

Chapter 5

3140 words

"How could he be so frail in life and so heavy in death?" Feng-po grunted as he and Ao Rue carefully settled Kuan-ti's corpse into the deepest of the air-filled caverns.

"He'll be happy here among the tablets and wisdom he loved so much," Ao Rue, himself looked lovingly on the thin, rune-covered slabs of emerald that were stacked everywhere.

"Ao Rue, could he really read these?"

"Of course, he could; there are still a few of us who can read."

Feng-po was nonplused. "You can read? Why bother? Dragons remember everything!"

"Dragons remember far less than you'd think, my tail-chasing friend. What they recall, they reshape to suit themselves. Dragons are incredible egotists; they think all creation radiates out from them. You've seen all those pictures of the world -- superimposed male and female dragons stretching their pinions to the very edges of the circle. They think everything's theirs. That's how they can hunt, kill, and manipulate other creatures without caring. After all, it's tough to share a whole world!" Ao Rue couldn't resist the last bit of sarcasm. "Now we could finish this if you'd stop asking questions. I'll explain things to you after."

"What do we do now?" Feng-po seemed to be having trouble accepting what was happening. "Never thought I'd see a dragon buried. Never imagined a dragon could die unexpectedly."

"It's a terrible, fell omen, but let me finish this. Soon, soon, I'll explain soon."

They backed out into the antechamber of the basalt cavern. Their talons clicked against the cold stone. Ao Rue gestured to Feng-po to move back and rose until his head was even with the top of the opening. He opened and cupped his wings until Feng-po couldn't see in. Gradually, a silver orb began to take shape within Ao Rue's wings; sparks slowly began to leap from pinion to pinion. Defying the end-all black of the basalt, the pulsing light of his eyes colored and broke the darkness. The sparks came quicker and thicker. They began to twine into bolts. Feng-po sensed the energies and marveled at his friend's unsuspected power. Slowly, unbelievably, the basalt started to flow; it was streaked with silver within Ao Rue's orb. The black stone began to whirlpool as the glow from his eyes spun faster. Blue lightening moved about the surface of the orb. It cracked and snapped in the cavern's dry air. The spinning basalt began to close the cave. Feng-po retreated into the water and still he could feel lightning's booms against his body. Ao Rue's unfathomed sorcery pounded on the stone. Suddenly, there was a great thump that seemed to smack the world shut. It punched Feng-po's ears and threw him tumbling backward. Stunned, he turned back to see Ao Rue facing a wall where none had been before, a strange, slick sheet of black swirled with blue and silver. Ao Rue was still standing casually. It was as if his creation had only been the currents of a minnow's fins.

Feng-po spoke haltingly, "How . . . how . . . could you . . . do that? I . . . I didn't know you could do that." His words were touched with awe and some fear.

"I can't," Ao Rue said wearily, softly.

"You can't; you just did! I never knew you were a spellweaver."

"I'm not." Ao Rue seemed confused himself. He was speaking words he'd never thought to say. "I mean I can't do it for myself. It comes only in great need, great anger. I must control it. It's only evil when I do it for myself."

"You mean like what you did to Chang-Lao when we were young?"

"Yes . . . yes." Feng-po suddenly realized Ao Rue was trembling and sobbing.

"Oh, my friend, your spell made me forget. You and Kuan-ti were very close."

"He was my father," Ao Rue managed to say as he turned slowly and stiffly. Feng-po could see the simple, deep grief in his friend's face now that magic and purpose had fallen away.

"Your father? No dragon knows his or her father. We're all chased off to do the stupid things that dragonettes do, to return to adult company when we're finally civilized."

"Feng-po, sometimes I think the only thing you ever notice are females." Ao Rue was still in deep pain, but Feng-po was serving as a healthy, if irrelevant, distraction. "Hadn't you ever noticed we were the only two with the scholar's eyes?"

"Blue eyes are scholar's eyes?"

"Yes, there was a time when everything meant something, a time before dragons became so bloated with their own selfish majesty."

