

## ONE

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### THE DRAGON'S PEARL

The sea called.

For two days and nights, SuiTien flew east. He was finally a thousand years old, and it was time for him to claim his pearl and learn his destiny. The dragons that had gone before him never spoke of this special time. He would just know, they said. And they were right. Every fiber of his spirit and body drove him to reach the sea.

Finally, he could smell the ocean in the wind. His flight took on new life, gliding and swooping, using the thermals to push him closer to his destination. In the distance, he saw a silver glimmer and raced toward it. Soon he was above the water, watching its waves claw at the rugged coastline.

SuiTien swooped down and plunged into the blue-green water. The green light from the sun slowly disappeared until it was too dark to see. In the black water SuiTien forced himself to go deeper.

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When he was nearly ready to give up, the ocean floor began to ripple with pale yellow and orange lights that marked the shells of the pearl givers. The colours deepened as SuiTien descended, and he eagerly scanned the red and gold fluted shells that covered the sand beneath him. One would contain the pearl that was meant for only him. How could he choose among so many?

One shell far to his right cast a pulsing yellow light. The shell was so small compared to the others. SuiTien wanted to leave it there and choose a bigger brighter one, but he couldn't. Its pull was too strong. He reached out to touch it and the shell opened. The pearl glowed with swirling waves of gold and yellow.

With trembling claws, he lifted the pearl to his throat where the skin cupped to hold it. *This can't be possible*, he thought. *This pearl can't be meant for me.* But it fit perfectly. Deep inside, SuiTien understood that until this moment, he had ever really lived, nor breathed, nor felt anything truly before now. The pearl sent a light through him, declaring his destiny as surely as if it spoke with words, and the ocean swallowed his tears of joy.

SuiTien burst through the waves like an arrow from its bow and soared on the wind until he felt he could nearly touch the clouds. Then he turned west toward the Temple of the Blue Mist and the beginning of his new life. In four days, he would meet the masters. He

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flew until he was forced to rest and then took flight again as soon as he was able.

When SuiTien woke on the third morning, he could barely stand. He breathed in short gasps and his heart raced when he saw the iron bars that surrounded him. *Only a sorcerer can do this*, he thought. He heard the laugh before he saw the man.

SuiTien couldn't cry out. The sorcerer controlled his voice. Every part of SuiTien's silent being inwardly screamed, "No!" He staggered toward the bars but was flung back by a gut-pounding force that knocked him to the ground. He heard the laughter again and looked up at DaiMoSun.

The sorcerer leaned insolently against the bars, his unsmiling grey eyes looking down at SuiTien. The magician had changed little since SuiTien had glimpsed him long ago. His grey hair was longer, nearly to his waist, and the skin on his sharp-featured face hung in a web of interlaced creases. His blue robes were dusty at the hems, and he nonchalantly gave them a shake while speaking to someone standing behind SuiTien's cage. "I told you it would be a simple matter."

SuiTien tried to turn around but couldn't move. From behind him, he felt a wave of hate so powerful that he could barely breathe. *So that's how it was done*, he thought.

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DaiMoSun looked at him. His voice was mocking and triumphant. "It's futile to struggle, dragon. The pearl is mine and so is its power."

DaiMoSun raised his hand and SuiTien instinctively tried to shrink back, but he couldn't move. The sorcerer smirked and reached into the cage. His claw-like hands closed around the pearl and he wrenched it from the dragon's throat. SuiTien's screams were silent.

DaiMoSun stepped back from the cage contemptuous and victorious. SuiTien heard a snort of disdain from behind him and instantly his fear was replaced by anger so deep he swore he felt his blood pulsing through his heart.

DaiMoSun wrapped the pearl in a silk cloth and placed it in a pouch that hung from his belt. "You want me to kill you, don't you, dragon? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you." He raised his hand. "You will remember what you lost and who did this to you."

SuiTien saw only a black streak fly from the sorcerer's hand like a brush full of ink swept across a white page. Then knives of fire sliced his shoulder, and a black ocean, with no lights or shells or joy, thundered over him and swallowed him in darkness.

## T W O

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### A M E E T I N G   A T   D A W N

ZiChan listened to the other men in the tent. Snores, snorts and deep breathing. *Good*, he thought with relief, *they're asleep*. He wrapped himself in the green blanket he slept under and slipped through the tent's flaps. He stopped and listened again before he moved away from the tent. No one made a sound.

