

Chapter 4
2220 words

On that long-dead day, now buried under over a decade's sand and sea fossils, Ao Rue swam slowly. He was late. He didn't care. He was always late for Kaochang's meetings bored him. *Too many voices, going in too many directions. Too many causes, too few brains*, he thought. *Always foolishness -- no one prepared. Didn't anybody study anymore? Fools!* Besides, his place on the Council of Five was meaningless. It had been centuries since the Council had done little more than try to referee the arguments among the generals, the practicing sorcerers, the aging pedants, and the ever-smug young. Most decisions were made by others in weed-filled caverns and changed little if anything.

Ao Rue's long, silver body moved easily through his natural environment. He slid in lazy S's that disguised both power and speed. Occasionally he'd snap his broad wings out in contempt of the water's power and turn back somersaults and figure 8's. If he thought no one was looking, he'd practice some of the winged acrobatics of the mating ritual. He opened both wings fully, like large shimmering shells against the massive currents, and did the difficult Sphere of Utter Devotion, rotating slowly with his head thrown back and pointed to the surface. His face remained calm and beatific as his muscles cracked with the effort. *Style . . . show no strain!* Yet, despite being well into breeding age, he was still alone, but he thought often of a miraculous someone to whom he could give his life and transform his world. Other times, he sulked in the belief that there was no one, would never be anyone, and wondered why he bothered to do anything. As the Crystal Palace of the Kaochang came into view, glittering against the blue-black of the deep sea, he thought again of the same uninspiring females that would arouse neither his attention nor his glands. He twinged within his dignity-shrouded loneliness.

Today, he made a quiet entrance between two of the rear spires and cringed to hear, once again, the self-righteous, grinding tones of Yün-t'ung, Nurturer of the Young, assailing the Council. She was going on about more help for the dragonettes' educations. *Little fools, get everything done for them. No wonder they could do less and less for themselves each passing day.* As he settled among the four other members of the Council on the terrace amid the circular tiers of reclining dragons, he tuned her out. Ao Rue did not share Yün-t'ung's infatuation with the young and had made himself markedly unpopular by saying so at every opportunity.

He glanced at his fellow Council members: Ao Kuang, visibly dozing, occasionally snapping awake and trying to look interested; Ao Ch'in, senile, preening her fading bronze scales with her tail and foolishly ogling every male in the place; Ao Jun, fascinated with everything and knowing nothing, nodding at Yün-t'ung's every other word; and Ao Shun, mumbling to himself as he stuffed his mind with yet another set of eternal minutes. *The ruling class!* Ao Rue thought contemptuously. *Has there ever in history been a better case for the decadence of bureaucratic rule?*

The Council gone from his mind as quickly as it came, Ao Rue scanned the audience. He was careful to avoid any eye contact with Chih-nil. He wanted to signal

Feng-po, just about the only one he could call friend, but as usual he was trying to wrap his tail around yet another female. Feng-po was living proof that there were rare dragons who mated more than once. This time it was Ch'ang-o, Child of the Moon, stunning in her glowing white scales and lace wings. Ao Rue secretly envied Feng-po's success with the females, while continually teasing him about the numerous dragonettes that bore Feng-po's ebony blaze. In fact, when Ao Rue didn't see any, he invented them: "Ah yes, Feng-po, I saw a herd of them just awhile ago, a veritable gaggle, a swarm; they darkened the sun as they swam above me. All mentally defective, of course . . ."

Ao Rue chuckled inwardly at his own joke and lifted his claw to affirm some inane motion from Yün-t'ung that he hadn't even heard. Then, his wandering eyes froze on something ugly. Yolbas, Lei-kung, Heng-chiang, and that tail-kisser Han Chung-li had their heads together on one of the upper tiers. The water above them boiled with their whispering, and that eel Yolbas' tail quivered with excitement. As Ao Rue watched, the tight circle broke its haze of bubbles and Yolbas motioned to Ao Jun to speak.

