



CHAPTER | IV



Tests

(April, 1903–February, 1904)

During the next year, I learned that the Company was more than a group of men wanting money. We were brothers: strangers in a strange land who had banded together for mutual help and protection. There were arguments, of course, but they were always worked out.

As for myself, I was treated as a man and not a boy; and the long hours I worked were really no worse than the hours I had worked on our farm. In the mornings I was the first to get up and make the fire and brew the tea for the others, and through the day there would be various things I would have to do. I did not go to school during the daytime like demon children because the demons would not allow me to go to any of their schools just a few blocks away. I could only go to a special school the demons had set up in the Tang people's

town, which was so poorly equipped and so poorly staffed that I was better off in the Company.

All during the day, Uncle and Father would keep up a conversation with me using what they knew of the demons' tongue, and they made me read and discuss the demons' magazines and newspapers which some of our friends and kinsmen, who worked in the demons' mansions, would bring down to us. Demonic was easier to speak than to read. It was hard to understand a language that only used twenty-six symbols, the *letters* of their *alphabet*. The *letters* kept on rearranging themselves in the most confusing patterns.

At about four o'clock, after I had gotten the fire ready again for White Deer to cook dinner, I would hurry to the Tang people's school, where I would learn the classics of the Tang people. The classics were the books supposedly written by Confucius and the ancients, about the correct way to live. Some of them made sense. Some of them didn't. As Uncle told me, some of it applied to everyone, including demons, and other parts of it applied only to the rich.

When I came home two hours later from school, I would be in time to grab a quick dinner from the leftovers, wash the dishes, do my other chores and my lessons, and then go to bed. I worked sixteen hours a day

and had never been happier in my life.

The part I liked best was when I went with Father to pick up the dirty laundry and deliver the clean. Because Father could speak more demonic than the others, he always got that job, and he usually took me along. Our wagon was painted a bright red, with the Company's name in demon script painted in large, bold gold *letters* on its sides. The wagon was pulled by Red Rabbit, whom we kept along with the wagon in a livery stable a few blocks away in the demons' section. Red Rabbit was a big, strong horse, red as fire, with a white star on his forehead. Father had named him Red Rabbit after the speedy horse of the god of war. As he jokingly said sometimes, he thought Red Rabbit would try to live up to his name; but so far the shameless beast had not. Red Rabbit was without a doubt the laziest, slowest horse in the demon land.

Uncle said half seriously that it was associating with demons that had made Red Rabbit so lazy. Whatever the reason, neither curses nor the whip nor kicks nor slaps of the reins on Red Rabbit's big rump could get him to move faster than his slow, deliberate pace—a pace which he never changed, whether we were in the flatlands or on one of the demons' steep hills. But no matter how slow he was, there was always a cube

of sugar in my pants pocket.

In the beginning, Uncle had not wanted me to go out with Father and Red Rabbit. It was dangerous to leave the Tang people's town. There was many a Tang man with a cracked skull or a broken arm or rib because he had crossed over the invisible boundary line between our town and the rest of the demon city. Sometimes the demon boys threw stones, and other times it was a group of restless adult demons who were out for a little "sport."

But Father said it was time I learned a little more of the demons' city. I had already been here a month and never left the Tang people's town. He took me out only along streets that he regarded as safe, either because he knew the policemen on the beat or because some of his customers on that street had banded together and warned the demon boys and young men not to try anything.

The first time we went out, I had been afraid of just about everything. I remembered stories about how the hills were made by burrowing dragons, so I was scared to death by the sound the cable made going through the rails of the *cable car* tracks: a steady rattling, clacking sound. I thought it was a dragon scrabbling at the surface with its claws, just about to break free. As

for the houses, they looked like wooden monsters, hunkered down along on either side, waiting for me to look away from them before they would grab me. And every demon I saw I was sure had a stone or a knife or a gun.

Father saw how I clutched the seat in sheer fright until the knuckles of my hands were almost bone white. Father began to speak quietly then of the Old Ones, the spirits of the dead members of our family to whom we offered food and the sweet smell of incense that pleased them so well. For their part, the Old Ones watched over the living members of the family, for one's obligations to the family did not stop with death.

Then Father spoke especially of the brave Old Ones who may have crossed over the sea to watch over us. Among these was my great-grandfather, who had died fighting the *British* demons when they had wanted to force the Tang people to let them sell opium in the Middle Kingdom. He was on the losing side and was beheaded for his trouble, but Father was sure that he for one would not miss a chance to fight demons again.

Father was even more positive that the spirit of my Grandfather was with us. I finally found out the truth about his death. He was a proud man who would take nonsense from nobody. One day shortly after he had

arrived, some drunken demons had tried to cut off his queue. Grandfather could have worn a wig if his queue had been cut off. He would not have been the first "guest" of the demons who had to resort to one, but instead Grandfather had spat in their faces and busted a few heads, and before the whole thing was finished, he was swinging from a lamppost by some demon's clothesline.

Like many Tang men, he did not think of the queue as a symbol of Manchu oppression. Tang men had been wearing their hair in that way for over eight generations, so for Grandfather, having a queue was part of being a Tang man. He would as soon lose his nose as his queue. But even if he had been a revolutionary who knew what the queue really meant and hated the thought of wearing it, there was still the principle of the matter. The demons had no right to do anything to him physically. Anyway, I understood why Grandfather had died.

I let go of the seat, ashamed to let the Old Ones see how frightened I was. Father did not give me a chance to think about how afraid I should be. He would point with excitement at some new sight, or wonder with me at the meaning of something which we had seen among the demons. There were few things that escaped

Father's notice, and even fewer things that Father was not interested in. Some of the houses had hitching posts cast in the shape of black demons, but in such odd clothes and of such odd colors that we never could figure them out.

I learned later they were *jockey* clothes. Father and I speculated on the purpose of the figures—whether they were like the lions or the door gods who were meant to protect the house, or what.

When we started to make deliveries I was afraid of going near the houses, but I was even more afraid of being left alone on the wagon. I went with Father, feeling a certain pride in the Company's craft as I carried the clean, pressed, and starched clothes wrapped in the crisp, blue paper and tied with twine into neat parcels. And then I would help Father carry the dirty laundry back. If the bundle was small, say only about ten pounds, Father would let me carry it back to the wagon; but sometimes—especially when we were at some mansion—I had to let Father take the load.

While we did that, Father began to tell me about his life as a boy on our farm, his first years with Mother, and his first years over here in the demon land. But I liked it best when he sang, in his deep bass voice, some of the silly nonsense songs he and Mother used

to make up when they were children.

One of them he taught me went:

The fox went a-walking,
For to have a little flirt;
But it made me so sad,
For she had no skirt.

The fox went a-walking
Down by the sloughs;
But it made me so sad,
For she had no shoes.

The fox went a-walking
Down by the mall;
But it made me so sad,
She'd no clothes at all.

And it went on like that for dozens of verses, going through not only articles of Tang people's clothing but those of the demons as well—some of which, when we picked them up, amused us no end, especially the tons of petticoats and the like that demonesses had to wear. Father sang the song in such a mournful voice that he always made me laugh.

During those trips alone among the demons, Father and I learned things about one another; and more, we learned about being a father and a son. Every trip was an adventure into a strange, fearful city; and yet I felt safe by my father's side. Anyone who could laugh and tell stories and jokes and sing while he was alone among the demons must know what he was doing. In my own mind, Father was the embodiment of Uncle's superior man.

Only once during all those trips did we have any trouble. Some demon boys were out in the street. They stooped as if to pick up things to throw, and Father whispered to me to sit up straight and not show I was afraid. The demon boys called out some things, but we ignored them until we had passed them by. A rock whizzed by my ear and hit Red Rabbit in the side. He snorted, but plodded on as steadily as before.

Then came that one fateful encounter with a demon. Because a demon can help or harm you, there is no way of telling if a demon might be testing you before he will reward you or whether he is trying to trick you. I had been in the demon land for only ten months, so it would have been about *January* of the demons' year 1904, when we met *Mr. Alger*. I remember it was a gray, wintry day. We were making the rounds

when we saw one of the horseless carriages stranded by the sidewalk and a demon in a big overcoat standing beside it. His driving cap was pushed back, and he was scratching his forehead in a puzzled way. The metal hood on the front of the horseless had been folded back on top so you could see into its innards.

"Whoa, Red Rabbit." Father pulled at the reins and Red Rabbit stopped. Father set the brake, and as an extra precaution he put the wooden block behind the wheel.

"*Can I help?*" he asked.

The demon was a big, cheerful-looking demon with a bland, round face. He eyed father. "*I dunno, John.*" Many demons called Tang men *John* because, they insisted, they never could get the hang of our real names. "*You know anything about horselesses?*"

"*Some,*" Father said. Truth to tell, he had never handled a horseless carriage in his life, though he had a book on them and cut out articles whenever they appeared in the demon magazines and newspapers. That was the extent of Father's knowledge. But to know facts is nothing. He had an intuitive feeling for what made the horseless carriages tick. He looked around inside the engine for about ten minutes and then wiped his face absentmindedly, so that the grease

stained his cheek. He did not even notice.

"Know where there's a garage?" the demon finally asked.

Father only grunted. His eyes were shining. He had hardly heard the demon until the demon tapped him on the shoulder. *"You sabe me? Garage. Repair my Oldsmobile."* As happens sometimes between two people speaking different languages, the demon had begun to shout at Father as if Father were deaf and the demon could make his words better understood by being loud.

But suddenly Father stiffened, hooked up a loose wire, and stood back. *"Horseless ready,"* he said with a satisfied air.

"What?"

"It ready."

