

Chapter 19
3020 words

Yolbas led the struggling phalanx of himself, General Heng-chiang, and Han Chung-li back from Mud-Pit Hollow. Despite his helplessness to Lei-kung's will, he still felt sick, disgusted. *A real dragon has died today.* As he and Han Chung-li had held Feng-po and the General had brought that brutal golden claw down on Feng-po's twitching body, that had been all Yolbas had been able to think: *This is a real dragon. A real dragon.* The thought echoed in him; he couldn't dismiss it. There had been blood everywhere. Feng-po had fought valiantly, raging into the air. They had fought as cowards. They were carrion crows -- sniping, ripping, clinging, taking him from behind. Dancing away, thrusting in. Always from the back. They had thrown him to the ground. *Blood everywhere; who'd have thought there was so much blood in him.* All three bore wounds that would scar deeply. Han Chung-li flew erratically on a ravaged wing. General Heng-chiang didn't look like he was going to make it. The left side of his chest was caved in. His dripping phlegm was now pink. He kept falling behind. Yolbas clutched one claw to himself. He was sure it was broken. Like black-draped mourners, the vultures and eagles kept pace with them, waiting for one to fall. None of the dragons had the energy even to scare them away. The whole group looked like some aerial funeral procession. Yolbas couldn't shake his morbid thoughts: *Blood everywhere; blood and mud!* When the deed was done, he'd thrown himself in the murky water of the oasis. Scoured himself with clawful after clawful of sand. Even now, as he flew, he rasped his one good claw raw with his tongue trying to erase the blood he saw on it. Han Chung-li kept telling him there wasn't anything there, but he knew better. He was forever stained. *A real dragon! We are nothing but shadows. Crude imitations gyrating on Lei-kung's black threads. Puppets! Why doesn't it bother Han Chung-li and Heng-chiang? They know. We all know. That is the pain: to know and be helpless! Will my claws, my talons, ever be clean? A real dragon!* Yolbas wished himself dead. *If a Demon came, I would embrace it in joy!* Yet as much as any dragon wished death, cried out against dishonor, cried shame, Lei-kung wouldn't grant release to even the most tormented. He left that to his Demons. *Erh-lang was fortunate I couldn't find him. Sometimes I think Lei-kung keeps us alive, forces us to breed, only for Demon food. Even now, he drives us home to lure Ao Rue to him.* As Lei-kung's dark magic jerked their wings in increasing beats, Yolbas wished for the purity of Ao Rue's flame. *A real dragon has died! Will I ever be clean?*



Ao Rue flew closer to Mud-Pit, wondering if Wen Ch'ang was just another worthless snot or something more. *I certainly didn't intimidate him. Is there anything behind that little mouth?* In the distance, he thought he glimpsed three dragons rise from the oasis. *That's wrong!* Again his wings took on supernatural speed.

As he descended into Mud-Pit Oasis, it became clear that something was, indeed, very wrong. It was devoid of any life, no birds, no animals, but he did see the vultures and

kites beginning to gather. He suddenly realized why. The powerful scent of blood rose like steam. *Feng-po? Feng-po?* Fear sent Ao Rue's thoughts radiating everywhere.

Here. So faint as to be a hare whispering in the dunes.

"Where? Where?" Ao Rue now called aloud as he frantically searched the wreckage. Finally he found the motionless and broken Feng-po tangled in a mass of mud, uprooted undergrowth, and his own blood. Tenderly, gingerly, he moved enough aside from the broken body to cradle his friend's head. He tried to brush the mud and sand from the gaping wounds. He reached out with his mind. A small spark of life remained. Softly Ao Rue fanned it with his magic.

Feng-po's eyelids fluttered, "Rue, I don't think I look too good. But you ought to see the other guy."

"Oh, Feng, how could I not have known? Why didn't you call?"

"Figured I could handle them. Were only three. But the General got me with that stupid golden claw from behind. Couldn't turn fast enough. Han Chung-li hanging from my hind claw. Kept my mind closed. Didn't want to get you involved in this mess. By the gods, that Yolbas is strong." He coughed, blood rushed from his snout. Ao Rue pushed a bit more magic into him. "Anyway, Rue, how's it been going. Nü-kua OK?"

The sorcerer was mute before his friend's courageous attempt at flippancy. He felt he should say something very important, very significant. "She's fine. While you were being murdered, we were tumbling around on a bed of herbs." Shame rose in Ao Rue.

"Twisting a little tail, huh." The blood had slowed to a trickle. "Nothing better than that! Listen, old buddy, got an ugly confession to make. Don't mind me if I get too serious. Got a lotta pain here. Don't know whether I'll make it."

"I could restore you with the Spell of Ti-tsang Wang-P'u-sa, the Saver of Souls."

"What!" A manic energy gave Feng-po strength. "Spend your power forever? You have a better destiny, sorcerer. It would leave me a ripped manikin, a torn carcass, an animated corpse! No. Don't. I wouldn't be pretty anymore. What female would bother with me? Save it; save it for a better moment and a better body."

"Always the females, my friend," Ao Rue murmured as he looked down into Feng-po's mangled face. The exertion had almost been too much. Feng-po's blood streamed down Ao Rue's chest and mingled with his tears.