Ao Jun was finishing the usual sonorous monotone that he thought passed for majesty, "And we all are most grateful for yet another contribution to the well-being of the young from Yün-t'ung. Her deep commitment to the future . . ." Yolbas began to bang his tail against the basalt floor. "Oh yes," said Ao Jun abruptly -- Yolbas' massive tail could get anyone's attention -- "The chair recognizes Yolbas, Slayer of Whales and Leader of the Games of Crab and Crayfish."

Yolbas rose, leaning back on his tail, flaunting the deep battle scars that marked his chest and neck. Mumbblings of praise rose from the male dragonettes. He led them in the elaborate, mental war games that sent crabs and crayfishes tearing at each other as the playing dragons forced their tiny bodies into elaborate tactics and their little minds into oblivion. Ao Rue viewed such cruelty with scorn. He thought those who saw it as a proper outlet for natural aggression confused the cure with the sickness. Death was death, even among the smallest creatures.

Yolbas paused a moment longer, obviously enjoying the adoration. He finally spoke. "Noble dragons, you know me. What you may not know is that I have been meeting in secret conclave with two of the greatest minds that our history has ever seen, and we have conceived a plan to bring dragonkind to its full fruition. All of you are familiar with and respect the works of Lei-kung, Lord of Thunder. Since almost time immemorial, we have prospered within the crystal palaces his architectural sorcery has created for us. He is a benefactor beyond reproach. So too, we have all marveled at the uncanny strategies of General Heng-chiang as he has gained us victory after victory over physical and magical foes."

Yolbas paused to allow Lei-kung and Heng-chiang to rise beside him. Heng-chiang slightly spread his brown wings to show the gold cables that stitched his old wounds together; he held his artificial gold foreleg to his chest. Phlegm rose constantly from his maimed snout. Lei-kung's small, unmarked, ecru body appeared insignificant beside the two warriors, but Ao Rue knew him to be cunning and shrewd. He was the actual source

of any intelligence that hammer-head Yolbas might speak. Han Chung-li was trying to slide his jelly-fish of a body forward, but just a slight lift in Yolbas' tail sent him cowering back. A deep rumble filled the palace as the dragons thumped their tails in praise. Ao Rue's and Feng-po's remained still. They knew Yolbas and his followers as eels and sharks, always self-serving. While Ao Rue might jokingly contend that he was the last altruist in the world, he knew better and resented the three's popularity when better dragons went unappreciated. Ao Rue believed that heroes were rarely the best, only the most obvious.

"We have already consulted with Ao Kuang, Ao Jun, and Ao Ch'in about our plan and have been assured the majority support of the Council." Ao Rue was startled. Whatever it was, there was reason he had not been consulted. He looked at his fellow councilors in surprise and was stunned to see that Ao Kuang was awake, but not that Ao Ch'in's lustful stare had become focused on Yolbas and her tail had begun to curl obscenely.

"My noble friends, what we propose is nothing less than to change the face of our world," Yolbas bellowed over the numerous speculations that had sprung up. The noise stopped. His audience again in claw, Yolbas went on. "For too long, we dragons have ruled our seas unopposed, unchallenged. We have grown lazy and soft. Too long we have wallowed in effete poetry and dead history, composing symphonies and maudlin verse, reading and not acting." The last with a pointed look at Ao Rue. "What we propose, through the wise and mighty magic of Lei-kung, is to drain the sea into the deep core of the earth and raise us and the land to the sun!"

