

Chapter 25  
1925 words

Ao Rue and Nü-kua flew toward the thunderstorm they'd seen at the far end of the Barkul Range; he was in good spirits again. Even the sickening uncertainty he'd begun to feel about Nü-kua had faded to moonlight shadows. *Nothing like the power of poetry to transform even an uncomfortable moment! With her in the rainbow!* As they rose closer to the boiling dark clouds, his flight was all power and skill; he challenged the powers of the jinn of the air. Unlike him, she moved like a sylph who had been sired by some wayward jinni. He ripped through clouds; she glided among them, hardly disturbing the filigreed wisps. She was a graceful streamer of gold among the fragile, towering billows. Sinuous and sensuous, Nü-kua was female dragon at the pinnacle of physical beauty. The distant lightning made her molten. Its alchemy skimmed all the dross from her scales. The darkling air transformed her freckles into stars that danced in her golden night, kept time to the music of her swaying motion.

In the rapidly-shrinking distance, the storm turned the mountains gleaming pearl, the valleys and crevasses stone black. The flashes transformed the world into stark triumphs, forming glaring clarities that were more honest, purer. The scene told absolute, ennobling truths and evoked deep, intriguing mysteries. Most of all, the terrible might offered the challenges of power, trials fraught with promises of spectacular triumphs and monstrous failures. It was the age-old seduction of the descent into the maelstrom, the lure of death and rebirth. The thunder muttered and grumbled. It called to Ao Rue. It was all he could do to hold himself to a pace Nü-kua could maintain.

"Oh, my Thoth, the lightning makes you a mirror with no reflection. Your scales are too pure to be stained by an image."

"You'll have to look inside me to see your shining self, my Bright Eyes."

"Look, look at my wing tips, my talons, my claws. I'm magic!" This close to the storm's charged air, glowing, crackling nimbuses had formed all over her. Nü-kua was decorated with blue auras that touched her with loving intimacy. While their nature was identical to the horrible static electricity of the sand storms, now it created glory rather than attracting irksome talc.

Ao Rue laughed joyfully, "You have them on the tips of your nostrils." She wrinkled her snout. It was such an endearing gesture that Ao Rue swelled with love and protection, but he didn't have the warm time he wanted to savor it. The charcoal and white clouds rose before them. Their tops climbed beyond the shadowed sun. As they plunged into the tempest, she cried out to him, "Thoth, don't go too far; I've never done this before." Again, he laughed in joy and exultation.

Description always escaped Ao Rue when it came to thunderstorms. They were primal meanings from which words turned away. Even the simplest language failed with too much complexity. To a cat or an ape, the engulfing rain was everything; to him, it meant nothing. It paled before the wind. The great bursts penetrated every crevice of their

bodies, blew their tendrils slick. Only mighty strength prevented their claws from being driven into their own bodies.

Many dragons avoided storms; they shunned the lightning's strikes. Ao Rue sought them. He chased the great fireballs of energy, pouncing on them as they zipped through the air. He rolled over on his back and let the bolts hit him full on. They penetrated him over and over again until he was all light. His heart blood ran silver; the stunning blue of his blazing eyes appalled the storm's moiling grays and blacks, dared its stunning whites. He capered among the pillars of clouds. Beside him, Nü-kua cavorted and frisked, charming the lightning to her and then coyly sliding away from its charge.

Ao Rue began to take the rampaging power to him, absorbing its chaos and pouring it back. His wizardry turned the lightning to towers of energy that shot through the clouds, struck at the peace of deep heaven. He cried aloud in conquest and danced in the strikes and shocks. The world was void of color, heat. It was all noise and power. More and more, he forced his magic into the tempest. The two dragons gamboled in the great mother of storms, an anarchy unlike the world had ever seen. Still he pushed his power into it, stunning the mountains with claps of thunder that shocked them to their ancient roots. Now, in complete contempt, he frisked like a kitten within the madness he created and fed. He was feral; he was wild. Yet, even as he took the soaring roar for his own, he heard Nü-kua 's panicked cry.

"I can't hold on anymore. I'm losing control."

Ao Rue fought his way through the tumult to her, the winds testing his every sinew, trying futilely to whip his wings into chaos. He defied the storm and gathered her to him, wrapping himself completely around her, enclosing her in the sanctuary of his wings. Entwined, they tumbled through the air. They were saturated with erotic power. He let them be buffeted and blown for a time, stretching the moment, lavishing in the lightning's power and her embrace. Then, he raised his magic, enclosed them in the sphere of love. They drifted and floated. Like a summer leaf, they gently spiraled and glided. The storm pounded futilely against them. He guided them toward the rainbow circles that lived for moments in the layers of moist haze at the storm's edges. Just as it seemed they would drop through one, the colors would fade. Timid, but lovingly, another would call in the distance, only to vanish no matter how softly they approached. Each ring of colors gave way to the lure of yet one more complete circle -- ever close, never near. Nü-kua hummed and cooed. She slipped her tail around his and rubbed her snout against his chest. She writhed gently, slid her wings against the tender insides of his, touching the softer, delicate flesh of his body. Locked in ecstasy, they settled into the sea. Even though they met the white caps with no more force than a snow flake on a flower, great gouts of steam and spray exploded into the sky as they discharged all the storm's energy.

