

Dragons Among Us

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Kunming, Southern China

Ao Kuang, the great dragon of the East, paced across the smooth floor of the palace, the scrapping of his cobalt tail emitting a continual hiss with his eloquent movements.

"Master, please, do not worry yourself. These matters will take care of themselves." Yi Lin followed ten paces behind as his station dictated. "It must surely be something the others from the West have created. It will pass."

"Maybe so, my faithful servant, but I'm afraid we no longer have the luxury of isolation. It is only the superstition and fear from the Westerners that has kept us hidden for these many years. When they decide to step from behind their veil of ignorance and acknowledge our existence, it is then we will have to defend our homes and our very lives. We must learn the exact nature of the threat so we can combat it from within.

"It is my duty to protect my people and my lands." Ao Kuang ran his talon over his forehead in a familiar gesture Yi Lin recognized as worry.

Stepping closer to his master, Yi Lin exhibited a courage he did not feel. He lightly touched the Ancient master's forearm with his talon.

"Master? Allow me to send a message through my network. We will have the beginnings of a solution before the end of this day." He stepped back and bowed from his waist, sweeping his hand before him as he lowered his gaze to the floor.

Ao Kuang, his yellow eyes slitting, stopped and turned. "How long have you been with me, Yi?"

The smaller dragon, his scales rustling softly, lifted his eyes from the ground but continued to keep them downcast.

"A thousand years, sire. I was a youngling when the monks of the valley found me dazed and wandering among the rice paddies. I trained in the bowels of your palace for many a year, sire."

Ao Kuang watched his servant shift colors from his normal grass green to a light lime color, the edges of his scales fading to a dust brown.

"Do not worry. My question is not one of anger. This problem has mired my mind in useless wonderings. It has allowed me to forget how clever you are. Send your messengers. I weary from this cloak of responsibility and will retire to my personal chambers. Report to me the minute you have news." He turned his massive girth and strode from the room.

Yi Lin, shaking from head to toe, raised his head from the bow, his scales a sickly lime green. He'd been too bold in actually touching the Ancient One. He was surprised his master hadn't struck him and had him served up for dinner. Ahh, but he knew better. Ao Kuang was a caring and kind master whose first concern was the welfare of his people and those humans who interacted with them. Now, if it had been Ao Shun from the North...he'd be greeting his ancestors this very moment.

He pulled in a deep breath, calming his fluttering stomach and straightened to his full thirty-foot height. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself a moment; quietly humming the peace mantra his religion master taught him. Pebbles skittering across the stone floor destroyed his meditative moment. Pumpkin colored eyes dilated, taking in the subtle movement to his left. Lightning reflexes moved him across the floor, his hand striking out and wrapping around the neck of a very young, yellow and white colored, lowland dragon.

"Please! Master Lin. It is only I--Hong Chen. I wish to help."

Yi stared into the bulging azure eyes in the pale face, the pink forked tongue lolling to one side of the pale mouth. Releasing his vise grip from the neck of the youngster, Yi moved back.

"Hong, you must learn to shift fully before you skulk about the palace. Otherwise, you will find yourself learning the intricacies of the dungeons."

"But master, I thought I had." The young dragon stepped from behind the pillar clad in an embroidered vest and began to check his scales.

"Your scales are fine. The pink tongue was the give away. If you creep about the Master's palace in human form, your curiosity will land you in the dungeon or the kitchens. Why are you here?"

"I bring news about the problem in the outer world, master Lin. I have experienced it myself. I don't know the cause but do know the problem. I would be willing to find out more, if you would so honor me." The young shape shifter's bright azure eyes gazed hopefully at Yi Lin.

"Tell me what you know, and I will decide if the master can use your services." Yi moved on padded talons toward the front gate of the palace, the scattering of sand hissing under his tail. At the lack of response, he turned to find the young dragon had morphed into a strapping young man, naked except for the overly large, embroidered vest.

"This is the predicament. Without warning, I find myself changing into or out of my dragon form. There is a moment at which I feel light-headed, as though I've hyperventilated then the change occurs. The first occurrence happened at my home while I was working on my studies. The second occurrence nearly got me thrown into jail. While riding my bicycle home from college, I took a shortcut down an alleyway to save some time when I shifted. Exiting from between the buildings in my dragon form created a panic among the non-shifters. I ran down another alley and hid until I changed back. It was a bit embarrassing as I was without clothing, but I stole some pants and a shirt from a clothesline and ran home. Several of my friends have experienced the same problem."

Yi moved toward the human shape of the young dragon called Hong Chen. He noted the human, fear emanating from his lightly tanned body, step back into the large vest.

"Please find some clothing to cover those unsightly scales. I will not turn you over to the cooks but you must cover yourself."

Hong stepped from behind the vest and crawled into the pocket on the side. The master's advisor sat upon his tail and watched the pocket move until, at last, the young Chinese man crawled out of the pocket and jumped to the palace grounds. He was dressed in the modern clothing favored by the young people of the current age; jeans, a sweatshirt bearing the picture of some film star frozen mid-air in a martial arts leap, a leather jacket, and leather boots upon his feet.

"How is it that you happen to have this..." Yi Lin waved his talon up and down, "...costume so readily available?"

Hong looked into the pumpkin colored eyes. "I have learned to be prepared for those occasions when the change overtakes all my efforts to stay in my form, be it dragon, or be it Homo sapien. May I be so bold as to ask you to store my vest until I return with news from the outside?"

Yi tapped his talon upon his scaled chin. "I will put it into my room. Before you attempt to enter the palace grounds, send a message through the front gate. There is much fear from the humans regarding this palace; therefore, no one will endeavor to steal the message. Once I have received your communiqué, I will leave word for you. At that time, you will be able to enter the grounds without fear. Now go. Time is short, and master needs solutions quickly."

Yi Lin dismissed Hong Chen with a wave of his talon. The young Chinese man, head bent in respect, heard hissing on the stone walkway. He peered from under his eyelashes and watched the pompous old dragon waddle into the darkness of the palace interior.

These old dragons have no idea what lies beyond the walls of this sanctuary. However, Yi is right. We must find a solution to this problem as soon as possible. If I shift one more time in public... Hong shuttered and slithered between the ancient iron bars of the entrance gate. Time was quickly slipping through his fingers. He didn't cherish the idea of capture and dissection at the National Academy.

His azure eyes flit from left to right, scanning the busy street in front of the sacred palace. Against the walls, which held the massive gate, small shrines stood, candles flickering. Prayers, printed on slender silk banners attached to bamboo sticks stuck in the ground, asked the monks within the walls to plead to the gods the case of the loved one whose name was herein written. Lit incense wafted aromatically on the light breeze ruffling Hong's dark hair.

Bolting into the hectic fray in the street, he sped through the throng.

Ming Li will know how to proceed.

Hong did not sense the deep, yellow eyes tracking his departure.