Skeptically, the demon got back behind the wheel while Father went to the front near the crank to start the motor. Father put his thumb against his palm instead of putting it around the crank. As he told me later, when the motor took, the crank could move suddenly and break a man's thumb if his thumb was around it. He folded his hand carefully around the crank and began vigorously winding it. The motor caught and started with a chug. The whole horseless began to shake. Father closed the hood.

"Here, John." The demon unbuttoned his coat and

reached into his pants pocket, but Father shook his head.

"No tip. Happy just to look at horseless."

The demon stopped and studied Father as you might look at a dog that had suddenly said he was going to the opera. *"Well, I'll be damned,"* he said. He reached into a pocket of his waistcoat and took out a card, and handed it to Father with a flourish. *"I can use honest handymen like you. You come around anytime, you sabe me?"*

"Me sabe." Father nodded.

Father went to hold Red Rabbit's head as the demon wrestled the brake of his carriage free with a loud ratchety sound. Then he put the *clutch* in. There was the loud bang of a backfire and the horseless chugged forward. The demon grinned and waved. Father waved back. When Father climbed up beside me, he held out the card. "Here's a lesson for you," he said.

I puzzled out the words: *"O-li-ver Al-ger, Re-al Es-tate A-gent. Prop-er-ties sold and man-aged. One thousand two hundred Polk Street."*

"Very good." Father took the card and put it carefully away in his pocket. "Did you see that demon's face, Moon Shadow? He was surprised when I fixed his carriage. Machines aren't all bad. Some of them may be the true magic. We might not be able to speak too well with

the demons, but in machines there's a language common to us all. You don't have to worry about your accent when you're talking about numbers and diagrams."

I was getting excited. "Maybe the Dragon King was right. Maybe the magic takes a different form in our land. Maybe that's why you don't need words for it."

Father wiped his hands on an old rag in the back of the wagon. Then he held up his hands. He had not been able to get off all the oil, for the lines of his hands were still black. "Well, you know, repairing the horseless carriage was a lot like healing the Dragon King. My hands just seemed to know what to do."

I leaned forward eagerly. "Do you think that was the Dragon King in disguise? Do you think it was a test?"

Father gave my queue a friendly tweak. "You're too ready to find tests everywhere." He grinned. "Why can't he just be a demon?"

"But White Deer says there are good demons and bad demons. But was he showing us something good or bad? Was it—"

"You talk too much." Father clicked his tongue and shook the reins, and Red Rabbit started forward again.

But whatever Father said to me, his meeting with the demon made him look doubly hard through the

demons' papers for signs of the true magic. It might have been that Father secretly took the meeting and the successful repairing of the horseless carriage as a test, but did not want to tell me. Or probably it was simply the change in the demon's attitude from being surly to being friendly that encouraged Father. At any rate, he studied the papers even harder than I did.

But not only did I have to learn the demons' language, I also had to learn how to measure time by two calendars. There was the demons' calendar, which was based on the movements of the sun with its fixed number of days and months and its seven-day weeks. And there was the true time of our own home, with its calendar based on the movements of the moon so that the first day of our New Year changed with each year, as did many of our holidays. Then, too, our week was ten days long.

But above all I wanted to learn Tang words so I could write Mother myself and be able to read her letters on my own; and there were a lot of letters, for she had begun to dictate twice a week to the schoolteacher. In her part of the letter, Grandmother had grumbled a bit about the expense—not that she begrudged us the extra letters, but their budget was a bit tight. But Mother in her part of the letter had argued that they

now had twice as many loved ones to write to in the Land of the Golden Mountain. Father had told them that we would tighten our belts a bit over here and try to send on some extra money to cover the mail expenses. In the meantime, we had done our best to match them letter for letter so that they got their money's worth in return. Of course, in her next letter Grandmother had wanted to know how come we could suddenly afford to pay for double the mail load.

Grandmother became quiet, though, when I added my own lines to one of Father's letters. I first wrote to them in late *November* of the demon year 1903; but because of the distances, it took two months (a month for our letter to reach them and a month for their letter to reach us) for their reply to reach us. That would have made it the first month of our year 4061, but early *February* of the demons' year 1904.

Mother told us how proud she and Grandmother were. The schoolteacher himself had exclaimed over my handwriting and vocabulary—both of which I owed more to Lefty's private tutoring than to my teacher in school. My mother added that she wished I were there to help her go through our box of Father's old letters, for there were now many passages she had forgotten over the years.

I suddenly felt very guilty, for in all the excitement of slowly learning about Father and living in the demon land, I had not really had time to think about Mother. But now I remembered about how it used to be, sitting on the edge of the rice field as she waded through the brown, clouded water. I remembered, too, how after the dinner dishes had been washed and dried, we would sit by the small hearth and look at the fire and think of things that we ought to tell Father in our next letter, or how when we had come back from the schoolmaster, we would spread out one of Father's letters and pretend to read it to one another. Mother had always been good at that, for she would have the schoolteacher repeat a section she was not sure of—despite the schoolteacher's grumbling. When she got home, she could almost recite the letter by heart. She must have done the same thing with the parts of the letter that I had written.

"What's the matter, boy?" Father asked.

But as much as I would have liked to, I found it impossible to tell him about my feelings, though I think he suspected. He pretended to become very severe with me. "Now don't you go getting a swelled head by what the schoolteacher says, boy." And Father set me to reading the letter out loud, helping me with the more difficult words.

Then, after setting me to another lesson, Father went through a pile of old demon newspapers and magazines that one of our friends had brought down from some demon house in which he was employed as a houseboy. Suddenly Father waved the "*New York Herald*" magazine at me. It was a fairly recent one, dated January 17, 1904. I know the date because I still have it. One rich demon subscribed to the paper and had it shipped to him all the way across the country. It always boggled my mind to think of the great mountains and wide rivers across which he had people bring the papers just for his reading pleasure.

Father spread the magazine out before me. I saw a series of drawings of a boxlike contraption. Father pointed to the big letters beneath the picture. "This means the demon flew."

"Flew?" I said excitedly.

"That's what it says. A pair of demon brothers by the name of *Wright* flew in an *ae-ro-plane*." Father's tongue rolled over the syllables. He pronounced the demon word again as if delighted with the sheer sound of the full vowels. "An *aeroplane*."

"Were they given the wings by the Dragon King?" I asked.

Father laughed. "No." He tousled my hair affectionately. "Not so they say. They repair bicycles. But

what some demon did, I can do." His eyes had gone as deep as they had when he had spoken of learning to fly on that strange beach.

The others were down on the second floor where our dining room-kitchen doubled as a gaming room in the evenings, when the dishes had been cleared away. Only Uncle was not excited by the demon magazine. He folded his arms across his chest and pondered his next move at the Tang people's chess, which is slightly different from demon chess (for one thing, there is a river across the board). Finally, Uncle pushed a chariot forward and sat back for White Deer to make his move. "It's probably just some fairy tale for children," Uncle said. "You just haven't read it the right way."

"No, no, it's fact," Father insisted.

"You can't trust everything you read in the demons' papers," Uncle observed loftily. He was sitting in his special treasure, a chair which the founder of the Company had built and carved from teakwood brought all the way from the Middle Kingdom. The head of the Company always sat in that chair. Uncle treated his chair very much like a throne in which no one else was allowed to sit. When Uncle was settled into his chair, he did not so much speak as make proclamations, so we knew better than to argue with him at that time.

I could not understand why Uncle took such a stubborn attitude against the fact that some demon had flown. Father went to the demons' library and read through all the newspapers gathered from around the country, and he copied out the accounts of them. All of these Uncle refused to believe were true. But a few days later, we received our next sign. Melon Head was a laundryman in *Oakland*—he had gotten that name because he had gone completely bald in his younger days. He belonged to the same guild as we did and often caught the ferry over to attend the guild meetings. He was an old friend of Uncle's and usually dropped by our place for a snack after he and Uncle had gone to the meeting.

Uncle was not feeling at his best that night. He had quarreled again with Black Dog—over what, no one knew, but Black Dog had walked out in a huff. Uncle's mood was not helped any by Melon Head's news.

Over tea he told us about some crazy demon, *Baldwin*, who put air into a big canvas bag and then floated up into the sky, where he was under the control of the winds. He had a special, sausage-shaped canvas bag built for him, maybe about thirty feet long. It was covered with a giant net which went down to its belly, from which a wooden frame was suspended. There were

propellers and a motor in the frame, and they sent the bag lumbering through the air, so he could guide his own flight.

It was one of the pioneer *dirigibles*, but at that time we thought of it as almost a miracle. It was called the *California Arrow*, though Red Rabbit was a rocket compared to it. The real crazy thing was that the demon was testing it so that he could race it at a big fair held at one of the demons' inland cities and maybe win some money in a contest being held for flying machines. The demon then planned to take it all around the demons' land and charge people admission to see him fly.

"Can you imagine flying and making money at it too?" I said wonderingly.

"No, I can't, because it's too risky to fly. Better to stay on the ground and do something you know you can make money at." Uncle spoke in his sternest voice.

"But supposing he does," Father said.

"You're crazy. First you wanted to bring your wife and your boy over to this place to live, and now you want to fly like a bird. Next thing I know you'll be collecting twigs for a nest."

"And you have a mouth that runs on, old man," White Deer snapped. It was one of the few times I had

ever seen him look angry. "You weren't supposed to talk about that."

Uncle glanced first at me and then at Father guiltily. "I didn't—I mean—"

"You were going to bring Mother over as well?" I asked.

"The demons will let a merchant bring his wife over, but I have to be a partner in the store," Father said.

"But then how did you bring me over?" I asked.

"You came here as a merchant's son," Father said. "We got a paper saying that I was a partner in the store and owned a thousand *dollars* worth of property here; but that was only for the demons. I actually don't have a share in the store."

