

Chapter 30  
2660 words

Mei-chou had waited around long enough at Spring Halt to know that Ao Rue's conversation with Nü-kua had not gone well. In fact, from what she had seen of it before she'd left the Ravine of Baboons, it had been very animated. Erh-lang had stood behind Nü-kua, alternately looking guilty and stupid. He cringed when Ao Rue's blazing blue glare had fallen on him. The little tabby wasn't looking forward to having to talk to Ao Rue; he wouldn't be very coherent if things had gone badly, and she strongly suspected the worst. She'd begun to wonder if he was going to appear at all. When he finally did arrive, it was in stony silence, his bright silver turned to aged pewter, his once bright eyes to dull prussian. For a moment, he and the lone heron stared at each other across the water. Mei-chou felt more pain rise from Ao Rue. Then, he unceremoniously scooped her up and flew for Mud-Pit Hollow.

Ao Rue didn't talk during the flight. Curled in his talon, tight against his chest, Mei-chou felt trembling in his flesh. Once they got to Mud-Pit, he set her down and busied himself smearing his silver scales with mud. The fight against the Demons had burned most of the gold off, and she knew he'd be reluctant to have the company of other dragons that a trip to the gold caves would occasion. She busied herself slapping a couple of brown vipers around, being careful to keep her claws sheathed. *Bloody snakes take forever to arouse! No sport at all.* She knew he'd speak soon enough and would need her there when he did. Cats never underrated the pleasure or importance of their company.

"I'm sorry I was so abrupt." Ao Rue had finally emerged from his wallow. "I just couldn't stand being at Spring Halt. Too much of her there. Many places I won't be able to go for a long time. They all smell of her. I don't want to be reminded. This was the first place I thought of. We won't be here too long. But it does make me feel a little better to think of Feng-po. I miss him."

"So it's over. I can't say I'm surprised. I tried to warn you. You sorcerers rarely find mates. You're too strange for the normal workings of the world. Still, you insist on trying. Oh my, you do insist!" As she spoke, Mei-chou slapped the vipers out of the way, approached his encrusted form, and hopped up on the cleanest talon, the one with the least amount of that filthy mud on it. Listening was one thing; getting dirty was another.

"Mei-chou, do you know what it's like finding out you're not real? I stood in the bottom of that ravine like a supplicant. I think she would have let me uselessly beg. Her mind was blank to me. There was no touch, no warmth. She made me a stranger. Yesterday, I was beautiful; today, I'm ugly! Oh, and that Erh-lang stood there like the world's greatest innocent, trying to look apologetic. I really needed his pity. Oh, how I longed to make him disappear just like Chang-Lao. The two of them stood there making a mockery of what I feel. Made me emotionally stupid! Me! Nü-kua thought I was angry because my pride was hurt. That was about eighth on the priorities of pain."

"My sorcerer, the immature are always traitors, no matter what their age. It's their nature. They feed on us."

"Yes, her betrayal is primal. She struck down the most elemental of bonds, greater than all others, greater because it is given, not required. She has taken my belonging from me -- I have no place. I look inside myself and find void. There is no safety in me, for me. Not that inane security you spoke of. No, not that. What's missing is holding someone greater than myself within me, someone I can give myself to. You know what she said? She asked if we could still be friends! How could she imagine I could bear that after what we'd had? What was she thinking of? How could I stand seeing her with anyone else?" He paused, gathering himself, drawing deep breaths to stop his sobs, fighting tears. "Mei-chou, it is a nothing thing to be rejected or insulted by someone who doesn't know you. With no insight, all they have are best guesses to use as weapons. It only works if you believe in a stranger. But to be ripped by a friend, by a lover, who knows intimately, thoroughly, insightfully, by someone you've given the power of yourself -- that is the greatest agony! The greatest desolation! How could she think it was something as vapid as pride?"

"You expect too much from her; you always did."

"But she was so special. I never felt so powerful, so in place, so smart, so strong." A large tear rolled from each eye, making a silver path in the mud. Mei-chou made sure they weren't going to hit her before she spoke.

