

Playing With Fire

A Novel of the Silver Dragons

By

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May 2009

ISBN 978-0451223784

Chapter One

“Good twin calling evil twin. The weasel crows at midnight. How copy?”

“Oh for mercy’s sake...I’m busy! Stop sending me silly messages in code! If you have something to say, just say it, otherwise, radio silence, remember?”

“You’re no fun anymore. You used to be fun, but lately, I’ve noticed a change in you. Is it menopause, May?”

Cyrene’s question took me aback so strongly, I stopped creeping down the darkened hallway and blinked in dumbfound surprise at the mirror which hung on the wall opposite.

No reflected figure blinked back at me.

“Are you still having your period? Do you experience hot flashes at night? Are you now, or have you at any time in the recent past, grown a mustache?”

“Goddess help me,” I murmured to no one in particular, and tried my best to ignore the perky little voice which chirped so happily in my ear as I continued to make my way down the dark and deserted room. I thought for a moment of just turning off the miniature radio which allowed Cyrene to contact me, but knowledge born of long experience with my twin reminded me of the folly of such an idea.

“Boy, you really are in a grumpy mood if you won’t rise to the bait of menopause,” she said in a mildly disgruntled voice.

I stopped briefly to admire a beautiful dull sea green vase that sat in a glass-fronted display case before slipping silently across the room to the door opposite. “That’s because it was completely ridiculous. You’re older than me, which means you’ll be menopausal before me.”

“I’m barely older than you. Just a few years really. A thousand at the most. What are you doing now?”

Trying to keep from going mad, I wanted to say, but I knew better than to do that, too. Cyrene being helpful was survivable...Cyrene hurt, depressed, or unhappy could have dire repercussions that I truly didn’t want to contemplate. “I’m in the library, approaching the office. Which could well have extra security, so radio silence from here on out, OK?”

“You said I could help you.” The petulance in her voice was potent enough to make my lips tighten.

“You’re helping me by guarding the front of the house.” I sidled up to the door and gave it a good long look. There were no wards that I could see. I held up my hand, lightly placing my fingers on the wood. Nothing triggered my sensitive danger alarm.

“I’m on the *other* side of the street!”

The doorknob turned easily, the door opening with the slightest whisper that bespoke attentive care by the house staff. “Gives you a better view.”

“In a tree!”

“Height gives you an advantage. Hmm.” Across the small room, another lovely antique display case stood, this one lit from within, the yellow light spilling out of the case and casting a pool on the thick carpet beneath it. There were a couple of pieces of object d’art in the case, but it was the slender glass vial that sat alone on the center shelf which held my attention.

“Hmm what? I think I’m getting bugs. There are definitely bugs in this tree. What hmmm? Did you find the thingie?”

“The Liquor Hepatis? Yes. Now, hush. I have to figure out how this case is protected.”

“This is so exciting,” Cyrene whispered. “I’ve never been a part of one of your jobs before. Although this watching business is a bit boring, and I don’t see that it’s necessary if you said this mage is in England somewhere. I mean, after all, it’s a mage!”

The disdain in her voice was evident even over the tinny radio.

“I never did understand what you had against mages. They’re just people like everyone else,” I murmured as I eyeballed the mundane electronic alarm.

“Oh, they think they’re so high and mighty with their arcane magic and deep, dark secrets of the universe. Bah. Give me a nice simple elemental spell any day. Mages are very overrated. I don’t see why you don’t just go in and get the thingie.”

“Overrated or not, Magoth said this particular mage was gone, but his staff is here, and not even a mage would leave something as valuable as an arcanum of the soul unguarded,” I answered, disabling the alarm. Mages, as a rule, dislike modern security measures, usually preferring to rely on their own arcane resources, and the owner of the case before me was no different.

I smiled at the spells woven into the wood itself, intended to keep intruders out. They had no effect on me, however, so once I tossed a small, aluminum coated piece of cloth over the minute security camera bolted high in the corner of the room—it wouldn’t do to have images of me recorded for all posterity—I simply opened up the case and reached for the vial.