"But you could bring Mother over with that piece of paper."

Uncle cleared his throat. He did not like what he had to say. "Not while I'm the head of this Company. I'd go to the demons and tell them that the paper was a lie."

"But if the demons knew that Father wasn't a real partner in the store, they might send me home as well," I said. "And maybe the demons would even send Father back home because he lied."

"Yes, well." Uncle scratched uncomfortably at his ear and peered at the wall. "I'd rather lose both of you than see you bring your poor mother over here. What kind of place is this for her when we're afraid to set foot outside our own door?"

"You used to tell me how no one would ever fly either," White Deer pointed out, "and yet the demons are."

"And I bet the families of those demons are going hungry right now," Uncle declared smugly. "And all because of someone's crazy dream."

Father was going to argue with Uncle some more, but White Deer shook his head. There was no use going on. "Come," Father said to me. "It's time for you to go to bed." We said good night to Melon Head and left.

I kept quiet when we got to our room, but it was obvious from my face that I wanted to talk. Father sighed. "Well, out with it before you bust."

"Were you really going to bring Mother over here?"

"It's only a dream of ours, Shadow," Father said gently. "Before I left home, your mother and I secretly agreed to do it if it could be managed; but I'm more likely to fly again in this life than to bring your mother over here."

"But perhaps you will fly," I said. "What better test of your dragon-ness than if you could fly in a softskin body? And if you could do that hard task, Uncle would have to believe you were once a real dragon, and then he would respect you even more than he does and he would do what you say. Then you could bring Mother over."

"You talk too much, boy." Father laughed, but he looked thoughtful. He pulled the quilt up about my neck. Then he turned the gas down on our gaslight. As I fell asleep, I could see him sitting on his mat, weighing the possibilities of what I had said.

The next day after we had had our morning rice, Uncle came over to Father. "Oh, my head." Uncle touched his fingers to his temples. "I drank too much wine last night."

Father grunted. He wet one finger and lifted an iron from the rack on the stove, where it had been heating. He tested it by putting his finger next to the iron. The moisture on Father's finger evaporated, making a soft sizzling sound, so Father knew it was ready without any discomfort to himself. He looked up from the iron. "You stiff-necked old goat," Father said. "Why don't you apologize and be done with it?"

Now Uncle was a proud man, and it had probably

taken him most of last evening and this morning just to work himself up to this point where he would make excuses for his actions. But you could never force him to admit he was wrong. Uncle pressed his lips tightly together and his eyebrows drew closer together. "What makes you think I was going to say I was sorry?"

Father spread a shirt out on the ironing board. "I don't think when I'm around you. You do all the thinking for me."

"Well, someone has to. You can't be left on your own. A grown man your age playing with demon toys. You're a fool—a stupid, stupid fool—especially for wanting to bring your wife and family over to this place."

White Deer bent over and whispered in my ear. I could smell the soap on his hands. "Don't think too badly of Uncle. He's angry at his son and he grieves for him, but he holds all that anger and grief inside him. He's just taking those feelings out on the nearest person."

"But that still doesn't make it right."

"No, but neither would resenting Uncle's words. He doesn't mean them. He thinks your father's taken to flying the way that Lefty once was taken by gambling and the way that Black Dog is owned by his opium pipe."

In the meantime, the argument between Father and Uncle had reached the shouting point. "Go away, old man. Go away before I hit you with this iron," Father said. He turned away from Uncle and bent over the enamel bowl on the left side of the ironing board. He sucked his mouth full of water and then spat the water out forcefully in one large explosion, so that the entire shirt was sprayed with water. It was some way Father held his teeth and lips that made the water spray like that. Father very calmly began to iron.

Uncle snorted and stalked away.

But after ten days, Black Dog still had not come back. It was White Deer who joined Father beside his ironing board. "Black Dog's been gone a long time," White Deer said.

Father's arm went back and forth rhythmically across the sheet, smoothing out the wrinkles. "Yes, he has," he grudging.

"He's never been away this long," White Deer added.

"Unh," Father grunted.

"Opium costs too much. He's never had enough money for a binge as long as this."

"Unh."

"We ought to look for him."

Father sighed and set the iron he had been using back onto the stove rack. He took off another one that had been heating there and wet his thumb to test it. "I suppose we ought to," he said finally.

That night after dinner, Lefty began our confrontation with Uncle. "I understand that Leopard Head is down from the north country with his pockets full of money. I think I may get into a game." Leopard Head was a cook for the demons on some ranch up to the north. The point was that he was a member of the Brotherhood of Eternal Repose, nicknamed the Sleepers (it was their enemies and not the brothers who rested eternally), the same brotherhood to which Black Dog belonged, and would be staying at their hall. If Black Dog was at the hall, Lefty could find out.

"If you see my worthless boy," Uncle grumbled, "spit in his face for me."

"No one is worthless, Uncle," White Deer chided him gently.

"He comes the closest to it of any Tang man I have ever seen." Uncle mopped his brow with his handkerchief. The air was still hot and steamy inside our building.

"He's probably too ashamed to come back," Hand Clap contributed.

"Yes, that's it," White Deer said. "He'll probably come back like a small dog with its tail slung between its legs."

"That boy knows no shame."

"He's still a member of the Company."

"Hah. I've got a good mind to fire that boy."

White Deer shrugged. "You can't fire someone from the Company unless your two partners agree, and Hand Clap and I will never do that."

But Uncle was still too proud to say he wanted help to look for his boy. "None of you are to look for him, understand?"

White Deer looked at his friend for a long time. "Well, there's no objection if I take a walk, is there?"

Uncle sat for a long time in his chair, drumming his fingers on the chair's arms. "No, I guess I can't keep you from going for walks." He pushed himself up from his chair suddenly. He picked his hat from a peg. "I think I'll visit Whirlwind. Haven't seen that old fool in a long time." Whirlwind also was a Sleeper. Uncle walked down the steps. The bell tinkled as he slammed the door.

"We ought to split up the rest of the Tang people's town," Father said. "I'll take the opium dens."

"No, let me," White Deer said.

"No," Father said. "It makes more sense for you to go among your friends in the restaurants and ask after Black Dog. He's got to eat sometime. Hand Clap, you can cover the brothels. You know them all so well."

Hand Clap looked embarrassed when we all laughed. "Not that well," he mumbled.

"Leave the gambling places to me." Lefty slipped a silver dollar out of his pocket.

Father caught his wrist. "This is serious business, Lefty."

Lefty smiled. "Relax. I will not use this for gambling, only for buying drinks. There is nothing like wine to loosen tongues."

"All right." Father let go of his wrist.

"What about me?" I asked.

"Boy, you stay here."

"I want to go with you."

Father shook his head. "Where I'm going, nobody should have to go. What would your mother say?"

"Before I left, she told me to look after you. You'll need someone to watch your back for you."

"The boy is quite right, you know," Lefty said. "Some dopey may be just desperate enough to tackle you."

Father drummed his fingers on the countertop. "It's very ugly, boy. You'll think you're in the court of Hell."

"All the more reason to have someone you can trust there."

Father cocked his head to one side. "I do think you've grown an inch since you've come here."

"More like a foot," I said.

"You've been using Hand Clap's ruler again," Father laughed. "Let's get started." He jammed my hat onto my head.

We headed for the alley that is known as the Devil's Kitchen. There was a different kind of smell to the alley. It was a sweet yet bad kind of smell. We paused at the mouth of the alley. Overhead the moon shone through the bars of the fire escape, and it kept pace with us as we walked inside, like some restless animal pacing in its cage. It was pitch-black in the alley mouth. Without the moonlight, we would have stumbled over the man who lay moaning against the wall.

"Is he—?" I began.

"No," Father said. "Just trying to sleep. If he had any money, he'd be inside."

We turned the corner of the building into a kind of courtyard formed by that building and two others. One gas lamp lit the yard. Father kept his hand on my shoulder. "Keep close to me," he cautioned. We started down the steps into a basement. A bald-headed man

perched on a stool behind a counter, his feet inside the rungs. He acted as if he were in some kind of store. He was sipping a cup of tea with one hand while the other rested on his thigh.

The rest of the basement was given over to beds, each of which had a little table beside it. On each table rested a nut-oil lamp, which was used to heat up the pellet of opium before it was put into the long-stemmed pipe. Later, when I went into a demon hospital, it was to remind me very much of a scrubbed-up, antiseptic opium den. On the straw mattresses, men lay in various positions, but of the faces I could see, each of them wore a moronic kind of grin. One man had just put his heated pellet into his pipe. His lips sucked happily at the pipe, which was as long as my arm. Each time he sucked, there was an evil kind of frying sound. The pellet was only good for several lungfuls, but that was enough. The air itself was thick with the smell of opium and with stale sweat and vomit and urine.

The man at the counter put a pellet down on the counter.

"I'm looking for my cousin," Father said.

The man scratched his forehead with his left little finger. The casual gesture must have actually been some

recognition sign. Father scratched the little finger on his right hand.

"You don't look like a brother," the man said.

"I'm not," Father said. "But I once knew men from the Heavenly Order brotherhood. That was back in '97 in the Little City." The Little City was what we called the demons' *Sacramento*, the provincial capital up to the north.

"I hear the fighting was messy," the man behind the counter said. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say." Father looked around the room.

"Well, who are you looking for?"

"A man called Black Dog."

"And he's your cousin?" The man at the counter sat back, satisfied. "So you're the man they call Windrider now."

"Is Black Dog here?"

"No, but I'll send word to your laundry if he does come here." The man gestured toward a teapot. "Have some tea?" he offered, just as if he were in his home.

"No thanks," Father said. "But I'd appreciate that word if he shows up."