"Maybe, you should be satisfied with normal. Most beings are." She got some spray when the tear broke on his foreleg. *Great! Dirty and wet! The things I do for love!*

"I don't feel good when I'm normal. You know that as well as I. It's my dread legacy. What was it you said, 'If you want to be special, you have to be different.' Didn't you say that?"

"I expect I did, but I wasn't trying to make you miserable."

"That's my own fault. You did warn me. I understand now what you were saying. I gave too much away. I was vulnerable when I should have been wise. Foolishly over extended myself. Now it feels like I laid my tenderest tendril over a rock and someone hammered it." He successfully held back more tears. "Someone once told me that we are all born with holes in our hearts. Love is supposed to fill that hole. If that's true, when it's ripped out, love leaves a much greater void than it filled. Sounds like something Feng-po would say when he was drunk. Oh, I miss him. Far more now than when she was around. She shielded me, I guess. So much of my feelings were centered in her that I didn't have much left for anyone else."

"Feng-po was more than a lot of dragons thought he was. We cats always liked him. Quick with a puff, he was. A good guy."

"You know what else she said." Ao Rue was still too stricken to think of anything but Nü-kua for too long. "She said I'd been magnificent, that she'd always cherish my memory. How can she say that? My memories have turned false. It wasn't real. I have no past. Cherish is a lie. The present has killed the past, stolen the future."

"You were terrific; you are astonishing. I'll never forget you coming around the Bogdo-ola. No other dragon could have done that. Unlikely that another ever will again.

I'll never be able to give enough gratitude for your saving Chu-Chu. You do have a future, a great future, an imperative future. How you feel now is the perspective of the moment. You'll think differently later."

"I don't think so, Mei-chou. If it was real, she and I would still live in each other."

"You may be right. I don't know. I've never given as much of myself as you have." *Poor, muddled child! I wish I could hold him.* "You did deserve better. I never thought I'd hear myself tell you that, but you did." *He's ranting, but I must let him speak, must listen.*

"My words fight me, fail me. There's an old, old poem. I don't remember the verses; Kuan-ti would be angry; he'd say I was lazy." The memory of his mentor brought a small, wry smile to the dragon's snout. "But it said something like 'What cannot be spoken, I must pass over in silence. More words are in ending than beginning. Spontaneity requires only joy and goes beyond words. Endings demand analysis but evade language.'"

"Does it help you to know that?"

"Not really. It gets close and then the rage blots it out. How could she leave me! She said she still loved me but not enough. What in damnation does that mean! Then she flies away as if nothing had happened and I'm buried in the mud?"

"Perhaps you feel more than she does?"

"I feel too much! What bothers me is that I'm absolutely sure this is the wrong thing for her to do. She babbled about dedicating herself to her nonexistent egg, to her dragonling. In this world? I should have killed Erh-lang; let her cry for an egg then! She's going to become ordinary."

"Yes, you certainly did make her more than she is. You have that effect. Your company ennobles. It's the thaumaturge in you."

"The tradition she thinks she wants and has isn't what she wants at all. Does that make any sense, Mei-chou?"

"Nothing here is expected to make sense. If you're right, let's hope for her sake she never discovers it. Probably won't. The odds are that realization is beyond her now."

"There's a part of me that wants to grind her snout in her choice, that wishes her nothing but pain and failure."

"That's not you."

"You're right. I just wish it was. It's awful to think so badly of someone you can't stop loving. I just don't understand. She was the driving force in the relationship, always pushing it to new heights. Now she decides I'm nothing. I sometimes envy selfish rage, insensitive anger. They blot out the fear. You know I'm afraid to be seen, afraid to be near anyone. I'm surrounded by an alien environment. I feel so disengaged, so ineffectual. My thoughts, my words, my feelings -- all seek meaning where none exists. I'm boring. I don't know what I'm saying. You don't have to hang around if you don't want. You've been far kinder than I ever could have expected."

"What, and leave you with no one to irritate, no one to keep you on the tips of your talons? After all, I am the last friend of the world's greatest sorcerer, the world's only sorcerer! Regardless of how you feel, all life rests in your eyes and fire. Forget her; you

have better things to do than mourn! A world needs saving! It's important for you to keep busy anyway. Admittedly, killing Demons is boring, but it beats lying around in the mud." Mei-chou tried to redirect him, change his perspective. It didn't work.