He looked around. No one in the camp was stirring so he ran, in and out of the long, dawn shadows and through the mists that curled around the ashes of last night's fires. As he neared the edge of the camp, he looked back and saw the line of his dark footprints in the dew-silvered grass. When the others woke, they'd know where he'd gone, and he didn't care. He was going to see for himself what the men had whispered about last night by the fire.

He figured they'd let him see it eventually, but they would want to go with him as if he were some little kid and couldn't face such a sight alone. Well, he

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wasn't a kid, and he could face it, and the punishment would be worth it. He was sick of being reminded that he was different, that he had no family, that he didn't really count. He could already hear the lecture now and feel the stick on his back. At least he would have this memory, this adventure, when all the shouting was over.

He headed to the corral, a rough enclosure of gorse and sticks that he'd helped build to protect the horses from predators. The horses looked up lazily as ZiChan crept by them.

The prize the men had spoken of was in a shadowy corner, tied firmly to a stake with a thick rope. ZiChan crept closer and reminded himself to breathe. He put his hand on his chest, feeling his heart pound. He listened. No one had stirred yet. *Quit wasting time*, he told himself. *You'll never have this chance again*.

ZiChan strained to see through the mist and shadows. As shapes became clearer, he shivered. Four sharply clawed toes, green muscular haunches, a thick coiled tail. He pulled his blanket tighter around his shoulders. He was trembling, but he didn't care. He had to see.

Sunlight finally broke through a gap in the trees, and he saw the dragon. It lay so still that ZiChan thought maybe it was dead, and then he heard a rasping breath and saw its chest move. ZiChan wondered what the dragon's pearl would look like,

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but when he moved around to get a better look, he saw that the circular gap in the dragon's neck was empty. *He's not quite full grown. Like me,* thought ZiChan bitterly, *not-quite anything.*

The dragon shifted laboriously and turned its head to face ZiChan. The gold-feathered crest, which grew from the dragon's head and down its neck, slipped across its back to reveal a bloodstained shoulder. ZiChan saw jagged tears in the two large scales that should have smoothly covered it. From beneath the two twisted scales oozed a thread of blood. *How could the men have left him like that?*

*Because they assumed I'd be dead by now.*

ZiChan gasped and took a stumbling step back. The dragon had spoken, but not out loud. He'd heard the words in his head. *What the--!*

*Don't be frightened, please. I won't harm you.*

ZiChan stared at the dragon's luminous and bulging eyes. *He looks friendly,* thought ZiChan, and then he mentally kicked himself for being an idiot. *How would I know what an **unfriendly** dragon looked like? What am I supposed to do? Hhe can hear everything I think. I have to stop this!*

ZiChan said aloud. "Do you know everything I'm thinking, because this is really creepy?"

*Yes, right now I do. But you'll learn to shield your thoughts from me. Then I'll only know the things that*

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*you want me to know ... I am 'friendly', by the way. My name is SuiTien. I'm glad to meet you ZiChan.*

*You know my name? This is even creepier.* "I don't understand. Why didn't you just talk to the others, yesterday, like you're talking to me now and ask them for help?"

"They can't hear me," the dragon said aloud.

ZiChan was relieved to actually hear a real voice.

"They're too old for talking dragons," SuiTien continued. "But you and I are the same, remember? You thought so already."

"Not-quite," ZiChan murmured. That thought seemed a long time ago. He heard the rasp of the dragon's breathing again. "Let me get you some water."

ZiChan hurried to the pile of water skins left for the horses—glad to have something to do that gave him time to sort out his thoughts. All he ended up with were more questions. He dragged a water skin and a bucket over to the dragon. He filled the bucket twice before SuiTien stopped drinking.

Up close, ZiChan saw the dragon's wound clearly. "Let me put some cold water on your shoulder," said ZiChan. "It might help." He tore a piece of cloth from his blanket, soaked it in the cool water and placed it on the dragon's shoulder. SuiTien flinched.

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"How did you get captured?" asked ZiChan. "I can't imagine the men of my village laying a trap for a dragon."

"I was sick, and I couldn't cast a spell to protect myself. They found me and carried me here in a sling. Their ropes cut my shoulder."

Frowning, ZiChan reached over and took the cloth away from the dragon's shoulder. He rinsed it with fresh water and looked at the wound closely before placing the cloth on the torn scales. The dragon was lying.

"The part that's bleeding now happened last night, but not the rest. The blood from another wound has dried completely and is even beginning to flake away." ZiChan stepped back and stared into the dragon's eyes. "So, what really happened?"