"My pleasure," the man said.

As we stepped outside, I turned to Father. "What fighting?"

"Never you mind, boy," Father said.

We went to three other dens, but we had no luck. We were just coming out of the third den when we saw three men appear in the courtyard. Father pressed me back against the door so we were hidden in the shadowed doorway. They walked side by side very deliberately. The two other men who were in the courtyard scuttled out of their way. The sound of the boots echoed hollowly off the walls. The man on the right jerked his head at a basement opium den we had yet to try. "The pig's in there."

"Bring him out," said the man in the middle. Father tightened his hand on my shoulder and he put his finger to his lips, telling me I was to be silent. The man on the right disappeared into the den. There were protests from inside and he reappeared a moment later, half-carrying a man who was naked to the waist. Two men followed him.

"You can't just come breaking into our place like this and taking out one of our customers. You Justices can't push us around even if you are the biggest. There are rules now. Every brotherhood has its own territory—"

The man in the middle held out his right hand. The man on his left lifted up his loose black shirt and pulled out the heavy pistol that he had stuck under his

waistband. He handed it to the man in the middle.

The man who had been protesting stopped and dropped to his knees.

"We don't want to start a war with you Bloody Hands, but we will if we have to," said the man in the middle. He nodded at the dopey who had been dragged out of the den. "This pig stole money from one of our foxes. He beat her up, too, so she wouldn't talk."

"So that's how he got all of his money," said the other man from the den. The man on his knees got up and spat at the dopey.

"Take him and good riddance. You can't get any lower than stealing money from a woman." The two men hurried back inside their den. The third Justice propped the dopey up against the railing that ran along the steps to the basement and stepped to one side.

I saw it was Black Dog then. He looked up, confused, studying the three men for a moment until he recognized them. I'll give Black Dog this much. He smiled rather than being afraid. "Lead Hand," Black Dog said to the man in the middle, "I'm going to remember this in the next life and I am going to take definite pleasure in tromping every worm, cockroach, and fly that I meet. I'm sure one of them will be you."

"I never stole any money from any fox," Lead Hand

said. "Don't be so sure as to who's going to come back as what." Lead Hand cocked the pistol. You could hear the loud mechanical click. Suddenly I heard a shrill piercing whistle from above me. I looked up to see Father with two fingers in his mouth. He emitted another whistle as I watched. It was a decidedly demonic talent.

I don't think the gunmen would have mistaken Father's whistle for the sound of the police if they had been calm, but of course they were nervous and excited about the killing. The man on Lead Hand's left turned to run, but Lead Hand grabbed his arm. "The gun, you fool, the gun."

Dumbly, the young man let Lead Hand give him the gun. Then the three of them ran like mad for the alleyway.

"Where did you learn to whistle like that?" I asked with open envy.

"Something I picked up," Father said.

"Think you could teach me?"

"Yes, it might just come in handy for you." Father started down the steps three at a time, running toward Black Dog, who lay sprawled across the railing, his legs spread out on the steps. He twisted his head up. He had difficulty focusing his eyes, but finally he recognized Father. "You," he said.

"Yes, me. We've come to take you back to the Company." Father bent over and tried to help Black Dog to his feet, but Black Dog pushed Father's hand away.

"Don't want . . . don't need . . ." Black Dog mumbled.

"Oh, hell," Father said. He swung his fist into Black Dog's jaw with a solid smack. Black Dog sagged on the railing. Father crouched and got Black Dog over his shoulders and walked slowly up the steps. I was waiting for him at the top. "Get his hat and things," Father said.

But I was staring up at Black Dog.

"Remember," Father said, "he was a good man once. Now get his things."

I got Black Dog's hat and shirt and joined Father, who had already started to walk toward the alley mouth.



CHAPTER | V



Windrider's Claws

(February, 1904–May, 1905)

Later, at the Company, Uncle sat for a long time figuring things on his abacus. The beads clacked as his fingers flew back and forth. Through the ceiling we could hear Black Dog snoring upstairs. "The money can be made up out of my share," Uncle said.

"Don't be an old fool," Father said. "There's not just the matter of the woman to be made up. There's the Justices to be paid off."

"No. Whiskey Devil—he's the head of the Justices—owes me a favor from a long time ago. It won't cost that much."

"Still," White Deer said, "it ought to come out of all our shares. We can write it up to expenses."

"He's my son," Uncle said sternly. "I'm responsible for him."

"Money, money, money," Hand Clap said disgustedly. "Who cares about the money or where it comes from? The point is that any one of us could be a dopey and sleeping upstairs."

Lefty massaged his right arm. "Hand Clap is right. And it would not have to be just dope. It could be gambling for me, or any one of a thousand different traps that a Tang man could fall into in this demons' land."

"Put it to a vote," White Deer said. "All those in favor of sharing the cost, put up your hands." He and Hand Clap put up their hands.

"You're both fools," Uncle began. "Think of your families—"

"They do, old man," Father said. "That's why they're here. But this is their family, too. Now will you get talking to your Justices?"

Uncle slammed his abacus down on the table. "Who can talk to fools?" he grumbled, but there was a pleased look in his eye.

As soon as Black Dog had recovered, he promised to reform. He sounded as if he meant it; but then he always did, Hand Clap told me later. Black Dog kept his promise for a time. Pale and shaky, he moved about the laundry working as hard as any of us; but after a

while he began to get snappish again, and to sneer at things. It was his way. I think he had lived so long in this land of the demons that his mind had become poisoned and he had begun to think like a demon and to despise the Tang people around him. Maybe when he had first begun to take dope, he had just meant to get away from his conflicts; but after a while, taking dope had become an end in itself.

Now quite a few of the older Tang people used opium. Everybody, including Father, would have an occasional pellet, but that was the way they might have a drink or gamble at the tables. But there were certain individuals who had gone over the edge, who knew no moderation. Opium for Black Dog was what gambling had been for Lefty, but Lefty had stopped, more or less—at least compared to his old days. Black Dog's real problem was his inability to control himself. Finally, one month after we had brought him back, he disappeared. And on the next day, when he came back, we smelled opium's strange, sweet smell—like roasted peanuts—clinging to Black Dog's clothes, and we knew where he had been.

When I had been in the demons' country for over two years, Uncle sent me to make the rounds among

some of our regular customers in the Tang people's town to collect overdue bills. As he said, even by demon reckoning it took two figures to write my age, for I was eleven by our system of counting and ten by theirs. I had been collecting money for a month when I saw Black Dog lounging in a doorway, staring at the *May* rain.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I had to take a walk and get some fresh air." He stared up at the sky with a frown and pulled his collar up about his neck. The rain ran down the brim of his hat, splattering on his shoulders. "But it's a miserable day."

"I guess," I said. I had the small canvas bag of money under my loose shirt. "Going back to the Company?"

"Why not?" Black Dog shrugged. He fell into step beside me and we walked up the hill in silence. Black Dog folded his arms across his chest, almost hugging himself. "Don't you . . . don't you hate it here?"

"I don't like it, if that's what you mean, but White Deer says that 'hate' is so strong a word that I ought to use it only for evil."

"But there's another way to forget evil," Black Dog

said. We stopped for a moment in a doorway when the rain fell harder.

"Did you ever hear about how we got opium?" he asked finally.

"The *British* demons forced us to let them sell it in the Middle Kingdom," I said.

"Ah, that's what some people say who want to hide the truth, because they don't want to give the poor man his due. He was a poor working man like you or me who, no matter how hard he worked, always wound up owing more and more to the bosses. The only thing he owned outright was his ugly wife, maybe the ugliest woman alive. She was so repulsive that he beat her in the morning when he got up and beat her in the evening when he came home. The wife never complained, because she loved him dearly. But finally when she saw how much he hated her, she fell ill because she was so sad.

"On her deathbed, she called her husband to her and told him that after her death he would realize how much she loved him despite everything he had done to her. At once the poor farmer felt sorry for what he had done, but before he could tell her, she died. Ten days later, the poor farmer noticed a strange white flower growing from her grave. There was a little round fruit

inside the flower. At first the poor farmer was afraid that his wife had turned into some poisonous flower. He could not sleep at night, thinking about the flower and what he had done to his wife. He could not work during the day, remembering the blows he had given her. 'She has every right to hurt me,' the poor farmer said, 'for I have been a mean, spiteful man.'

"With that, he fell sick himself. But he had no money to pay the doctors, nor any offspring to care for him. And then one night during a feverish dream, he saw his wife. She told him that the flower on her grave had been woven from the strands of her soul. The strange fruit in the flower could heal him. He was to cut the fruit and harden the juice that would come out and smoke it. If he smoked it every day, he would become healthy. The very next morning he got up and did as his wife had told him, and no sooner did he take his first puff than he felt his illness leave him. So it was that he and his wife were closer in death than they were in life."

Black Dog smiled ironically. "So it is to those two lovers that I smoke, for the name of the ugly wife was Life and the name of the farmer was Everyman. The only good thing I ever got out of my ugly life was the flower."

I did not understand his story at all. "But life isn't all ugly," I said.

"Don't you think it's ugly here? What kind of lives do we lead without wives and families?"

"There's no money back at home."

"But why sacrifice yourself just so others can get fat at home? All they ever understand is that they need more money."

"Things will be better in the next life. Maybe we'll be born as the sons of noble families. Maybe we'll even finally find release from this world."

Black Dog looked at me intently. "Why shouldn't we get some pleasure in this life? Why later? Why not now?"

"Because we don't owe things just to ourselves. There are others."

He grabbed me by the arm and his voice grew wild. "Don't give me your simpering, mealy-mouthed answers. We've repaid our debts a dozen times over."