Sound exploded from everywhere. It ricocheted in madness from spire to spire, tier to tier. No one remained quiet. Super-heated water collided in clouds and whirlpools. Ao Rue caught fragments: "New, it's good," "Yolbas . . . great," "My scales, we'll bake," "Leave?" "Challenge?" Suddenly, one sound began to dominate. It was the young males, chanting: "THE SUN, THE SUN, WE WANT THE SUN." Over and over again it echoed. Ao Rue looked to Yolbas and saw Han Chung-li happily waving his forelegs, leading the obviously rehearsed chant. In an instant, Ao Rue saw his future in the hands of a half-witted cheerleader. His head dropped in despair, only to see a more immediate horror. Kuan-ti, Teller of the Future, Ao Rue's mentor, who had been old when Ao Rue was young, was writhing, babbling incoherently: "Dee . . . demns . . . mons . . . doom . . . mons . . . death" He was drowned out by the chant, and before Ao Rue could make his way to the twisting Kuan-ti, the wildly talking dragons had closed the way.

Ao Rue took a deep breath to try to speak, to seek order, but before he could, Yolbas had seized control again. With a quick sign to Han Chung-li, Yolbas stopped the chant as if he'd bitten off its head. "My friends, there are those who would say that wings are only for mating and fighting. Not true! We can be the gods of the air! The sky will be our playground. We are not doomed to the sea. Dragons should go wherever they please. Are we not power? Are we not the greatest magic in creation? Are we not the highest of

all creatures? Our destiny is to rule the land as we have conquered the sea. We must extend our might until the stars quake."

More and more, Yolbas' words were punctuated with cries of excitement, screamed yes'es, and still Ao Rue tried to speak, thinking that no one had seen him or cared to hear, but one did. Lei-kung had remained calm. He nudged Yolbas, smiled, and nodded toward Ao Rue. Yolbas slowed; he too smiled, signaled for quiet. "Ah, my friends, in my commitment and passion, I have failed to acknowledge a venerable member of the Council of Five. My pardon, Ao Rue, please share your wisdom."

Ao Rue was taken unawares despite his urgency and could only stammer, "I, I, was not, not consulted." Small laughter scattered among the tiers. He gritted his fangs in embarrassment.

Now Lei-kung spoke. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue, our friend, we tried, oh, we tried so to find you and Ao Shun." Ao Rue sickened at the false sweetness of his paternalistic tone. "But he could do little more than dredge up old minutes, hardly relevant. Poor old Shun. We are all so concerned with what age has done to his mind. And you, you were just nowhere to be found." Han Chung-li was nodding along and hardly concealing his scorn.

Chih-nil stepped forward and smiled down at Ao Rue. "We thought you were deep within the library caverns or perhaps practicing the mating ritual again to see if you could get it right."

Hoots of scorn and roaring laughter cascaded down on Ao Rue. He coiled in on himself. Feng-po glared in anger; his eyes beginning to glow. Little Ch'ang-o was pushing her foreleg against her snout to hold her giggling. Even the pathetic Han Chung-li roared his disdain. Ao Rue shrank in shame, dropping his head, seeking only escape. He suddenly knew they'd meant him to speak. In one master stroke, Lei-kung had rendered him impotent, meaningless. Ao Rue looked briefly at Feng-po, shook his head in despair, and managed to mouth a brief "Later." He turned and crawled his way out through a small tunnel, the cries of triumph and joy flushing him out.

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It was later, when he found the courage to return to the empty palace to seek Feng-po, that Ao Rue discovered Kuan-ti's body. It was awash with the sand kicked up by many claws, carelessly abandoned amid the celebration of the new world to come. At first, Ao Rue could not believe he was dead. For a dragon to die unexpectedly, without control, was an abomination, too insane to believe. His old teacher was twisted about himself, caught in a vision of madness and terror that had snapped his bones and exploded his blue eyes. Ao Rue moved quickly to him, gathered up the fragile body, and rocked it within the cradle of his own body. He shuddered uncontrollably with grief, totally sure the base of his world had crumbled, that his cowardly retreat had left his master helpless. Yet, amid the pain that scattered his mind to chaotic grains, he suddenly realized what specter Kuan-ti had seen, what he had been trying to shout: *DEMONS, THE AZGHUN DEMONS!*