Something glimmered for a fraction of a second to the left of the Liquor Hepatis. I jerked my hand back, narrowing my eyes at it.

“Did you remember to cover the camera?” Cyrene asked suddenly. “You don’t want them seeing you when you decloak.”

“I’m not a Klingon bird of prey, Cy,” I said absently, scanning the shelf holding the glass vial. There was nothing else visible. Had I just seen a reflection from the vial, perhaps? A bit of light prisms from the glass? Or perhaps the mage had done something to the vial that was beyond my experience?

“No, but you can be seen when you do anything requiring concentration. Or so you say—I couldn’t see you when you juggled at the party we gave in Marrakech.”

“The discussion about you using me as a party trick is going to have to wait for another time,” I murmured, shaking my head at my foolish thoughts. The owner of this house might be a mage, but he had a misplaced confidence in his ability to keep his Liquor Hepatis safe. I reached for it again, catching another momentary glimpse of something tantalizingly just out of the range of my vision. “Agathos daimon!”

“What?”

“Agathos daimon. It means—”

“Good spirit, yes, I know. I’ve heard you mutter it often enough. Why you can’t swear like any normal person is beyond me. What are you agathosing about, anyway?”

I turned my head to the side, my peripheral vision catching the sight of a small lavender stone box sitting behind the vial. The second I tried to focus on the object, it vanished.

“There’s something else here. Something...important.”

“Important how? Can I come down out of this tree yet? I’m getting eaten alive here.”

“No. Stay there until I’m out of the house.” I removed the vial, securing it in an inner pocket of my leather bodice as I gave the case another look, but nothing was here. I turned my head again, my fingers groping blindly along the slick glass of the shelf. They closed on a small, cold square just as the lights in the room burst on.

“Agamemnon’s tears!” Cyrene’s squawked in my ear. “Someone’s there! There’s a car out front and lights just went on in three different rooms—”

“Thanks for the warning,” I whispered through my teeth. Voices outside the room heralded someone’s imminent approach. I glanced quickly around the room, desperately hunting for a dark corner where I might hide, but the room was far too bright for that.

“I’m sorry! I was picking bugs off my arm and didn’t see the car pull up. What’s going on? Why are all the lights in the house on? Oh no—I think one of the men is a mage. He’s...yes, he’s a mage! He’s probably the owner! Mayling, you have to get out of there!”

She wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know. I leaped to my feet as the door knob started to turn, jamming a chair underneath it to keep it from opening.

“Mayling!” Cyrene yelled in my ear, in her excitement using her nickname for me.

I ran for the window, praying I could make it outside into the darkness before the door opened. The door burst into a thousand pieces, turned to ash, and drifted slowly to the ground as I jumped onto the table next to the glass.

“Mayling!” Cyrene’s bellow was loud enough to hurt. A man’s shape appeared in the doorway, pausing for a moment as he evidently heard my twin.

“Mei Ling!” he cried, running forward, obviously hearing Cyrene but misinterpreting my nickname for a proper name. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened. “It’s the thief Mei Ling!”

Instinctively, I shadowed when I heard the men’s voices, but the room was too bright to remain hidden. Just as soon as he looked toward the window, the man would see me. I had no choice but to go through the window.

“Agathos daimon,” I repeated softly to myself as I put my hands over my head and flung myself through the glass.

“There!” the man cried as pain burst into being all over my body. “She’s there! I heard someone say her name! It’s the thief Mei Ling on the ledge outside!”

The blessed warm darkness of a late March Greek evening embraced me, making me all but invisible to watchful eyes as I raced down the narrow ledge, shinnying down a pipe to the ground.

“Where are you? Are you all right? *Mayling!*”

“I’m fine. I’m outside the house, but stop yelling or the mage’s people will find you,” I hissed into the microphone. “Can you get out of the tree without being seen?”

“Oh, thank the gods you’re all right. I just about had a heart attack! Yes, I think I can get down. There’s a handy branch right...oomph!”