"You're hurting me," I said. All the time, in my mind, I was telling myself that I must not be frightened. I must not be frightened.

"You don't know what pain is," Black Dog said. "Wait till you have been here for thirty years. Then you'll welcome the pain. They were once as pleasant to

me as they are to you." He twisted my arm. I let out a yell. I kicked him hard in the knee and he let go of me with a grunt. I began to run up the hill. My hat flew off. I kept on running. I heard his boots come closer as he followed me. Suddenly I felt a pain in the back of my head. He had grabbed my queue. I stopped short as he jerked at the queue, and fell on my back. He tore the money bag away from me, but he did not even look at it. "Pain?" he said strangely. "Pain? You don't know what it is." And he began to kick me with his heavy boots.

When I came to, I was back in the Company. Father was pressing a wet towel against my forehead anxiously. "He's awake," he said. The rest of the Company crowded around me.

"What beast did this to you, boy?" Lefty asked.

I found that I was not even mad at Black Dog. How could you be mad at some dumb, pain-goaded animal?

I did not know what to do or say; the Company looked so stern and solemn.

But Uncle took it out of my hands. "Was it Black Dog?" he demanded.

I did not say anything.

"Was it?" Uncle asked.

"Yes," I said reluctantly.

"I'll cut off his head and throw it into the gutter where the dogs can eat it," Uncle said.

"How can you curse your own son that way?" White Deer scolded him.

"He's no son of mine," Uncle declared.

Father turned heavily in his seat. "That's good to know. Then you'll let me take care of him."

"I should have let you or any one of a dozen men take care of him a long time ago. He's not a man. He's an animal," Uncle said.

"You won't do any such thing, Windrider," White Deer said. "Black Dog is a member of the Company."

"Kick him out," Uncle said.

"We'll put it to a vote," White Deer said. "I say bring him to the police and let them handle it."

"Bring him to the demon police?" Uncle asked.

"Yes, the demon police," Lefty said. Hand Clap nodded.

"Otherwise," White Deer reasoned, "you'll have to take it up with the Sleepers. They're not about to let anyone go around beating up one of their brothers without their permission. No matter what he's done."

"The Justices were going to shoot Black Dog," Father pointed out.

"They asked the Sleepers. You ought to know that," Lefty said. "And the Sleepers only gave their permission because they didn't want a war with the Justices."

"I'll go to the Sleepers myself," Uncle said grimly. "They won't refuse me permission."

"No." Father let out his breath in a rush. "No. I'm sick of having to deal with thieves and pimps and pushers. I'm sick of having to scrape and bow to men who live off the misery of their brothers and sisters."

"Now, now," White Deer soothed. "There are many good men in the brotherhoods who earn their money as we do and who don't deal with those things. It's only a small number who are criminals."

But Father whirled around to face White Deer. "Don't you see? We're all tainted by it. As long as we keep quiet and let it go on, we're as bad as they are. It eats at them; it eats at us."

The others were silent. Father might have slapped each one of them in the face. He should have kept his mouth shut then, but the dragon-ness in him would not let him. He had to speak his mind. "We mustn't play their games anymore by their rules."

"They are our brothers," Uncle said, "no matter how bad. That's why we don't go to the demon police.

We Tang people take care of our own affairs. It's better that way. Remember the virtues of the Stranger, the lonely man in foreign lands: Be silent; be cunning; be invisible. Besides, what's the use of going to the demons? The Sleepers can afford to pay more bribes to the police than we can. The demons will just listen to our complaint and then file it away. Better to go to the Sleepers themselves."

"If you won't go to the demons, there's only one other way to make sure that justice is done," Father said. "And that's to do it myself." There was something about his posture and the look of his eye that reminded me of dragons. All the others in the room could feel it, too.

Then I realized that to be a dragon meant more than just taking an interest in the magic of machines. It was also to live by the spirit of dragons, and Father felt that no dragon would let such an act go unpunished.

"Dragons," Father went on, "protect their own brood."

"Dragons, dragons, dragons. Always that nonsense," Uncle said impatiently. I think he instantly regretted his words, for Father's mouth hardened at that.

Father sat back in his chair. It creaked under the shift of weight. "When I was there on the beach and in the dragon kingdom, it was more real a time than this."

"Don't kill yourself for a foolish dream," Uncle insisted. He would not have said such cruel things normally, but he was worried about Father. "And besides you promised . . ." He glanced at me and was quiet.

"What promise?" I asked.

It was a long time before Father spoke. He folded his hands and looked at them while he talked. "You do many strange things when you're young. And maybe the strangest thing you do is join a secret society that says it's dedicated to throwing out the Manchus. You enlist. You act as a soldier for the future of the Middle Kingdom. And then you realize that though they make a lot of patriotic speeches, at heart they're only criminals."

"And did you do that?"

"I once was a Sleeper," Father said. The others left our room shortly after that. But we no sooner had turned off the gaslight and lain down than we heard a bump at the door. Father got up and opened it, to see Lefty sitting in the hallway facing our door. The hallway was so narrow that though Lefty had his back against the wall, he had to draw his knees up toward

his chest. By his left side he had a club.

He smiled apologetically. "Excuse me, Windrider. I meant to be quiet. Hand Clap should never have eaten so much squash. That one has so much gas that I cannot stand sleeping in the same room with him, so I have come out here for cleaner air."

"Right by my door?"

"The air is cleaner here."

Father slammed the door shut.

"Why should the air be cleaner here?" I asked him.

"Be quiet," Father snapped. "The fools are trying to keep me in." We had no window in our room, so the only way out was through the door. Father paced around the room. Finally he seemed to notice me again. "Go to sleep, Shadow."

"How do you expect to be reborn again as a dragon if you act like a criminal?" I asked him.

"Dragons have claws, too." Father pushed me down on the mat and drew the quilt up about my neck. "Now go to sleep."

I felt rather than heard Father stir. He lit the gaslight, keeping it dim. Half awake, I watched as he rolled off his mat and got dressed, except for his boots. Then he went to our trunk and eased the lid up, piling the things silently on the floor until he reached

the very bottom. From this he drew a flat rectangular package, and he undid the plain cotton cloth about it. The demons called it a hatchet, but it was really a squarish sword, looking much like a cleaver except that the balance was truer.

The light gleamed on the blade. He set it down by the door.

Then he found his boots and set them down by his sword. He put his hand on the doorknob and leaned his ear against the door as if listening to Lefty in the hallway. Father straightened, and wriggled his shoulders as if to relax them. He took several deep breaths before he jerked the door open.

I had never seen Father move so fast. He jerked the door open, and Lefty had time to stare up in disbelief as he groped for his club when Father's fist hit him in the jaw. Lefty's head tilted back sharply and he had a glassy look in his eyes. As he began to slump over, Father caught him and eased him to the floor.

I closed my eyes quickly when Father came back into our room. I raised my eyelids slightly so I could watch Father pick up his hat, boots, and sword in one hand before he closed the door. I remembered again that Mother had told me to look after Father. I scrambled for my things, and with my boots clutched against

my chest I padded after him. I was just in time to see him pull on his boots before he went outside.

I counted to ten before I followed him outside. It was a night when the thick fog drifted through the streets and I could not see more than an arm's length before me, and everything seemed unreal, as if I were asleep and dreaming. The gaslights showed in the fog only as dull spots of light—like ghosts hovering. A building would appear out of the grayness and then disappear. The whole world seemed to have become unglued. If ever there was a night for monsters to be out, this was the night.

I could hear Father's steady, determined footsteps fading away into the distance. I decided not to put my boots on after all, because the echoes might tell Father I was behind him. I shivered as I walked on the cold, wet pavement. I picked my way through the garbage and over the occasional demon who lay sprawled on the street with the vacant look of a dopey. We went two blocks down *Dupont Street*, and then one block up the steep Street of the Tang People, into an alley. I crept down the alley until I dimly saw Father's tall figure bulk out of the mist. He knocked at a door. I ducked into a nearby doorway.

"Who is it?" a voice asked.

"It's the Windrider. I want to see the Water Fairy."

"Who?"

"Some call him the Tiger General now."

The little door shut, and Father stood unmoving there in the cold, his collar turned up, his sword in one hand. I stood shivering, my boots clutched to my chest, afraid to go to him but afraid to leave. I knew that the Tiger General was the head of the brotherhood, but how he had gotten that other name—as improbable as it sounded—I did not know.

Finally the door opened and I saw a small, wizened man. "It's been a long time since anyone used that name."

"My Uncle has a long memory, reaching back to the railroad camps and a young man who drank the water as the demons did without boiling it first. He told all the other Tang people what a superior stomach he had. He took sick with the cramps and the runs."

"That name is the only thing that saved you from being shot down on our doorstep. I wanted to see what fool would dare to use it. I should have known it would be you."

"All that's past. Send my kinsman out to me."

But the Tiger General stayed where he was. "It's in my mind that you and Black Dog may have been

mortal enemies in some former lives and done great harm to one another. You never did get along, from the day you joined us to the day you quit."

"Think what you like." Father shrugged. "But I beg you to keep this matter between the two of us."

While the two talked, I had watched a shadow creep out of the narrow alley between the Sleepers' hall and the building I was in. The shadow ducked back into the alley mouth. In his hand was a heavy pistol.

"He beat up my son for the money he had collected," Father said. "Do you protect child beaters and thieves?"

The Tiger General considered that for a moment and then turned in the doorway. "Tell our brother that he has a caller." There was scuffling from within. Then the Tiger General stepped aside as Black Dog was pushed, stumbling, out into the street. He paused for a moment, on all fours. His shirt was rumpled as if he had been dragged to the door. He stood up and smoothed out his shirt.

"I'm sick. A dopey is always sick," he said to Father.

