

Chapter 33
1085 words

The first sign of an answer to Nü-kua's call was a rising whistle from beyond the Barkul Range. Animals scattered from its coming. Snow leopards and black eagles fled their hunts. Shrieking baboons covered their ears. The mountain argali danced from ledge to ledge to escape the increasing shrill. Cats sought the depths to blot it out. It grew in intensity, echoed and smashed off the peaks. Stones cracked and fell. Snow shifted and avalanched. A great stunning silver-blue sphere tinged the sky with its rush. Its coming defied everything. The air fanned away from it in glowing incandescence. Thunder tried to follow. Its crashes and cracks fruitlessly trailed the orb. Within the glowing sphere was a brown pellet, a mud-encrusted projectile.

No one will ever know how Ao Rue came so quickly. He was a wonder that the world had never seen before, would never see again. Perhaps love and magic succeeded where wings would fail. No dragon could top the Bogdo-ola and yet he came. With contempt for all, he answered Nü-kua's call. Sorcery incarnate, he shattered nature.

His inviolate bond had raised him beyond the power of mountain and flight. The limits of space and time ran before his wrath. He scorned stillness and mere motion. His purpose stole light and dark and turned the world to the silver blue of his making. His vow moved him beyond the chains of thought and change, passed the bonds of pleasure and pain. Ao Rue's pledge, made in a softer, younger, sweeter time, smashed the controlling spirits of the world.

He swept down the Mount of God toward Lei-kung's chorten. The sphere disappeared. He flung his wings and claws out. The mud flashed away. Energy crackled from his body. Air and sand were blanched stone white by his might and glory. His fire was silver, far beyond ordinary dragon flame. He was born again from the radiating rings of a new star. His eyes blazed unthinkable power.

Before his stunned gaze, Erh-lang clawed at Nü-kua. He was oblivious to her, crawling up her, trying to get to the sky, trying to die. They struggled and rolled in the sand. Frantically, she held him. Great gouts of sand and flame cascaded above their deadly embrace.

Ao Rue landed sharply beside the two struggling dragons. He reached out with his claw. Instantly, the raging Erh-lang's flaying body quieted. Great, pitiable cries of devastation rolled from him, but his demented movements ceased. Nü-kua clung to his twitching body. She looked up in surprise and appeal at Ao Rue. "You! How? Help me! He's trying to leave me. Help me!"

"Let him go. No one can save him. He's only a shell. There is no will to live in him anymore."

"No! Never! Fix him! He can't leave me. I won't allow it! Do something! You're the great sorcerer."

"I can't. The force of life lies beyond all magic. He doesn't want to live."

"What good are you!" Nü-kua let go of Erh-lang and slapped Ao Rue's stilling claw away. Erh-lang erupted into violent flight. With no one to hold him, he leapt into the sky. Nü-kua was stunned for a moment, still surprised that he would shun her. But she quickly followed; her claws and voice reaching out to him. "Erh-lang, I forgive you! Come back! Don't leave me!"

Ao Rue followed both dragons into the clouds. He cried after her. "Bright eyes! Don't! Stay with me! I'll take care of you."

She wasn't listening. All her attention was on catching the wildly erratic Erh-lang. Once, twice, her grasping claws almost had him. Each time, he jerked away. He was consumed by a mad, elusive course -- a path that would take him to the death he craved.

Ao Rue continued to try to reach her. "He's going to go up. Get away from him. You're all right. You can live! You can live! Stay!"

Now she had Erh-lang by a rear talon. "Go away! He's mine." As she gained control of his twisting form, her rage faltered. Only now she remembered -- only now she questioned what she was doing. She tried to pull away, but the frenzied Erh-lang had her. He began to climb her body toward the sun. His talons sunk deeply into her. Finally, she looked to the rapidly closing Ao Rue; appeal filled her eyes. His spun in raging answer. She tried to yell through Erh-lang's mournful cries and the howling wind. "The egg. The egg" She never finished. Erh-lang's fires had peaked. He exploded into the inevitable glitter sand. She was consumed.

Ao Rue recoiled from the heat and sand that splattered against him. His deep wing beats stopped. Waves of despair and resignation forced his head to droop between his wings. He just kept them open out of habit and spiraled down on the updrafts. He floated like a dead leaf. His tears mixed with the falling gems. He settled on the glitter sand. Aimlessly, he combed through it with his talons. *Still warm.* A sob escaped him. *Something special here? Must be! It's her! Should be most beautiful.* He sifted through more and more of it, grain upon grain. Yet, no matter how hard he looked, the truth became too obvious to him, impossible to avoid: *Nothing. Nothing. Like all the rest. Nothing to cherish, to take; nothing to hold.*

How long he stayed -- his silver wings spread weakly over the sand, his claws balled beneath him -- is lost in time. Finally, he stirred. There was a weariness in his movements that went beyond the frailty of flesh. He opened his claws and let the glitter sand fall through his talons. It was nothing more than another place the cats would not walk. As he flexed his wings to leave, Nü-kua's last words came to him. *What was she trying to say? Something about an Egg?* He lifted off the plain and looked among the geometric rows of Yün-t'ung's classroom, then out across the sand. *Nothing.* He extended his smell and magic: *Lingering tinge of Demon. Sterile sand. Salt death.* He directed his attention to the chorten. *Choking stench! Foul! Evil!* Despite his efforts, his head and magic flinched from the malodorous miasma. *Cleanse it? So tired! Another day. Maybe leave it? Warning?* His wings beat stronger now in search of the Demons who had taken

Nü-kua and Erh-lang. All he felt was a dull rage, a single purpose. It would continue to grow.