"Stop talking. Gotta tell you this. Been eating at me. When Lei-kung had my will, when I groveled in the mines, I hated you for your freedom. Wanted you suffering with me. Sorry. So sorry."

"That's nothing. Don't worry."

"But I'm free now. You did that. Could you do one more thing?"

"Anything."

"Take me into the air. I want to die like a dragon. Take me to the wind and clouds. See if Ch'ang-o's waiting for me."

"Are you strong enough?"

"What difference does it make?"

"As you wish, my friend." Ao Rue's eyes began to spin as he gathered the enormous strength necessary to carry Feng-po. Gently, carefully, he held his battered friend behind his wings. He poured as much freedom from pain into Feng-po as he could as they climbed into the air. Despite his care, a moan of pain escaped Feng-po's clenched fangs. Ao Rue's wings spread wide, cupped and beat the wind. Slowing, then with increasing speed, he lifted Feng-po about the tree tops, up toward the sun.

"This is high enough, my silver friend; you can let go."

"Are you sure?" Ao Rue wanted to hold on to Feng-po as long as he could.

"Nothing is forever. Let me go." Feng-po opened his ravaged wings as he began to fall. Wind torn at the holes. For a moment, he was able to glide, even make a banked turn despite his broken tail, "Am I not the Earl of the Wind? Am I not beautiful?" Ao Rue's heart rose.

"Beautiful and demented as always!" Ao Rue hid his sobs as he answered.

"Suck a vine for me; crunch an oyster." Feng-po exploded into a rainbow of richness. Ao Rue kept his eyes wide, let the dazzling brightness imprint itself on his brain, let the heat sting his body.

He hung in the air for awhile, then circled down to the oasis. Nothing was in his stunned mind but purpose. He landed. He gathered a clawful of the ample mix of Feng-po's blood and mud. He painted the Rune of the True Death on his chest. He wanted no chance that Lei-kung would ever reappear as anything. Ao Rue no longer was the caring sorcerer; he was the icy assassin, consumed by rage and grief. With a scream of fang and claw, from a time too ancient to remember, he leapt into the air. His wings trailed lightening-blue clouds. He beat in a realm beyond any air that had ever brushed the sand or sea and closed quickly on the fleeing dragons. His wrath took him completely. A small concentration broke, and far away, the black eagles dropped on Spring Halt to feed.

Hovering over the struggling Heng-chiang, a small part of Ao Rue's mind told him he should be thinking, told him he should be feeling something other than the blood rage. He ignored it and dove. The General rolled over in the air. His vision was filled with a screaming silver devil. He raised his golden arm against Ao Rue's rush. It was simply brushed aside. With an economy and speed that astonished even as great a veteran as Heng-chiang, Ao Rue flipped him over and sunk his fangs into the back of his neck. With all four claws, he grabbed the General at shoulders and haunches. With a quick, clinical snap, he ripped him into six parts. Ao Rue let the body fall straight down. He threw the head toward the sun and scattered the legs and arms to the compass points. Heng-chiang's golden arm pinwheeled into oblivion. The scavengers cried joy as they chased the dismembered General. Ao Rue felt nothing. He let Heng-chiang's blood stream along his snout, back over his body.

As Lei-kung's chorten came into view, Ao Rue saw Yolbas and Han Chung-li scuttle in. The chorten rose like a immense, decapitated mushroom on the vast dead plain. Strings of dragons radiated out from it to the mines. The chorten's four curved sides absorbed the sun's reflection from the salt flats and gave back nothing but dullness. The

dome that bulged from the center of the flat roof stole the sun's rays. Amid the screaming heat of the desert, it was uncaring cold. Lei-kung was perched like a shrouded vulture on top of the hemisphere, waiting. His neck kinked forward, his head down between his sharply pointed wing stubs, he looked for all the world completely calm and unaware. When he saw Ao Rue approaching, he jumped to the walkway at the base of the dome and laced his claws across his belly.

Ao Rue came straight in. Just as it appeared he would crash into the chorten, he backed wind and bathed the entire dome and Lei-kung in silver-blue fire. It streamed from his snout and curled around the chorten as if it had no end. The air crackled and shattered with its intensity. When he stopped, he was astonished to see both the chorten and Lei-kung unmarked.

Completely unfazed, Lei-kung looked up and seemingly discovered the berserker for the first time. "Ao Rue, you seem upset. How can I be of service?"

Ao Rue advanced along the walkway, his claws opening and closing spasmodically. Lei-kung made no attempt to escape.

"Speechless, are we? Now that's not good. We are reasoning creatures. It is not wise to give way to rage. It paralyzes the mind. Certainly Kuan-ti told you that."

Ao Rue reached out with his claws to shred Lei-kung's head.

Lei-kung raised his voice for the first time, "You stupid blue-eyed freak." With a slow, underhand motion, like throwing a fish to a seal, he tossed the sphere hanging from his wrist into Ao Rue's face. It snapped free from its vein and exploded. Ao Rue was instantly enveloped in a sticky net of black threads. With a malignant intelligence, it quickly oozed over his entire body. It cinched his wings, bound his claws, sealed his snout. He could barely move, hardly breath. Wildly, he struggled. His great strength yielded only twitches.