"So, now you're the only one. The only scholar?" Feng-po didn't quite understand.

"True. Now I'm the only freak, but there must be other scholars somewhere, somewhere someone who believes there's more to life than blundering around controlling things. Someone who still takes time to think."

"Lei-kung thinks." Feng-po knew that was the wrong thing to say the moment the words fell from his snout.

"THINKS! THINKS!" Ao Rue raged, the glow in his eyes brightening. "That sack of rancid cod oil never had a thought in his slimy life. He connives, conspires; all he cares about is exploitation! He and his walrus-brained thugs just left Kuan-ti to lie there like shark vomit!"

"Easy, easy," Feng-po tried to calm his distraught friend. Despite Ao Rue's usual stoic control, he could be so quick sometimes. Feng-po still shuddered when he thought of Chang-Lao's body exploding from within on the day he called Kuan-ti a freak to Ao Rue's face. Feng-po spoke quickly, knowing he had to make Ao Rue forget his anger. "Is Kuan-ti the one who first took you to the deep caverns?"

"Yes, that and so much more." Ao Rue softened. "He taught me to read the old runes. He showed me long-forgotten poetry, so exquisite it makes filigree crude. In these tablets is magic so potent that in the wrong claws could shatter the very cosmos into shell

shards. Even if he hadn't been my blood father, he was the sire of my soul. He made me rich when the world wanted me poor."

"But these caverns. Aren't they haunted. Voices echo through the stone. No one comes there. I never would have come here alone. They say anyone returns who shakes with nightmares for months after."

"Ghosts?" Ao Rue chuckled sadly. "That's only Yülü, although calling him an 'only' is like calling a palace a mussel."

You mean there's a dragon who lives down there? Lives in the darkness?" Feng-po said in disbelief.

"Lives' isn't quite the right word. His body isn't there, but his spirit sure is, and a massively powerful one at that. That was his comrade's spell I used to close the cave mouth, Shen-t'u's Spell of Eternal Closure. Let Lei-kung and that oaf Heng-chiang try to unseal that gate to drain the sea. I often wondered why anyone would want anything sealed forever; now I know. I know far too well." Again, Ao Rue slipped into twisting grief. "Oh, Feng-po, our world is done. You see, I now think I know what Kuan-ti was trying to say to that unthinking school of bottom-feeding flounders at the Kaochang."

"Yülü? Gate? Closure? I don't understand."

"Settle yourself. I'll tell you what I know. Besides I'm not quite ready to leave Kuan-ti yet, and in awhile we have one more thing to do that I'll need your help with."

"All right. If you think I can do it."

"I hope so; I'm very tired. I could tap more power but that's only for emergencies. Let me rest while I tell you what I think is going to happen. To give you an idea of what's on those tablets and how bad dragons' memories are, tell me where you think we began."

"Everyone knows that!" Feng-po spoke with a shade of condescension. His courage was creeping back as Ao Rue's magic faded. "Dragons were spawned in the sea. The sea is our mother; the sun that lights the water is our father. Together they loved to produce the crown of creation, and"

"Enough," said Ao Rue impatiently. "Heng-chiang, Lei-kung, and Yolbas are going to rip us all from the sea, and you prattle with catechism. Dragons were originally land creatures; we evolved from something stupid, like iguanas. We only reached our current state after we made the sea our home. Since then, we've been back on the land one more time. After that mess, there's good reason why we shouldn't go back again."

"What's an iguana?"

"A moray eel with legs, I think. Stop interrupting and try to concentrate. The tablets tell of a time when dragons ruled the air, not the sea. The tablets themselves have to be kept in the air; they deteriorate quickly in water. When Lei-kung breaks the magical seals and gates on these caverns and the sea drains through, they'll crumble. And they are our oldest records. There are a few other remnants of those days, but few bother to know them. Your name, for example, means 'Earl of the Wind' in the old high tongue, 'Quick Stepper' in the vernacular."

"Wow, maybe the air will be good for me," Feng-po said hopefully.