"You weren't too sick to beat up my boy. Now fight," Father said.

"But you're armed, and as you can see . . ." Black

Dog held up his empty hands. One of his brothers tossed a sword out onto the cobblestones. Black Dog turned to look with astonishment at the others. The Tiger General merely folded his hands behind his back.

Reluctantly, Black Dog bent slowly, as if his back hurt. "Now," he shouted and straightened quickly, raising the sword over his head to throw it. The man in the alley stepped out, cocking his pistol. He began to aim at Father. I threw myself against the man—literally threw my whole body, as if it were only an object, against him. I hit him in the stomach and he collapsed with a grunt. To my astonishment, I found I still held my boots. I began to use the heavy-soled boots like clubs, flailing at the man.

Black Dog cut viciously at Father's head, but Father had accurately judged the length of Black Dog's swing and kept his head just an inch out of the reach of the sword, using his own body to draw Black Dog's swings. It was as if Father were playing with him. Panting, Black Dog cut again and again at Father's head, but he always just missed. Panicked, Black Dog tried one huge, powerful cut and missed. He missed on his back swing, too. Then Father had cut Black Dog across the chest, laying open the shirt. Black Dog

stumbled and fell back with a shout.

An arm caught me across the chest and I was tossed off by the man. My head hit the cobblestones hard and I lay there, looking up breathlessly at a man in his forties. In his hand was the pistol and it was aimed at me. Then suddenly the man jerked his head back and he twitched. There was the sound of a meaty smack and he fell face forward across my legs, Father's sword in his back. Father picked up the man's pistol and whirled.

The Tiger General and some of the brothers had stepped onto the sidewalk. The Tiger General held up his hands apologetically. "It was supposed to be between just you and Black Dog."

"And now?"

The Tiger General prodded the dead man in the leg. "It is still between you and Black Dog for all we care." He turned to one of the brothers. "Bind up Black Dog's wound and gather his things. He is no longer a member of this brotherhood. I have had enough of his disobedience. He's already been warned of the penalty." The Tiger General turned back to us. "Are you satisfied?"

"Is he?" Father jerked his head in Black Dog's direction.

"I cannot say." The Tiger General shrugged. "But now when you settle this matter later, it will be strictly a private affair."

I slid out from underneath the dead man, staring at his blood that had splattered my pants leg. Father jerked his sword free from the man's back and wiped the blade carefully on the shirt of the dead man. "Put your boots on, Moon Shadow."

Father stood up and turned back again to the Tiger General. "The Company wasn't responsible. I acted on my own."

The Tiger General crossed his arms across his chest. "You'd best get out of our town for a while. Not that I care for the likes of those two pigs, but there are some brothers who would resent the death of a brother, no matter what kind of a fool he was."

"I understand," Father said.

Father put me to bed and then began to write a letter. I was so sleepy that I fell asleep before I could ask him why he was writing it then. The next morning Father left early, while I was still asleep. When I woke up, nobody knew where he had gone. He did not come back until around noon, when he walked solemnly over to Uncle. "I have already written my wife and mother

telling them about the trouble last night. I have told them we have to leave the Tang people's town."

Uncle put down the pair of trousers he had been washing. The steam in the laundry had slicked his hair down against his face. "Where will you go?"

"Out there among the demons," Father said.

"Don't be a fool. There is nothing that money can't fix—even the killing of a brother," Uncle snapped. "What can you do out there?"

"I went to see a demon, a *Mister Alger*, who manages apartment houses. I have a job, cleaning and fixing things in those houses. I can heal sick machines on the side, too."

"And where will you live then?" Uncle demanded. "What demon would rent to you?"

"There is one demoness. She was once rich but now she's poor. She lets people live in her house for money. They have a stable that they converted into a little room. I'll stay there with my boy."

"You can speak their tongue well enough to collect bills, but not well enough to live among them."

"I can speak the language of machines," Father said. "That will get us by."

"To hear you talk, you'd think it was you who'd been knocked on the head instead of your boy."

"Maybe I have been," Father said. "I feel like I've just woken from some long dream. I can follow the dragons' ways better among the demons than among the Tang people."

"That's the real reason," Uncle snapped. "But don't you understand me? It's dangerous out there for a Tang man. Just the other day some demon boys caught Melon Head in the street. Now he's blind in one eye. And that was just traveling from the ferry into the Tang people's town. He wasn't even trying to live among them."

"We won't ever have to travel very far away from our home. We ought to be safe."

Uncle waved his hand. "Then go, and good riddance to a fool." He was hurt and angry and afraid for us all at the same time. I don't think he could really understand why any Tang people would want to leave the safety of our town to live among the demons. I suppose it would have been possible to go on living near the Sleepers, but it would have meant paying an expensive compensation to them—money Father did not want to pay. And then, too, I think he truly believed that he could follow the dragon-ness within him better among the demons. The fact that he was willing to live among the demons was a measure of how strongly he believed.

Despite Father's words, he seemed as sad as I was the next day when we left the Company. He had gone in the morning to clean up our new home. When he came back in the afternoon, we got ready to go. Uncle stayed upstairs in his room while we loaded our possessions into the Company's delivery wagon. And then, when the very last box of wires and parts and tools had been loaded into the wagon, Father went up for one last visit to our room. I had stayed downstairs out of courtesy to him. Then the Company gathered around us when Father came back down.

There were presents, of course. White Deer gave us a little statue of the Buddha-to-be, a happy, laughing god who would exist in the future when all mankind had been liberated from the material world. Lefty gave us his magnificently written poem which he could never reduplicate because he had lost his hand. Hand Clap gave each of us a little charm on a necklace. On the charm was inscribed the name of the Demon Stomper, who was most often portrayed as a man in a tattered robe sticking a knife into one eye of a demon while he pulled out the other. It had been blessed by priests back home—the Enlighteners, they were called, because their monastery was the Place of Full Enlightenment. Everyone was impressed by Hand Clap's gift.

And then we heard the sound of a door slamming upstairs and footsteps. Uncle had on his best outfit, looking as splendid as any lord. His arms were folded across his stomach and his hands were hidden in the great sleeves. He hid his affection behind his gruffness. "Well, you young fool, are you finally finished making enough racket to tear down the house?"

"Yes, Uncle," Father said quietly.

Suddenly Uncle took a porcelain cup from his sleeve. There was a little bit of dark soil in it. In his other hand, he held some incense sticks. "Here," he said.

There is no way of identifying dirt, of course, but we all knew it must come from Uncle's own little cup of soil that he had brought back after one of his trips to home. For Uncle the soil was very special, being a bit of the Middle Kingdom and home, and more: part of the land which his fathers and their fathers had worked before him.

"Put it in front of all your gods and your demon toys and burn some incense in it."

Father cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"Here, here," Uncle said in an annoyed voice. He thrust the cup and incense sticks into my hands. His own hands disappeared inside his sleeves again. "And good riddance to you."

He would have turned away, but Father on impulse suddenly stuck out his hand. Uncle stared at it for a moment and then, like a demon, took it and shook hands with Father. Then Father shook hands like a demon with all the others, rather than bowing and saying good-bye. He was determined to begin doing things in the demonic fashion.

We mounted the buckboard next to Hand Clap. I sat between him and Father. Then Father cracked the reins on the backside of Red Rabbit, and with a lurch the wagon set off. I held the cup in my hands, looking at the familiar buildings passing by. Oh, I would be back to shop for things. Father thought it more prudent if I did the shopping in the Tang people's town for a while. But it would not be the same. Most of my day would be spent away from here.

I felt Father's hand on my shoulder. He nodded at the cup. "We'll give that a special place," he said kindly.



CHAPTER | VI



The Demoness

(May, 1905)

In those days *Polk Street* was for the poorer demons. There were lots of common little shops like grocery stores or poultry markets and wooden tenement houses, some four stories high, into which the poor demons crowded. In the morning you would see the demons in undershirts and coats, swinging lunch buckets as they walked to the factories, and the demonesses hurrying to be on time in the rich mansions one block to the west, where they worked as laundresses or housekeepers or housemaids. There would be young demons who were clerks in offices, tugging at their stiff celluloid collars as they ran to catch the *cable cars*, and shopgirls in their long dresses walking in groups, talking in excited voices.

All day the streets would be filled with noise: the sound of the hooves of the great dray horses as they

clopped up and down the cobblestones and the merry ringing of the *cable cars* on the streets that crossed *Polk*. The demonesses might be back later in the day, pushing baby carriages or walking with their employers' wives, doing the day's shopping. And in the later afternoon, everyone would come home, looking tired, hardly noticing the demons who lit the gas lamps.

I had been through streets like *Polk Street* before, when we had picked up laundry, but we had only been passing through then. Now we were here to stay. The tenement houses had the same odd, flat faces and the same drab colors, making them look all the same, as if they had been hatched in the same brood. Their doorways gaped like mouths and their windows gleamed like eyes, so that each one of them looked like the stark, empty face of a multi-eyed demon.

We stopped finally in front of a neat little Victorian house with an odd shape. It seemed to have a little more character than the tenement houses. I found out later that it had eight sides instead of being built in the shape of a square. The demon who had built the house had wanted it that way. Actually, it made that house seem all the more scary, because behind its iron fence, it looked like some strange beast that had to be kept specially separate and fenced off from the others. It squatted there

like some toad made of glass and wood and shingles. In one corner was a turret with a big bay window looking out on a small garden surrounded by the fence. "Here we are," Father said. He picked me up and swung me down to the sidewalk. "You watch our things," he added. I watched uncomfortably as he and Hand Clap each grabbed a box of our belongings and walked into the alley between the iron fence of the house and the tenement next door. When they disappeared from sight, I wasn't sure what to do. On the one hand, I was supposed to watch our boxes; but on the other hand, I didn't want to be alone. I walked cautiously toward the mouth of the alley, but I couldn't see Father.