"Oh, please, Ao Rue, don't struggle. You'll hurt yourself. We wouldn't want you falling off. Now you know the full power of Lei-kung and the Northern Lights! There is strength in this spell to still all the powers in the firmament. You will only exhaust yourself."

Ao Rue's eyes began to spin wildly as he called upon his magic. The web dulled them to pathetic, dying stars.

"No, your magic won't help either. You're mine. This spell has another delightful property. It's elastic and adhesive." Lei-kung reached out with one talon and caught the web at the tip of Ao Rue's right wing. He began to walk around the dome, towing the wing behind him. When Ao Rue thought he was going to pull it out of its socket, Lei-kung reached up and slapped it against the side of the dome. It stuck. Lei-kung sauntered back. "Now the other wing."

Ao Rue gave up his struggle and let the Great Opening Spells of Shen-t'u and Yü-lü, the Guardians of the Doors to Death, rise. Nothing happened. The web tightened.

"Now your front claws. Just a bit below the wings. We wouldn't want you to be too uncomfortable."

Out of the corner of his web-hooded eyes, Ao Rue could just make out Han Chung-li joining them, one wing dragging on the stone. Ao Rue's muscles cried out as Lei-kung stretched him across the dome.

"Now the hind legs. I'll leave your head free. It's important that you can see the scenery and not miss your audience. Look, my strings of jewels all coming to admire you." From the mines, from inside the chorten, from everywhere, dragons were coming. The lines seemed endless. They all gazed up at Ao Rue spread-eagled on the dome.

Lei-kung hopped back up on top of the dome. As he raised his fore claws and stunted wings to acknowledge his servants, he continued to rave at the gagged Ao Rue. "Did you really think I would let you destroy my Great Society. Take the glory of the terraforming from me. You've been nothing but an irritant. How dare you think you're better than any of us! Did you think I'd forget Chang-Lao, my only friend, the only one who understood me, who loved me. He was my only joy. Do you remember him, Ao Rue? You blinked him out of existence like a moth. Did you think I'd forget. That day I vowed I would be greater than you, greater than Kuan-ti, greater than the ancients. I am the ultimate dragon! I am the next evolutionary step. Before me, all creation pales. Now you'll serve me well. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? Can you imagine? First, I'm going to render you less than the stupidest dragonette. I'm going to caulk your nostrils and still your fire. Blinders will shade those ugly eyes. Clay will close your ears. Your genitals, ah, your lovely genitals; I'll tie them off! Let you watch the blood leave them; watch them atrophy; see them drop off. Once your senses are less than ours, then, I'll remind you of your sense of pain. Each day, I'm going to rip parts of you out and throw them at the claws of the dragons below. The black eagles and vultures will come and feed. While they do, my Demons will savor your beloved dragons. Of course, I'll save the tastier parts for myself. Perhaps, I'll share them with the tender Nü-kua. Yes, tender. In fact, when I'm done with you, I may start on her. That is if I don't give her to Han Chung-li. He does have his special ways with the females. Each day a new piece of you for eternity, for posterity. My power will grow as you dwindle. If only I had a spell to regenerate you. Overnight, you'd grow back. We could begin anew; each day would be the first of your life. What a wonderful idea; I'll have to look into that. If I can't, maybe I'll turn you into a permanent exhibit, seal you in amber, make you an enduring tribute to my power. Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to tell my minions what they think."

With a glance over to Han Chung-li, who was ready to lead the litany, Lei-kung began: "This is Ao Rue, who once was fierce. Once he thought himself great; once he thought himself better than us."

At Han Chung-li's signal, the crowd chanted in dull-bass response, "One of Us, One of Us."

"But he is here now in our wise hands. We hope to teach him to think better, to fly no higher than anyone else."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"In our tender care, in time, he will forget his magic, forget his quest for useless knowledge. We will cure him."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"Soon enough, he will realize the importance of the common good, the great values of our cooperation, our unity of purpose."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"My dear, dear friends, once again I serve you in bringing this deviant, this criminal, into our Great Society. Soon, like us all, he will bow to dragon destiny, to our final fulfillment."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"Now go, my friends, to your valued labor. Remember that all our sacrifices, all our trials, are to provide the greatest good for the greatest number."

"One of Us, One of Us." The chant continued as the dragons mechanically returned to their unceasing tasks. As Lei-kung descended to the walkway, Han Chung-li crept over and fearfully poked at Ao Rue. He immediately jumped back.

"Don't worry, Han Chung-li," Lei-kung reassured him as he leaned against Ao Rue's bound body. "He's ours for as long as we want. Completely helpless. But you stay away from him; this is my special pleasure. Go busy yourself with another female. You needn't worry either, Ao Rue. We're not going to begin our little project today. For now, you'll just be on display. It will be valuable for the dragonettes to see you helpless. Help them formulate their future goals and behavior. Tomorrow morning will be soon enough to start our modifications. Later, we'll get to the dissection. Or is that vivisection?" Lei-kung laughed aloud.