Across the street of the elegant villa located in Nea Makri, a small resort town outside of Athens, a black, vaguely human shape fell to the ground. I hurried around the edges of the square, avoiding pools of light from the houses until I reached my twin.

Her face, light dimly from the lights at the nearest house, looked up at me as I stopped next to her. “I fell.”

“I saw. You all right?”

She nodded, peering at the house as I quickly pulled her to her feet. “What are they yelling? I can’t make out the words.”

“It’s probably nothing but a lot of swearing. Oh, and my nickname. Well, not my nickname—the other name.”

“What other name?” She asked as I hurried her away from the house, and down the dark side street where we’d left the rental car. “Oh, you mean that Asian thing that someone made up?”

“They made it up because they heard you yelling my nickname in Dresden when I helped the naiad sisterhood get back the icon that was stolen. Fortunately, they were looking for an Asian person, and paid no attention to little old me.”

A guilty look flitted across her face. “I didn’t know that people would think that was your real name. Besides, that was at least ten years ago. Surely they’ve forgotten that by now?”

“Hardly. The fame of Mei Ling lives on...”

We stopped in front of the car. I was about to pull out the car key, but realized with some surprise that I held something.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as I stared at my hand. “Goddess! You’re bleeding! You went through the window?”

“Yes.” I unfurled my fingers and stared at...nothing.

“We’d better go,” she said, taking the key and unlocking the door. “I’ll drive. You can slump down so you’re less obvious. I know know no one can see you when you do your cloaking thing, but they’ll see the blood that you’re dripping everywhere. It’s a good thing you’re my twin, or you’d have to go to the hospital.”

“If I wasn’t your twin, I wouldn’t have been in a position to jump through the window in the first place,” I answered automatically, tracing out the shape of a small stone box. “Whatever the mage used on this is pretty powerful. I still can’t see it.”

“See what?” she asked, pausing to peer into my hand. “The cuts? They’ll heal in a few minutes.”

“I’m not worried about that—I have been stabbed, shot, and nearly disemboweled, and I know full well I’ll heal up quickly enough. It’s this,” I said, ducking as Cyrene shoved me into the car.

“What, exactly?” she asked, gunning the engine. “Hotel?”

“Yes, please. It’s a box. Look at it from the corner of your eye.”

“I can’t see anything when I’m driving—oh! It’s a box!” she exclaimed, her gaze flickering between my hand and the street.

“I think it’s crystal. I think—” My fingers, which had been stroking the invisible box, must have pressed a small, hidden switch, for suddenly my soul sang. I felt rather than saw a luminous golden glow, a beautiful light that radiated from the box of such wondrous beauty, it seemed to fill me with happiness.

Cyrene swore and slammed on the brakes, jerking the car onto a thankfully empty sidewalk, her eyes huge.

I stared down in astonishment at the source of the unseen but still tangible ethereal glow.

“What the—what is that? Gracious goddess, it’s...it’s...”

“It’s quintessence,” I said, breathing heavily as I allowed the glittering brilliance to sink deep into my bones.

“The what now?”

“Quintessence. The fifth element.”

Slowly, I closed the lid of the box, the light ending with an abruptness that left my soul weeping.

“Like the movie, you mean? With Bruce Willis?”

“What?” It took a moment for her words to penetrate the fog that seemed to settle over me with the loss of the light. “No, not that. That’s just Hollywood. The fifth element is something alchemists strive to find. It’s the essential presence.”

“Essential presence of what?” she asked, carefully pulling back onto the road, quickly pulling over again when police cars burst out of a cross street, sirens wailing and lights flashing.

“Everything. It’s the above and below. The embodiment of that force we call life. It’s the purest essence of...being.”

“Is it valuable?” Cyrene asked, a calculating expression stealing across her face.

My fingers tightened around the box. “Priceless. Beyond priceless. Invaluable. Any alchemist would kill to have it.”

“Hmm.”