It seemed to me at that time that there might be any number of demons waiting in their houses, waiting patiently for me to turn my back so they could leap upon me and take over my body, or torture me, or do the hundred and one things that demons can do to people. I looked up at that moment and saw a pink demonic face staring down at me from the glass eye of the turret. When it saw me looking, it vanished. I ran back to the wagon. I stayed there all the time, clinging to the familiar shape of the Company's wagon while Father and Hand Clap unloaded our things. It did not take long, since we did not have very much.

Hand Clap sat on the seat of the wagon for a moment, the reins in his hand but reluctant to tell Red Rabbit to go. We were just as reluctant. We stood on the sidewalk beside the wagon. My hand held on to the side. For want of something to do, Hand Clap scratched his neck and looked around. Then he began to sniff the air. "There's money to be made here by a man with the know-how," he said. "I can just smell the gold coins piled in all these houses, and I can just see all these poor demons sitting on top of their heaps of gold, crying because their clock's busted and they don't know how to fix it. They'll be mobbing your place day and night to fix things once they know you're here."

Father laughed. "Careful, or some jealous demon will wish us bad luck."

Hand Clap sat back in the seat. "With that charm I gave you? Listen, if some dumb demon is too ignorant to recognize its power and comes a-knocking at your door, why, you tell me and I'll tell the Enlighteners, and they'll come flying across the ocean and gobble that demon up from the top of his hair down to his big ugly feet."

"You do that." Father slapped Hand Clap's leg. "Now you'd better be going. Red Rabbit looks hungry."

"He's always hungry," Hand Clap said.

"Remember though," I said, "he likes a carrot in the morning."

"I'll remember." Hand Clap nodded a good-bye to Father and winked at me. Then he shook the reins, but Red Rabbit would not leave. He looked around at Father as if telling him to get back on the wagon.

"Go on, you fat, overgrown, sassy rabbit," Hand Clap ordered as he shook the reins, but Red Rabbit stubbornly stayed put.

"Get out of here before I skin you and make a jacket out of your hide," Father said. With his hat, he whacked Red Rabbit's rump real good. With a snort of hurt pride, Red Rabbit started in his harness; but then he stayed put.

"Go on," Father said, and he whacked Red Rabbit even harder.

With a sad twist of his head, Red Rabbit turned away from Father and began to clop along in his slow, methodical pace. From the way he went, you might have thought he was pulling a ton of metal instead of an empty wagon. Together we watched them roll down the cobblestone street and turn the corner.

"Come along." Father put his hand on my shoulder and steered me around to face the alley. We walked past the iron fence and the garden to a big back yard that was

filled with trees and grass. A stable stood in one corner of the yard. Father swung the door open. It creaked on its hinges, and I could smell the disinfectant Father had used to clean out the stable that morning.

In one corner of the room was a potbellied stove with a pipe leading up to the ceiling. Our mats and blankets were laid in one corner. Boards had been propped against one wall for the day when Father would build shelves. Until that time, our stuff would stay in our boxes. I wandered around the room and touched everything to reassure myself that it was real and not some demonic illusion. Father waited patiently in the doorway with his arms folded. When I went back to him, I nodded that it was all right. He grinned.

The first thing he did was to put up a shelf. Then he set Monkey and the Buddha-to-be on it. He placed the cup of soil before them and stuck some incense sticks into the soil and lit them, so that Monkey and the Buddha-to-be would be comfortable in the pleasant smoke. Finally Father nodded his head in the direction of the house. "Now we have to meet our landlady. Her name is *Miss Whitlaw*."

"*Miss Whitlaw*." I practiced the syllables several times until Father sighed. "That will have to do for now." Then he spat into his hand and smoothed back my hair.

He frowned. "How do you ever manage to get so dirty?"

"I washed my face this morning like you told me."

"Not very well," he said. He picked up an empty pail and went outside. I watched from the doorway as he worked the pump handle until the water splashed into the pail. He came back inside and got some clean hand towels. He threw me one. "Now wash," he said.

"You'd think," I grumbled, "that we were visiting the Empress herself."

Father wet his towel in the pail and began to wash his face. "Your mother was always polite to everyone. She always said that you never knew if that person might have been some king or queen in a former life."

"But these are white demons," I protested.

Father opened our trunk and got out some clean, well-ironed shirts—some of White Deer's masterpieces. "You can take that up with your mother when she comes here herself. Until then, we'll do as she says. Understand?"

I said nothing because I was still annoyed, but I rubbed my face vigorously anyway—in fact harder than Mother used to do it. I was not going to be accused of being unfaithful.

When I had changed into my clean shirt, Father announced we were ready. Finally we stepped outside.

Standing there in that empty back yard, I was afraid, and then I thought of the Old Ones. Perhaps they were watching. I had to try to act brave at least.

Father took my hand as if he knew I needed the support, and we started toward the demon house. On the way he pointed to the outhouse that sat at the end of the dirt lot. Then we went up the back steps and knocked at the door. Under my shirt, I wore the charm to keep demons away.

I think that the demoness had been waiting for us, because Father had no sooner knocked once than she opened the door. She was the first demoness that I had ever seen this close up, and I stared. I had expected her to be ten feet tall with blue skin and to have a face covered with warts and ear lobes that hung all the way down to her knees so that her ear lobes would bounce off the knees when she walked. And she might have a potbelly shiny as a mirror, and big sacs of flesh for breasts, and maybe she would only be wearing a loin cloth.

Instead I saw a petite lady, not much bigger than Hand Clap. She had a large nose—but not absurdly so—and a red face and silver hair; and she wore a long dress of what looked like white cotton, over which she had put a red apron. The dress was freshly starched, and crinkled when she moved and smelled good. She had a

smile like the Listener, She Who Hears Prayers, who refused release from the cycle of lives until all her brothers and sisters too could be freed from sin.

"Well," she said. "Well." I looked at her eyes and saw a friendly twinkle in them that made her seem even less threatening. There were demons, after all, who could be kindly disposed. I suddenly felt calm and unafraid as I stood before her.

My father nudged me. I bowed carefully and presented our present. It was a paper picture of the Stove King, who reported to the Lord of Heaven each year about what the family had done—both the good things and the bad things. It was customary each New Year's to bribe the little Stove King. Some families offered him cookies and tea, which he could snack on during his journey to heaven. Others took a more direct approach and smeared his face with honey. Still others bought little paper horses and carts so he could ride up to heaven in style. After all these centuries of tender loving care from millions of Tang families, the Stove King had gotten quite pudgy. Father thought it might be a nice gesture to give the picture to the demoness and I agreed, for the little Stove King might take the demons' ignorance into account and give a good report for them; for the Stove King was basically as kind and gentle a person

as one was likely to find among the gods.

The demoness turned it over and over in her hands in puzzlement until Father spoke. "*He Chineese saint of kitchen.*" I doubt if the demoness would have had a "heathen" god inside her kitchen but a holy man was a different matter.

"*Well, isn't that nice.*" She smiled pleasantly and stepped aside from the door. "*Please, do come in.*"

We sat down at a table covered with a cheery red-checked tablecloth in a cold, abstract arrangement of squares—the kind of pattern the demons favored.

And of course all the smells to her kitchen were different. The demoness went to her *icebox*—a strange device—and took out a pitcher and poured a large glass of some white liquid for me. For herself and for Father, she made tea, using water from a copper teakettle that she must have already boiled and set at the edge of the stove to keep hot. Then the demoness set down the biggest plate of things before me. They were brown-colored and shaped like men, and icing had been used to make eyes, noses, and button coats.

"*They're*"—it sounded like—"jin-jer-ber-ed cookies," she said.

I looked to Father to explain the demonic word which I did not know.

"*Gin-ger-bread*," Father said slowly. "It's a kind of sweet ginger-flavored cookie or cake."

"And what's this stuff?" I looked dubiously at the glass of thick, white liquid.

"Cow's milk."

I almost made a face but caught myself. "But that's cow urine."

"No, no, stupid. Milk comes from the cow's udders. Now drink it. You must not offend the lady."

I glanced at the demoness. She smiled at me. It was nice of her to think of me as a demon child—I guess. I sipped the liquid and managed not to make a face at the awful, greasy taste.

"Go on and have a cookie," Father ordered me sternly. "And you better eat all of it."

The milk did not make me inclined to trust the demoness' cookies much. "They look like dung," I said.

"I don't care if it is dung. She made it. You eat it."

"I will if you will."

Father sighed. He turned to the demoness. "*May I?*"

"*Certainly*," she said with a gracious smile.

Father took one of the cookies and munched at it. Well, he did not change into a toad or anything; and he did not throw up—I had been expecting either possibility. I tried one of the cookies on the plate before me.

The taste was heavenly. I gobbled up one and started for another.

"Hey," Father snapped. "First you don't want any. Now you want to gobble them all up like a pig."

"Go on." The demoness pushed the plate closer to me. She smiled in real pleasure. I suddenly liked the way all the wrinkles in her face crinkled up in tiny smiles. I had another cookie. And then I was so thirsty that even the white stuff did not taste so bad this time.

Father and the demoness talked politely about the neighborhood—where was the best place to shop for what. The demoness seemed genuinely to want to help us, and I began to think that she was one of the good demons. I looked about her kitchen—curiosity got the better of politeness. When I finally finished looking around her kitchen, I realized I had gone through four more of the cookies.

Father noticed the almost empty plate at the same time. "*Look at this boy,*" he said in exasperation. "*He eat enough for four pigs.*" He started to apologize to the demoness, but she only smiled prettily again.