"I still love her; I can't forget; I'll never forget. Did you ever want someone so much that you think you can create the same want in them? That if you gave it all your energy, all your dreams, you could make it happen? Then, pour all of yourself, your deepest essence, into it . . . and it just isn't enough."

"That kind of magic is beyond even you. Lei-kung could do that. You can't. It's selfish and manipulative. You couldn't be happy with that!"

"Maybe if I talk to her again." Ao Rue still fought what he thought was his failure.

"You yourself said she flies now as if you'd never been. She has her prize. You'll only make yourself more the fool by chasing her. Make your love useless, non-functional. Don't let it be in the world even if it must be in your heart and mind. Redirect your anger, your pain. Do something creative. Change your perspective. Pour your grief somewhere else."

"I think I'll start writing poetry again."

"I do think that should wait until the Demons are exterminated."

"Yes, after; you're right. I know the perfect place to put my verse. There's a cave with an arch over its entrance. Already some of the lines of the ancients are carved there. I'll add to their chronicles. I think that's where we should go when it's over."

"Good, you'll be able to magic gold out of the stone there. You look stupid with that mud dripping off you."

"Mud? This isn't mud. It's the ritual paint of the Demon Slayer, the Mad Shaman, the Master Hunter. I will become a demon myself, hunt them until exhaustion takes me. And when I wake, I will hunt again and again and again. I will give the future the memory of a beast possessed. A dragon without heart or mercy. Ruthless, death incarnate. I will live in the memory of the very Earth as a killer, a berserker. I have nothing else to leave. When it is done, when no Demon violates the face of life, I will rot in a cave or turn myself into glitter sand if I ever find the courage or the cause."

Mei-chou said nothing. She was grateful that he found any purpose for his life. She knew it was vital that the Demons be killed, imperative for all living things. But, oddly, her relief was only that it was good for him.

The two sat in silence for a time. He spoke first. Now his voice was more philosophical, more resigned. The rage had left him. "It's common knowledge that time heals pain. It's probably true too. I wonder if I have enough time to heal mine. When I finish the Azghun Demons, will I be well? Will I die with pain?"

"You'll still have me. And you don't think I'm going to let you blow yourself up, do you?" Once the Demons were gone, and Mei-chou had absolutely no doubt that he couldn't achieve that, she knew that all that would hold him to the world would be her.

"Mei-chou, I never did have my moment, did I?" She was pleased that he hadn't laughed at her.

"No, everyone was always looking at themselves or the other way. You weren't a hero, but you will have the satisfaction of ridding the world of evil."

Now he did laugh. "Mei-chou, most of the time, you're so wise; you really are." She was glaring at him. "I'm sorry; I wasn't making fun of you. It's just that evil is never gone. Intelligent beings will invent it over and over again and blame someone or something else that it's there. The Azghun Demons are a manifestation of dragonkind's manipulation and insensitivity, the product of too much power combined with smug ignorance. Yolbas knew that at the end, but no other dragon would ever admit it. So many are satisfied with the short term. All they ever achieve is survival and breeding."

"Survival, busyness, mindless activity should never be enough."

"Ah, you're wise again." Now they both chuckled. "It's our minds that separate us from the animals. When we don't use them, we are nothing more than beasts. Feng-po knew that. He knew it in the oblivion of the vines. Speaking of vines, I'll bet Feng-po stashed some around here, probably in the pool to keep them cold. Would you mind too much if I went off by myself for awhile. I need the time. Try to put Nü-kua in balance. Seek new energy; we have a lot of work ahead of us."

"No, that's all right. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you. Thank you for your kindness. You'll be all right without me?"

"I'll be fine. What do you think I am, a kitten?"

"No, you, at least, are the real thing."

As Ao Rue ambled off to suck a few vines, Mei-chou tilted her head in sympathy. The pain had descended on him again. But he wouldn't be alone. She would keep an eye on him and he'd never know. That was one of the many advantages of a cat. The best was having one as a friend.