

Chapter 34 (last)

1330 words

EPILOGUE

"Where's my jerboa today?" For once, Ao Rue was up before Mei-chou. In the last year, after his decade-long hunt had been successful, there hadn't been much reason for him to stay awake. The Azghun Demons had kept him going before. Now they were gone.

"Jerboa? Jerboa?" She spoke from something other than sleep, more a drugged trance.

"Yes, you always bring me one. You sound like you've had your head in a bucket of Mi-hun-t'ang, the Broth of Oblivion. Come down here where I can see you."

"You never eat them. Never thought you noticed. Just gave up."

"Gave up'? You never give up. So I don't like rat. Just because I don't eat them doesn't mean I didn't like you bringing them. What's the matter with you?"

"Leave m'alone. Le' m'sleep." Mei-chou's head sank back to his warm snout.

"What's the matter with you? I can't see you there!" Ao Rue's voice was panicked.

"Le' m'sleep." Mei-chou's voice was soft, slurred, distant.

Ao Rue's eyes opened fully. The blue spun madly, greater than ever before. The air cracked. He became all dragon, all Ao Rue, all feeling. Shifting, crystalline lace tendrils of sorcery rose to surround his body. The energy snapped and swirled with the cave. Outside, the world came to his will. Great, long-dead forces gathered. The atmosphere soaked power from the land, collected it at his summoning. At the far poles, snow and ice melted and slid. The sun swelled and pulsed at his call. Thunder cracked and rolled where there were no clouds. Wen Ch'ang felt the deep sea strain and rise. He marveled, not understanding, but mouthed a silent "Ao Rue." Lord Chu sprang immediately alert. Beneath him, the Mount of God groaned. The great spell solidified within Ao Rue. He cried out as it threatened to burn him to nothing. He fought it, strained as never before. Finally, he focused it, made it embrace the mound of matted gray fur on his snout.

"Aahh." Mei-chou snapped awake. "What was that fuss? Couldn't you be a little quieter? Try to be a little considerate. Can't you let me sleep?"

"You weren't sleeping."

"What do you mean? It was a great sleep, the best in a long while. What did you do? Lord, what noise! What wrenching! You'd think you'd taken the world in your claws and wrung it dry. What were you doing?"

"You weren't sleeping. You were dying. That was the Spell of Ti-tsang Wang-P'u-sa, the Saver of Souls."

"I didn't know you did anything like that anymore." Mei-chou hadn't quite grasped what was happening. "What do you mean dying! Silly snake! I feel good! Strong! Hungry! I think I'll hunt."

"Don't bother. It won't last. It will fade soon. It's not permanent. A dragon can only use the spell once in a lifetime and only in full arousal."

"Won't last? You mean I'm dying? I'm not dying! You were in full power for me?"

"When did you last hunt? Last eat?"

"I don't remember. Am I really dying?"

"It comes to all creatures, even to my little princess." His great body trembled, shook.

"Stop shaking; you'll knock me off. If you start crying and get me wet, I'll bite a bloody hunk out of your tail! All creatures? No, not dragons. You can live forever."

"We can exist forever. It's not the same."

"If I'm dying, what will you do? Who will you talk to?"

"I don't know. I didn't think it was important to you."

"Important? Important? What do you think I've been doing. Hanging around for your stories? For the smoke? For a warm snout?" Mei-chou's tail swelled with false vitality, with real indignation.

"You serious?" Ao Rue was genuinely surprised. "You mean you cared about me?"

"Cared about you? I love you, stupid snake."

"Cats can't love dragons."

"Great, a lifetime of making your own rules, and now at the end you run to a platitude?"

Ao Rue was silent, stunned. Finally, he spoke, slowly, haltingly. "You have been my friend. I have been and always shall be your friend. What will I do when you're gone? Who will listen to my tedious and melancholy rantings?"

"They weren't that bad."

"They weren't much! No wonder no one ever stayed with me, no one except you, little princess. And I do love you. You would have been a wonderful dragon."

"I was thinking you'd have been a great cat."

"Always contrary."

"So what's new?" Gentle laughter made them one. "We were one of the great teams."

"Were we? I always wondered."

"Of course. Who would doubt it? What are you going to do now?" Mei-chou's concern was obvious, all pretension gone.

"Do? There's not much I can do anymore. Ti-tsang Wang-P'u-sa was one of the Major Powers; his is one of the Ultimate Spells. My magic's gone. That's the price. All that remains is the Last Flight."

"You did that for me?"

"No one else. Do you see anyone else here? Now who's being silly?"

"Don't get smart." Mei-chou feigned irritation. "I'm a very important cat. If anything's happened to Chu-Chu, I am the First of the First."

"He's ok. I'd know if he wasn't. For one reason or another, I sense he has a lot of years ahead of him."

"That makes me feel very good, especially for Pita."

Ao Rue nodded. "Mei, do you think anyone will remember?"

"I don't see how they couldn't. Just about all creation cringed from your Demon hunt. You were a dragon possessed. Those funny apes panic at your shadow. Silly beasts! And for all eternity, cats will appear to have special sight. They'll commemorate you by seemingly watching an invisible spirit pass through the air. Dying dragons aren't

something they're likely to forget. The passing of the greatest will forever be branded into the race. The Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur, is too strong for it to be otherwise."

"Am I supposed to believe that?"

"You sure are! Give yourself some credit! No one else did! No one ever asked for a hero, no one paid any attention, but you did it anyway. So you're going to turn yourself into glitter sand. Will you do it soon? Before I die? I don't want to rush you off, but I'd like to watch."

"I thought you might like to come with me."

"Come with you? Cats can't take the Last Flight."

"Now who's running to the rules. Besides, you know where we're going."

"No, I don't really know. All cats see are bright phantasms, always heading west."

"West. The legends say that is the Land of Extreme Felicity."

"Who knows? Can't you leave your learning behind? Must everything have a footnote?"

"I wonder if Nü-kua will be there."

"I don't know, Rue. If she is, she may not be alone; she may not be waiting. And I wonder if we'll get to keep our earthly forms."

"I'd like to think that it's a place without pain."

"Me too."

"It's time. The spell won't last much longer."

"Finally some action." Mei-chou couldn't resist.

"Sarcastic until the end."

"Of course."

Ao Rue brought his right talon up to his snout. He curled it into a cradle. Mei-chou climbed slowly into it. She turned and rubbed the side of her head against his snout, touched her nose to his. His eyes closed. A deep, mellow, rumbling sound rose from both of them. He felt her softness in his claw: *So small, so thin, so frail*. He drew her to his chest: *so soft, so precious*. "Comfortable, little one."

"Yes, my love. I hear the murmur of your great heart."

"And I yours."

Ao Rue stood. The great wings began to open as he moved out through the Gate of Sighs. He looked west, the great blue of his eyes tender and calm. He would rise once more. This time, for the first time, he wasn't alone.