"*There's only one real compliment for a cook, and that's for her guests to eat everything up. You must take the rest of the cookies with you.*" She smoothed her apron over her lap and winked at me secretly.

"*You too kind.*" Father spread his hands. "*You make us ashame.*" He kicked me gently under the table.

"*Yes, ashame,*" I piped up.

At that moment I heard a crash and the kitchen door swung open, and there was a demon girl about my age lying on her stomach. She must have been listening at the door and lost her balance. It was only later that I realized her face was not always a bright red, but was only that way when she was angry or perhaps embarrassed. The demoness jumped up and slapped her hand to her forehead.

"*Oh, that child,*" she said. "*She'll be the death of me yet. You, Robin. I told you not to spy on our new guests.*"

"*You said I wasn't to look,*" the demon girl said as she got up, dusting herself off. "*You didn't say anything about listening.*"

Father hid a smile as the demoness let out a little sigh. "*Well, the harm's been done. Let me introduce you.*" She turned around with an apologetic smile. "*This is my niece, Robin. When my brother and sister-in-law died, I took her in.*"

"*Auntie calls me her burden,*" the demon girl added.

"*I call you my treasure, too.*" The demoness slipped her arm around the demon girl and held her against her side. "*Though not very often, I'll admit.*"

Father stood up and bowed. He poked me and I slid off the chair and did the same. I did not mean to be rude

when I stared at her, but she was the first demon child I had seen this close. For all I knew, demon children were not like me, but like dolls or toys that the demons took out of boxes for a while to decorate their sidewalks and then stored away again inside their homes.

The demon girl was like and unlike what I imagined one of them to be. She seemed like a dwarf copy of her aunt, and her red face looked like a lantern that had been filled with blood and was going to burst at any moment. Her hair was the strangest color golden-red—as though her head had just burst into flame. She wore a short dress that I recognized as *gingham*, and her knees and legs had many scratches and scars on them.

And then I saw something in the demon girl's hand. It was a long rod with lenses at one end and a card, with two pictures on it, held in a rack at the other. The demoness saw the direction in which I was looking. "*Show Moon Shadow our stereopticon, Robin.*"

The demon girl held the device up to her face so the lenses were against her eyes. "*You look through it like this,*" she said. "*Here, you try it.*"

I put the viewer to my eyes and almost gasped, for it seemed as if I were suddenly in another world and no longer in the kitchen. Huge falls thundered right before me.

"That's Niagara Falls," the demon girl said.

Later it was explained to me that each eye sees the same object from a slightly different angle, so that each eye has a slightly different picture. It's the brain that combines the two pictures together into one image and creates the stereoptical effect: the depth that the world seems to have for us. The *stereopticon* card has two pictures of the same object, but each picture is taken from a slightly different angle. Each of the viewer's eyes focuses on one of the pictures and the brain, in trying to put them together, gives the viewer the illusion of depth as if he were not looking at two pictures on a flat card, but rather as if he were looking at the real thing. Of course, at that moment, I did not know all this, so I was very impressed.

Father looked through it for a long time. "Dragon magic?" I asked him.

"It's magic of the mind, if not of the dragons," Father said. He handed it back to the demon girl, pleased and surprised. *"It . . . it . . . fun."* He struggled for the right words and could not find them.

"Yes, Mr. Lee," the demoness said with a faint smile. *"We travel all the way around the world with it and yet never leave our parlor. We have more cards. Would you like to see them?"*

"Oh, yes," Father said.

She led us out of the kitchen into a hallway smelling of polish and old wood, and then into a carpeted room with a bird inside a glass jar and books stacked neatly in a bookcase to one side. Later, I learned that most of them were travel books. The demoness and the demon girl would go to almost any lecturer who was giving a *magic lantern* show with *slides* of his travels. The demoness' father had never really had any time to take her traveling, which was too bad, since she loved to travel.

But as the demon girl fetched the box of viewing cards, I was looking at one corner of the room that was filled with a blend of strange colors. I looked up to see that it was the result of a window.

"*Would you like to see our stained-glass window?*" the demoness asked gently.

I glanced at Father and he nodded, so I walked over to it until I was about two yards away.

"*You can take a closer look than that,*" the demoness said.

It was a tall, rectangular window. On the outside there was a border of flowers and vines made from bits of colored glass set into a lead frame. But on the inner part of the window there was a great green creature, breathing yellow and red flames and biting at the spear that a silver-clad demon thrust into him.

With a rustle of skirts, the demoness joined me.

"*What's that?*" I asked, pointing at the green creature.

"A dragon," she said. "You know. It's a very wicked animal that breathes fire and goes about eating up people and destroying towns. St. George killed many of them." I looked at Father horrified, for these demons had turned the story of dragons upside down if they thought a holy man would kill them. But Father answered for me. "Very interesting. We have dragons, too."

"Do you have a Chinese saint who did the same things as St. George?" the demoness asked with obvious satisfaction.

"You should tell them the truth about dragons," I told Father.

"Maybe dragons in the demon lands are all as evil as they believe." Father shrugged. "At any rate, when you're someone's guest, you don't correct her no matter how wrong she may be."

The demoness had waited patiently during this exchange. Now she asked, "What did he say?"

"My boy, he ask if you make," Father lied.

"Oh, no. Papa had the window brought from England." She lovingly traced the curves of part of the lead frame. "Papa said no home was complete without a stained-glass window." And in my heart, I agreed with her, for it was a lovely thing even if the scene it depicted was all wrong. The demoness added, "Papa also said that no one owned a stained-glass window. It was meant to be shared—so you feel free to come look through it any time you want, Moon Shadow."

"You too kind."

"Fiddlesticks," Miss Whitlaw said.

In the meantime, Robin had sat down on a bench before a boxlike contraption taller than her and made of black wood. She lifted up a kind of lid about halfway down on its front, exposing thin white and black tiles of ivory. She began poking at the tiles aimlessly, producing strange musical sounds.

"What's that?" I asked Father.

"The demons call it an *upright piano*," Father said.

Miss Whitlaw must have recognized the last two words. "*Robin plays it very well.*"

"Oh, but you play so much better, Auntie," Robin said.

"Now, Robin," Miss Whitlaw said, "*I don't think they want to hear an old lady's antiquated repertory.*"

"Please, we not hear before." Father poked me in the side.

"Yes, please," I chimed in.

Robin left the bench as Miss Whitlaw came over. She smoothed her long skirt underneath her and sat down with a little flounce like a young girl. She was smiling in a pleased but embarrassed manner. She turned to her niece. "*What should I play, Robin?*"

Robin was standing beside the *upright piano*. "*Play 'Simple Gifts,' Auntie.*"

Miss Whitlaw inclined her head to one side. "*Well, all right.*"

Her fingers moved over the tiles, drawing deep resonant sounds from within the big box, and she began to sing in a high, sweet voice.

We did not follow too many of the words then, but the demoness played it and Robin sang it so often that I eventually got them:

*'Tis the gift to be simple,
'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down
Where you ought to be.
And when we find ourselves
In the place just right
'Twill be in the valley
Of love and delight.*

*When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend,
We shan't be ashamed.
To turn, turn,
Will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning,
We come round right.*

And just then, the late sun must have shone on this side of the building. The dragon suddenly stood out in

luminous greens and yellows and reds, and I thought to myself, if there is light that comes from the magical pearl in the dragon's forehead, then it must be like the light of this window. The shafts of colored light shot across the room to where the demoness sat. Her skirt seemed to gather in a distorted picture of the dragon in the window—or not really distorted, but an image that was alive. For the glass had been cast unevenly, so that there were odd little flamelike curves in the colors. The image seemed to be so full of life, in fact, that it was bursting out of its outline.

And I thought to myself, Mother must be right. The kind of person who would own such a window must surely have been royalty in some other life. I found myself wishing more than ever that Mother could be with me right then. I was sure she would agree with me. Later, as I got to know the demoness, I was to realize that despite her demonic appearance and dress and speech and customs, there was a gentle strength, a sweet loving patience coupled with an iron-hard core of what she thought was right and proper. I was always to think of her as the demoness who kept the dragon fire locked inside a window.

After the song, the demoness spoke some more about dragons and I began to feel sorry for her. Her

dragons were sly, spiteful creatures who stole people's gold and killed people for malicious fun. They sounded more and more like what Mother and Grandmother had told me about the outlaw dragons. It was a shame that the demoness had not gotten to know the true dragons of the sea, who were wise and benevolent.

But Father only smiled when I told him that, later when we were back in our stable. "You know how the demons are," he said. "They turn everything upside down and get everything the wrong way."

As I helped Father tug off his boots, I asked him something else that had been bothering me. "Do you think the demoness is the ghost of a Tang woman? I mean she could have forgotten a lot even if she was a ghost."

Father grunted as one boot came off. "Maybe. Maybe not."

I began to work off his other boot. "Or do you think the demoness might have been some Tang woman who did something so terrible in a former life that she was reborn here as a white demoness?"

When the boot came off in my hands, Father massaged his feet. "Maybe that, too."

"I don't think she can be a ghost," I decided finally.

"I never heard of a ghost banished from the Middle

Kingdom and made to forget so many things. But then she must have done something pretty bad if she was reborn over here as a demoness instead of back in the Middle Kingdom at least as some kind of animal."

Father tousled my hair. "You think too much."

As I lay down on my mat and pulled the blanket up about my neck, it seemed to me that if this was the case, the demoness would surely be reborn as a rich Tang woman in her next life. I even toyed with the idea that perhaps we had been close to each other in some former life—a mother and child, even. If that were so, I at least owed it to her to set her straight on dragons. It was with these thoughts that I fell asleep.