I knew what she was thinking. Cyrene had expensive tastes, and no practical ability to save money. I was sure she was going to suggest putting the quintessence up for bid, but that was something I couldn’t allow. “No,” I said.

Her lips, recently plumped and now shaded a delicate pink, pouted in a manner that I knew made grown men swoon. “Why not? I bet we could get a lot for it.”

“For one, it’s not mine.” I said stroked the bumpy crystal lid with worshipful fingers.

“Well I know Magoth will want it, but that’s not what he sent you there to get, right? So he doesn’t have to know we have it.”

I shook my head. “If Magoth thinks I was even *near* a quintessence...well, the phrase ‘hell hath no fury like a demon lord denied’ charges immediately to mind. I can’t begin to describe the horrible things he’d do to me to get it. And you, for that matter.”

She shot me a quick glance as we drove through the city to the commercial center, where our hotel was located. “Me? A demon lord can’t do anything to me. I’m immortal!”

“So am I, and he could snuff me out as easily as a candle flame.”

“I can’t believe you never learned this, but demon lords can’t kill elemental beings, naiads included,” she said with gentle chastisement. “Everyone knows that.”

“So the lore goes, but do you seriously doubt you could escape Magoth’s wrath?”

“Er...” She thought about it for a moment, her lips thinning. “No.”

“I didn’t think so. No, dear twin, this little box is not going to Magoth...and we’re not going to sell it. There’s nothing else for it—I’m just going to have to return it to the mage.”

“It seems such a pity,” she said, pulling into the underground parking lot that sat beneath our modest hotel. “Maybe he won’t know it’s gone? I think you should just hold onto it for a bit and see if he even notices that you have it.”

“Did you give up morals along with your common sense?” I asked.

Cyrene parked the car, turning to me with an exaggerated roll of her eye. “My morals are just fine, and you can stop making that face at me. I just think we should talk this over a bit. It’s invisible, so maybe the mage has forgotten about it.”

I leaned forward until I could peer directly into her blue eyes. “Priceless, Cyrene. Literally...priceless.”

Avarice lit her face for a moment.

“Even if I was the sort of person to steal something for myself—and I’ll reiterate the fact that I’m not, since you seem to conveniently forget that whenever temptation raises its head—there’s no way I’d keep this. It’s just too valuable. That mage is going to move heaven and earth to get it back, and frankly, I could do without having anyone else after my head.”

She sighed and got out of the car. “You take life too seriously. We definitely need to work on getting you a sense of humor, not to mention a sense of fun!”

“There is little time for fun when you have my job. And speaking of that, I wonder what the mage will do since his people heard my name,” I said, slowly getting out of the car. My skin was hot and tight at spots where dried blood pulled at it. The cuts I’d received going through the glass were mostly healed, but I still looked like hell.

She spun around, her hand at her mouth. “Oh May! I’m sorry! I didn’t think of that—do you think they’ll connect Mei Ling with you?”

I let the corner of one side of my mouth curl into a rueful smile. “I don’t see how they can. They didn’t get a good look at me, and they think it was Mei Ling, infamous international cat burglar, and not a simple doppelganger from California.”

She grimaced. “Me and my big mouth.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad—it means less attention to me if everyone is looking for an Asian woman. Ugh. I can’t go into the hotel like this. I’ll shadow walk to my room. Will you be OK?”

She had a century to practice the long suffering look she bestowed upon me, but my lips twitched at it nonetheless. “I’m not inept, May! I am perfectly capable of entering a hotel and making my way to my room without encountering any assassins, thugs, anarchists, or muggers, thank you.”

“Sorry,” I said, contritely.

“Honestly! You treat me like I’m the child and you’re the parent, when it’s the other way round. I’m almost twelve hundred years old, you know! Just because I need a little help now and again doesn’t mean I can’t do *anything* without you...”

She marched off to the elevator with an indignant twitch of her shoulders. I followed more slowly, avoiding the overhead lights, and taking the less used stairs as a question danced elusively in my mind.

How on earth was I going to get the quintessence back to the mage without being caught?