"I fear the air will be good for none of us. Chaos and fear took us the last time we were land creatures. We fled to the sea. Don't interrupt me. I know what you're thinking; 'what could possibly chase dragons?' That's not too clear. Age has dulled the runes, and Kuan-ti, after a lifetime of study, couldn't decipher all of the most ancient ones. What is clear is that we ran from dread beings that had evolved after we left the first time. We could kill them, but simple destruction wasn't enough. Somehow killing them was unclean."

"What were they?"

"I was getting to that!" Feng-po should have known better than to disturb Ao Rue in lecture mode; he got petulant. "They were called the Azghun Demons." Both dragons shivered at some ancestral memory that brought irrational dread. "In color, they matched Lei-kung, although of a more sickening yellowish hue, if that's possible. Somehow they poisoned everything, but they couldn't speak or think; didn't have individual names. They infected dragons. I can't figure out how, but it wasn't noble or heroic or anything like that. It was just pathetically ugly. So, the dragons tried to get away from them, but there was nowhere to go, so they caused the seas to rise and cover most of the land. Many creatures were killed by the rushing waters. There's one elegy, a perfection of tragedy, devoted to the loss of a particular furred mammal, but it's not clear if it was an ally or a beloved friend."

"So we saved ourselves in the sea? Retreated in shame!"

"Yes and no; something still had to be done with the Demons. Their existence was too much of an utter abomination. They were too much of an affront to pride and natural law. Before the land was flooded, somehow they were lured or forced by a cadre of sorcerers into the deep tunnels below. I think our caverns are the upper levels. Then, they were sealed in with water. Atop that, magical barriers were created around these caverns to keep the tablets dry. Thus, these cave are like air pockets with water above and water below. At the deepest levels, in a vacuous place called Hell, the Demons may still prowl in yet more dry caves. If they live, they lie beneath our talons right now. When Lei-kung drains the sea, I think he'll free the Demons. That's why Shen-t'u and Yülü were and are so important. Since neither the water nor the basalt was enough, they had to guard the gates and the spells. Their obligation was so great that, when their bodies could no longer endure life, their spirits stayed."

"But you said that only Yülü remains."

"Shen-t'u is gone. I don't know where. Perhaps spirit has an end. Maybe he was just too tired. Yülü has grown weaker in my short life, and he's been down there for eons. I wonder if the demons grow in strength; I wonder if their infection has leaked into Lei-kung?"

"Please, Ao Rue, you tell tales to frighten the young." Feng-po recovered his composure and his courage. "Dragons fear nothing. We are the masters of all!"

"So, don't believe me." Ao Rue wondered how he could be so close to someone who could be so silly and superficial. There were times he thought Feng-po's mind had as much content as a blowfish. He seemed to have completely forgotten the solemn and

painful mission that had brought them to the depths. "Doubt me if you want, but I will tell you this. Throughout history, unexplained deaths, like Kuan-ti's, have always been harbingers of great suffering and strife. Mark my words: many more will die unnaturally before we see the end of this . . . if we live to see the end. Unnatural deaths are the darkest of omens. Our world is going to be turned inside out. We'll end up wearing our tender guts on the outside."

"This is silly. You're just trying to scare me." Any impact Ao Rue had hoped to have was now lost in Feng-po's bravado. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Not yet, my empty-headed friend. We need to finish here. I need you to write something for Kuan-ti in the basalt seal."

"How am I supposed to do that? You might as well ask me to chew diamonds."

Ao Rue had forgotten that his friend knew nothing of the time when dragons actually wrote and composed. "Here, I'll show you. Once I start it, you'll have to hold it. I'm deep tired. Give me the first talon on your right claw." As Feng-po extended it, Ao Rue's eyes began to pulse softly. Suddenly, Feng-po's talon began to glow. "There, do you feel it."

"Yes, yes, I do. It's as easy as cracking a clam." His talon began to glow very brightly, and the water began to boil around it.

