and cleared a little, just a little. There were voices. He hadn't been dreaming. *Ao Rue and that turd cat. Yolbas and Erhlang. Chattering females! Dragons were here. Many voices. Hit me? Hunt me? No, leave me! Leave!* But no shadows darkened the cave mouth. Carefully, slowly, he dragged himself closer to the opening. He jammed his fangs together against his cries of pain, but now he could hear; now he could see; now he could listen to his tormentors.

"Friendship . . . Cooperation . . . Mutual support . . . All against the Demons . . . Love among us all . . . Giving . . . Sacrifice." The words knotted in the running twists of Han Chung-li's brain. He shook his head in confusion, almost screamed in torment as one of his tendrils smacked his bad eye. He gritted and remained quiet. Elemental cunning guided while his mind failed.

He looked out over the multitude. *Stupid traitor, Yolbas -- Yolbas, Prince of Empty Words. Turned on us all. Could've saved us. Saved the Great Terraforming. Took my females. Little, soft dragonlings. Hold in my tail. Squeeze with love. Damned Yolbas.* His eye scanned downward; his tendrils slid in the sand as he turned his head to see. *Little Nü-kua. Not so pretty. Too big, too old. Ao Rue's bag of guts. Too happy! Hate happy! Chatter, chatter, chatter, chatter. Stupid talk. Laughing at me. Take my females from me. Cut my tail from me! Wring necks. Wring necks slow like geese. Cry like geese. Blood from mouth. Soft honk, honk like geese.* Han Chung-li quivered in the delight of his happy

thoughts of power. *Giggling, stupid dragons. Happiness hurts. Hate happiness. Look all cats. Many cats. Smoky crunchies. Cats good crunchies. Better th'n oysters. Oysters cold; cats warm! Runny, tickly-throat warm. Crunchy warm!* His tongue caressed his fangs. He sucked at the gaps in his teeth trying to recover the taste of the last litter of kittens. *Little crunchies. Lay on tongue. Little mews. Good crunchies!* All he found was his own putrid flesh.

Han Chung-li shifted his attention when Erh-lang swaggered forward to follow Yolbas' call for unity, purpose, and dedication. He wanted to hear nothing of flight. Hours before he had watched the dragons dancing in the clouds. He had turned his dead eye to them. Their joyful grace cursed his mutilation. Now the wind blew fragments of Meichou's words to Ao Rue into his cave. *Tell, tell, stupid cat. Crunchy cat. Yeah, yeah, tell friendship. What about Han Chung-li? What for me? Where me? Exile! No females. Outcast! No flight. Ugly little Han Chung-li. No fire. No gold. Chased away. Poor Han Chung-li. Show ye, show ye. Call my friends. Good friends talk to Han Chung-li. Love Han Chung-li. Yeah, yeah, my friends!*

Han Chung-li gathered his malignancy into a vile call of scorn and pain. He reached deep into his decayed heart. There, amid his wretchedness, he found a power that had escaped even Lei-kung's purposeful malevolence and contrived sorcery. By twisted will alone, he summoned the Azghun Demons. He alone commanded the scourge of despair. And his deepest desire was to befoul, to punish, his own kind. He laughed and laughed to see the unclean shapes bubble and ooze from the broken rock. He roared with joy to see dragon after dragon fly shrieking into oblivion. The showers of glitter sand made him swell with ecstasy. He cheered aloud, "Yeah, yeah, yeah! You like little Han Chung-li's friends? They love me! They want me!"