
DRAGON BLOOD, Lupi 21

Chapter 1

excerpt by [Eileen Wilks](#)

Lóng Jia

Pain comes in many varieties. There's the crushed outrage of a smashed thumb and the *oh shit* rip of a twisted ankle. A bad tooth throbs, a headache pounds, and when a bone breaks, the bright shock of it shorts out your entire system, as intense as a climax. Then there is pain that swallows the entire world, admitting no presence beyond itself. Pain that goes on and on.

Rule woke to pain.

In the first few seconds or eons, there was no place to put the pain, nothing to assign it to, no sense it was lodged in this or that part of his body. Pain was entire, complete . . . until it wasn't. He grew aware of a voice. Not words, for the pain-universe allowed him no space to sort sound into words, but he knew this particular sound was a voice.

He was not alone.

Some instinct rose from a place so deep inside the pain could not shut it out. An instinct that said *quiet*. That said *listen*. He was hurt, badly hurt, and he was not alone. Not-alone was dangerous. His nostrils flared. He did not smell clan or Lily. He smelled . . .

“. . . did you stop?” the voice was saying. It sounded scared. “It's not enough to get him out of the water. We've got to get to cover. One of them could swoop down at any moment and . . .”

The word for what he smelled eluded Rule, but he knew the scent. No, two scents. The one that went with the voice was not-trusted. The other . . .

“Hey, why did you—what are you—eep!”

The other was very dangerous.

“Oh, right. The sleep charm. I forgot about that. I can put him in sleep and then he won't scream

anymore. Okay. You can back off now. Please back off.”

Very dangerous, but also . . . his. His, and trusted. Rule made a huge effort and opened his eyes.

The glare made his eyes blur, or maybe they'd already been wet. He panted, openmouthed, as pain threatened to white out his other senses. He blinked to clear his vision. All he saw was blue. After a moment he caught the word for all that blue: sky. Then a large head loomed over him, furred in orange and black with white above the eyes and on the ruff.

Tiger. That was the word for the one with the dangerous-but-mine scent.

The tiger licked the side of his head with a huge, rough tongue. And purred.

The tiger had a name. Madame Yu. Yes. He did not need to defend himself with Madame Yu here. His eyes closed in exhausted relief.

“How did Cynna say it worked?” the voice asked. “I hold it on him, but there was something else.”

Memories flickered through Rule and landed on a name. Gan. The voice belonged to Gan, who used to be a demon and an enemy but was now a friend. She was not-trusted because her judgment was unreliable, not because she wished him ill.

“No, don't lick me! Lick him if you want, but I don't—oh, I get what you mean. I'm supposed to lick the charm to activate it.”

Madame Yu was here. Gan was here. Where was his mate? Automatically Rule reached for Lily through the bond. Panic flickered, a hot little flame amid the vaster pain. So far. She was so far away—

Something damp and metallic pressed against his cheek. Sleep swept in, soft and comforting as a blanket, and separated him from both thought and pain.

One second, Lily had been fighting two enormous Claws. Although fighting might not be the best term, since her M4 had run out of ammo and she'd been unable to get a new clip in before one of the oversize demons slapped it out of her hands. The next, she was waking up in this manicured garden. Trees surrounded the grassy area where she sat, interrupted in two places by paths. It was warm here, very warm, and a lot more humid than she was used to. Somewhere nearby, a bird sang. Water gurgled a happy-little-stream song. A stray sorcéri brushed against her hand, making the skin tingle faintly.

Lily sat motionless, her head aching, and looked up at the dead woman who'd greeted her.

Helen Whitehead was a small, birdlike woman of middle age who put the “white” back in Caucasian. Her skin was so pale she must have spent her entire life slathered with sunscreen, and her hair was the color of sun-bleached straw. Only her eyes testified to her body's ability to

produce pigment—blue eyes that might have looked washed out in another face, but were vivid in this one.

Lily knew the face, the eyes, the hair. The last time she'd seen them, that uncolored hair had been wet with blood, the blue eyes clouded over in death. She reached the obvious conclusion. "I'm dead."

The woman tipped her head. "Did you suffer a blow to your head?"

As a matter of fact, she had. It ached, as did various other body parts. Bruises and contusions taken in the fight in the audience hall were reporting in, which spoke against her initial conclusion. So did the Glock in her hand—the one she'd drawn so automatically she hadn't noticed doing it. Lily didn't have a clue what the afterlife was like, but she doubted it included semi-automatic weapons.

Still alive, then. Which made her amazingly lucky, though it was hard to feel fortunate as she sprang to her feet with all the vigor of an arthritic eighty-year-old. Her ankle sang out in sharp rebuke when she put weight on that foot. Good thing she didn't plan to run anywhere right away. Her ankle might let her hobble away. Maybe.

Helen watched, mildly curious. "I understand head blows can induce confusion. Put the gun away, Lily."

"I don't think so."

"I do," said a voice behind her.

She spun—and something yanked the gun out of her hand even as she squeezed the trigger. The shot killed the hell out of a leaf or two without coming close to the man who'd come up behind Lily.

Her weapon whisked itself through the air to plant itself in the palm of the man's hand. He was tall and thin and clearly Asian—probably Chinese. Tibetan maybe? His features were clean and elegant, his skin extremely pale, his hair black and pulled back in a tight bun. But his eyes were blue—sky blue—and brighter than any human eyes she'd ever seen. Brighter even than Cullen's, which she would have thought impossible. He wore a gold and black *shenyi*, the wraparound robe that had constituted formal wear for Chinese men for centuries. It hadn't been in style for a long time now.

Tom Weng had been wearing a *shenyi*. Weng had looked subtly different from the Han majority, too. She'd wondered if he might have a European ancestor somewhere, but maybe not. Maybe he came from the same ethnic group as this guy. There was a resemblance, wasn't there? He might be Weng's . . . cousin? Brother?

One way to find out.

Two months ago, Lily's mindspeech lessons with the black dragon she called Sam had finally paid off. An ability that had been dormant came to life. Mindspeech, she knew now, was only one way of using her mindsense . . . which was only logical, really. You had to sense a mind before you could speak with it. Lily's new sense was an odd meld of tactile and visual. Most of the time it slept in her middle, as much a part of her as her colon and as easy to ignore. When she wanted to use it, she gave it a mental nudge and it uncoiled, reaching out like a tentacle or probe—or like a mist, if that's what she wanted.

It was the mist she used now. With it, she could locate all the nearby minds at once. She nudged the coil sleeping in her gut, picturing it as a mist radiating out . . .

To her mindsense, the man simply wasn't there. That absence had only one possible explanation. He was dragon spawn.



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