The time they spent floating and loving passed as a rapturous dream for Ao Rue. He never wanted to wake, never wanted to think of Demons or Northern Lights again. Each scale lifted to her touch. They curled around each other, maintaining a lazy rapture that was struck over and over again with the sharp elations of fulfillment. All endings

promised the next beginnings. They rose and fell and rolled within each other. Awareness merged in amorous mist.

Finally, the sun brought them back. The storm had passed. Lolling on their backs, savoring their union, they floated wing tip to wing tip.

Finally, Ao Rue lifted his head. "Bright Eyes, I'd like to go for a deep swim. Listen to some whale song. Maybe find Wen Ch'ang; see how he's doing. Enjoy some tranquillity after the storm." He waited until Nü-kua finished the tuna she'd been snacking on.

"I don't know. I think I'd like to go find some of the others. See what Yolbas and Erh-lang are up to."

He cringed a little. These days he feared the echoes for dragons dying, Demons rampaging at the back of his mind. The thoughts of Last Flights and the light of glitter sand had even colored his usual joy with the storm's pyrotechnics. "No, I need some time to revitalize before I go back to business. You sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Oh, Ao Rue, why don't you just go with the flow? You're always so tied up with duty. Anyway, the whales' songs always sound the same to me. I know you think they're different each time, but I just can't hear it. And what do you want with that little weirdo? He's no fun. I thought you didn't like dragonettes? What did he go back to the sea for anyway?" Why couldn't he stay on the land like the rest of us?

"I'm afraid he and his friends are back in the depths because of me. I told him they'd be safer there. The Azghun Demons can't pass through water. And he's not so bad. The bumptiousness will pass soon enough when he gets older. For now, I can take him in measured doses. And he is special.

"Special'? I don't see anything. He even tries my patience, and I adore normal dragonettes! Not the weird ones though."

"I'm not sure what's there, but something tells me he has unusual promise. I feel I should keep an eye on him."

"All right, you go listen to your whales and attend to your duties. I'm going to head back to the chorten. I'll see you at home later."

"Oh, when you see Yolbas, ask him about the kaochang to discuss fighting the Demons. I'm a little surprised I haven't heard from him. I should be there. I can help."

"Of course, you can. Are you not the most powerful dragon in the whole world? I'll be sure to ask him." She reached out and gently touched her snout and her mind to his. *My Thoth! My very own Thoth!*

As she flew into the distance, he watched and admired her until she'd faded to a speck. It made him feel so deeply good that she admired him, loved him. *She makes me feel beautiful. She is the yes of my being!* Still, he began to feel how crowded he'd been lately. *I do need my time alone. Mei-chou's right. These moments of isolation -- self-indulgence? -- allow me to disengage.* As he swam down toward the deep caves, he did wish he could be more involved, be different for Nü-kua, get caught up in the socializing she enjoyed, but it didn't engage him; it bored him. The mindless frenzy threatened the perspective his magic and wisdom needed.

As usual, he tried to set his thoughts of alienation aside and reached out with his mind for Wen Ch'ang and the whales. Both were some distance away. Transforming himself, he chose the pleasure of swimming rather than flying. He knew he should be looking forward to the whales' newest symphonies, but the edge was missing. Nor did the thought of reading what few tablets remained captivate him. As he examined his unfamiliar feelings, he came to a sudden realization: *She's taught me to be lonely! Not even Chih-nil accomplished that!* His unsuspected reliance on her made him uneasy, and he tried to find comfort in the thought that they'd always be together, tried to ease his mind with the knowledge of their co-dependence. Yet, he couldn't shake his troubled thoughts, his haunting sense of uneasiness. But they were whipped quickly away by a strange, mental call. It was a faint, clear cry of need, unlike any he'd heard before. It wasn't a dragon's. He stopped, trying to listen more carefully, tuning his mind to its odd nature. *IT'S MEI-CHOU! MEI-CHOU IN TROUBLE!* He shot back to the surface. His wings threw great bails of water as he used raw strength to wrench them from the cradling sea. With deeper and deeper beats, he flew toward the distant Barkul Range. He cursed even his great speed: *Can I possibly be in time?*