The dragon blinked and looked away. When he spoke, his voice was tired and hollow. "DaiMoSun."

ZiChan shivered. Just hearing the name was enough for anyone to feel chilled to the bone. "But that's impossible! You'd be dead if you fought DaiMoSun! He's the most powerful of all sorcerers."

The dragon snorted bitterly and looked at ZiChan. "There was no combat. I was captured while I slept. I only live because the thought of my suffering gives DaiMoSun more pleasure than my death."

ZiChan removed the cloth, wet it again and placed it on the wound. "We've been told that he was raising

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an army against the emperor. In villages north of us, he's already taken all the men who are of fighting age. To the men in my village it doesn't make sense. No army of farmers can defeat our Emperor who has ten sorcerers and thousands of trained soldiers." He paused. "No offense, SuiTien, but what would DaiMoSun want with you?"

"You're right. He can't win with his army alone." SuiTien paused. "He stole my pearl. It was the emperor pearl, ZiChan." SuiTien's voice filled with bitterness and shame. "I was to be the next Dragon Emperor. With that pearl, DaiMoSun can make himself and his men powerful enough to defeat a thousand emperors and their soldiers."

ZiChan couldn't think of anything to say. What the dragon had told him could mean the end of the empire. "The emperor will find a way to stop him. He just has to."

Before SuiTien could say anything, ZiChan continued. Something in the dragon's story didn't make sense. "All dragons go the Pearl Sea to get their pearls. How could DaiMoSun know that the imperial pearl had been given to you, and how did he know where to find you?"

"When I left the sea, I flew straight toward the Temple of the Blue Mist. No other dragon, except the future emperor dragon, has this destination immediately after his 'choosing'. The other dragons

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study elsewhere for a hundred years before they enter the temple. If he were watching the sea, he'd know I was the one with the emperor pearl." SuiTien paused and his voice cracked. "I should never have stopped that night. I should have been stronger."

ZiChan protested, "No! You mustn't say that! DaiMoSun probably used his magic to make you tired. And how could he follow you? He has many powers but I've never heard, yet, that he could fly."

SuiTien seemed to take forever to reply. "No, he can't fly ..."

"Which means?" ZiChan asked, though he knew the answer.

"A dragon is helping him. I couldn't see him, but he was there with DaiMoSun and watched him take my pearl. I felt his hate, ZiChan. I'd never felt anything like that before."

The dragon shifted and stretched his neck into the sun. "I need to go, now. Too much time has already been lost because of my weakness. I need to warn the others, and somehow, your emperor."

ZiChan untied the rope around the dragon's neck. "Are you sure you're strong enough?"

"In one way, yes. But in another way, no. I'm going to need your help, ZiChan."

"To do what?" he asked dropping the rope to the ground.

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"I'm not sure I know exactly myself, but I believe that you must come with me."

ZiChan froze where he stood. He hadn't expected that answer at all. "Come with you! What possible help could a human be to a dragon? I can't do magic. I can't do anything special."

"ZiChan, I'm not sure what lies ahead of me, but my instincts tell me that I will fail without you." He paused. "Why did you come here this morning?"

"To look at a dragon, that's all." ZiChan kept his eyes focused on his feet.

"Was it?" SuiTien asked quietly.

*No, thought ZiChan, it wasn't. I wanted an adventure. I wanted to break the rules and do something for myself.*

He looked into SuiTien's eyes. Though he heard nothing in his head he knew the dragon had read his thoughts. He felt SuiTien understood his longing for something more than just life in a village where he had no family and no future.

"But a dragon and a human?" he protested.

"My father was a friend to an emperor and still speaks of his kindness and bravery to this day."

ZiChan laughed, "I'm no emperor—"

"No, but the world holds bigger possibilities if you travel with me, than your village does, if you stay." He paused. "It also holds danger."

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"Where are you planning to go?" asked ZiChan.  
"And just how much danger?"

"To the Temple of the Blue Mist. And as for danger—the entire empire will be lost if we can't find a way to stop DaiMoSun."

"Oh," said ZiChan. "Well, that was a ... um ... bit more than I expected."

"Too much more?" asked SuiTien.

ZiChan looked at SuiTien. The dragon would go without him if he refused his offer. He was certain of that. And how would he feel if he didn't take this chance to get away. If he ....

"I'll come with you," he said quickly before he changed his mind.

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