"Easy; it doesn't have to be that hot," Ao Rue warned. Feng-po was turning his talon about, looking at it as if, like a dragonling, he'd just realized it was there. "Now all you have to do is cut what I tell you into the basalt."

"Err, Ao Rue, haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"I can't write. Never bothered to learn. I didn't think it was important."

"Not important? Not important! Oh, never mind. How are we going to do this? I can't leave Kuan-ti unmarked. All right, we'll have to do it this way. Twine the end of your tail in mine."

"Not on your life. That's weird."

"Feng-po, try to forget your sense of propriety for a moment. I need the energy to do this."

"All right, but this isn't natural."

Feng-po watched as Ao Rue's talon began to glow, and he wondered how severely weary the sorcerer's energy was because the drain down his tail was hardly anything. Painstakingly, Ao Rue drew four lines of runes into the basalt cap.

"What does it say?" Feng-po asked as he gratefully untwined his tail and looked over his shoulder to check if anyone had seen.

"I'll read it to you later. Right now, I think I'll go into one of the caverns. I need some time alone, and the desolation down here calms me."

"Not yet, before you go and play hermit again, now I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"There is a friend of Ch'ang-o's I'd like you to get out of my tendrils."

"Feng-po, is this the time to discuss this!"

"This is important. Besides, you've never seen anyone this shy and insecure. She's a little thing, name's Nū-kua, a copper with green eyes -- cute, a real tail sweller. Trails around after Ch'ang-o like a remora."

"I'd have thought you'd be interested if she's that exciting."

"Not my type, too timid, but she'd be perfect for you. She even likes poetry. And I would like some time to cultivate Chang-o's tail without an audience."

"I bet you would! There are times I think that if you had your way, you'd spend all your time crunching oysters and drinking that effervescent, bubbly stuff you suck out of those bulbous vines."

"You're probably right. I love oysters -- crunchy on the outside, soft on the inside. But, hey, we were talking about Nū-kua; don't sidetrack me. She likes you. She was mortified by what Chih-nil and Yolbas did to you at the Kaochang."

"Wonderful. Along with scorn, now I'm getting pity."

"She seemed sincere."

"They all start out that way! You know her name means 'Tamer of Beasts.'"

"Will you stop thinking for a minute. You think too much! Why not just give her a chance to tame your beast?"

Ao Rue ignored Feng-po's ribaldry. "How can anyone think too much? Lei-kung's name means 'Lord of Thunder.'"

"'Lord of Thunder,' that little sponge?"

"You may have reason to remember that once he gets his plan into action," Ao Rue cautioned. "Then, you can forget all about the oysters and the bubbly and a whole lot of other things!"

"Stop the doom and gloom. Will you help me out with this?"

"Do you know ancient writings tell of telepathic links between lovers."

"Right. I've been with more females than you've ever seen, and I've never felt a mental twinge. Besides, I could care about their minds."

"Once dragons did it all the time."

"You're evading the issue. Are you going to help me or not?"

"I'll think about it. Now I need some time alone." Ao Rue turned and began to snake his way toward the deepest of the air-filled vaults. Feng-po watched his friend go and shrugged. As he turned to swim up, he thought he'd snag a few vines of bubbly and see what Ch'ang-o was doing. His mind started to caress that slender white tail. Ao Rue's astonishing magic had already faded from Feng-po's memory as he turned his back on the depths.



It was some time later that Ao Rue abandoned his solitude. The usual serenity that isolation usually brought him hadn't come. Too much ate at him: Feng-po's oblivion, Chih-nil's smugness, Lei-kung's insanity, Heng-chiang's brutality, Yolbas' belligerence, and if

truth be known, some envy and bitterness at their popularity. He did have enough sense of self left to stop and reread the unrhymed eulogy he'd written on Kuan-ti's tomb:

Father, Great Mentor, Give Me Strength in My Desolation

Give Me the Will and the Power to Confront What is to Come.

Ever and Always You Will Remain in My Heart.

May the Peace That Transcends All Understanding Be With You!

He wished he were a better poet.