

Chapter 7
2620 words

Feng-po and Ao Rue squinted a bit against the light. As the water had continued to fall through the deep caverns, the sunlight struck deeper. Feng-po's palace had never gleamed so brightly.

"Have some more bubbly," Feng-po slung one end of the long, dark vine toward Ao Rue. As he did, he lifted the other end and crunched one of its bubbles between his teeth. Clear, sparkling liquor ran out at the corners of his mouth. Feng-po licked at it, savoring each drop. "By the Keepers of the Gates, that's good! Can't beat the old stuff you found down by the caverns."

Ao Rue was only hoping to get this first meeting with Nü-kua out of the way, appease Feng-po, and get back to his tablets with a clear head. "I don't think I'll have any more until they get here. You know how I get when I've chewed too many vines."

"Yea, you get a bit aggressive, bit forthright, little careless. That won't hurt you, you and your vaulted poise. You know you're timid around females."

"Not true."

"Of course it's true. You're an inhibited oaf." Feng-po absently flipped a few oysters up and leisurely snapped them out of the water before they could fall to the floor. *Crunch. Crunch.* He ate them so avidly that they punctuated his speech.

"I could be a real dreamweaver!" Ao Rue was getting impatient with Feng-po's teasing. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Crunch "Sure, you *Crunch* could be." Feng-po wearied at times of Ao Rue's claims of what he could be. "Why aren't you then?"

"Ninety-nine times flamed and at least twice shy, that's why!"

"Well, your most recent escapade *Crunch* with Chih-nil certainly made you look like a lummo. She had you running all over the place."

"She is beautiful."

"Sure, she is. *Crunch* Thinks she's better than anyone else too. You think they call her the 'Eternal Virgin' for nothing? Tightest tail in the sea. *Crunch*" As usual, Feng-po was right up to date on all the latest gossip. "You ought to hear what they call you! *Crunch.*"

"I'll pass. Who cares about the blitherings of dragonettes!"

It was obvious to Feng-po that Ao Rue was going to start to sulk. His silver friend called it "dignity." Feng-po wisely changed the subject; he wanted Ao Rue in a good mood when the females arrived. How else was he going to be alone with Ch'ang-o? He even concentrated enough to stop eating oysters. "I can't believe how good my palace looks in this new light."

"Enjoy it. You won't have it much longer." Ao Rue was happy to have the upper hand again and to be away from a discussion of his amorous failures. Feng-po could and would recite them all.

"What do you mean 'won't have it.' Who's going to take it away from me?" Feng-po's body began to rise with his anger and his eyes to brighten even with the thought of such an affront.

"The air will take it."

"The air?"

"Yes, the air. How do you think Lei-kung and Heng-chiang made these things. Do you think they created them out of nothing?"

"Never thought about it."

"You know how Yolbas and his super soldiers force the crayfish and crabs to fight?"

"Of course, they control their minds."

"Well, the palaces are made the same way. There are little creatures, called corals, I think, that build them."

"Little creatures built all this? Where are they?" Feng-po was obviously puzzled.

"You can't see them; they're too small. There are billions. If you listen very carefully with your mind, you can hear them. Piteous little things. Heng-chiang's got them under a self-sustaining spell to work constantly. In the beginning, they were dying too quickly; the spell ravages them. He had to add another spell so they'd constantly breed."

"Constantly breed?" Feng-po's favorite subject.

"Calm down. Even you'd be anguished if you had to twist tails constantly. Wait until the air hits the palaces. Their death cries will fill your mind, if you'd care to listen. Our precious palaces will rot. And the corals are only one of many creatures that will die to fulfill the great dragon destiny."

"They're coming!" Any serious thought left Feng-po's mind as the two females swam up into view. Ao Rue could only faintly make out their shapes as his eyes tried to adjust to the deeper blue of the sea. He picked up the vine and popped another bulb. There'll be time enough to look at them once they got inside the palace. He wasn't too excited about a tedious time with Nü-kua while Feng-po got his tail straightened.

Ch'ang-o entered first and immediately was drawn to the welcoming Feng-po. Ao Rue saw that the new light wasn't too flattering. Her white scales, which had glowed in the depths, were now garish, almost harsh. Shadows had given her highlights; now she seemed stark. She was made for a softer time. Her charm now seemed to be coquettishness. She looked old and worn. It was clear that she was completely infatuated with Feng-po. Her eyes swept his lime-green body, lingering on his brass talons and pinions, obviously enjoying the ebony streaks through his wings and the lightning-shaped ebony blaze that marked his broad chest. *Have I ever seen such blatant lust before?* Ao Rue wondered. *That's what Feng picks 'em for.*

Nothing, however, could have prepared him for Nü-kua. She entered coyly, staying partially behind Ch'ang-o. Ao Rue was so stunned he actually rose to see her better. If the new sunlight was cruel to Feng-po's paramour, then, it worshipped Nü-kua. *Feng-po had been wrong, Ao Rue thought. She's not copper; she's spun rose-gold . . . a creature of the*

sun . . . she catches all the light . . . it dances on her like gossamer. He suddenly realized Feng-po was talking to him.

"Ao Rue, what's the matter with you. Off in one of your intellectual hazes again? I'm trying to introduce you."

"My pardon" was the best Ao Rue could manage.

"Well, anyway, you know Ch'ang-o. This is her ward, Nü-kua." Nü-kua seemed to be peeking around Ch'ang-o's greater bulk.

"Hello, Ao Rue." In his ears, at least, her voice was an effervescent melody that stirred the water warm.

"Well, dragons, who can I interest in some prime bubbly that Ao Rue found down by the deep caverns?" Feng-po enjoyed playing the host.

"You go down there?" Nü-kua began, only to be interrupted by Ch'ang-o.

"Only a small one for her." Ch'ang-o's maternalism was fading into form as she moved closer to Feng-po.

"Yes, I'll have another," said Ao Rue absently. He was having a lot of trouble getting his eyes off Nü-kua.

"Well, what did everyone think of the Kaochang the other day?" Ch'ang-o didn't wait for an answer. "I thought it was splendid. What a dragon that Yolbas is! Don't you think so, my dear?" Nü-kua had no chance to speak. "I just think the pride it brings is so positive. Dragons go off by themselves far too much. We need something to bring us together."

"So true, Ch'ang-o, so true," Feng-po had managed to break in when no one else could. "You always see such things so clearly." Ch'ang-o glowed. "We must discuss it further, but I fear it will only bore Nü-kua, and we know Ao Rue could care less about politics." Feng-po was already moving Ch'ang-o toward the door. Ao Rue had no chance to release his complaint that it had nothing to do with politics. "Come, my dear, let us leave Nü-kua in the capable company of our resident scholar. I'm sure he will have much to enrich her mind." Before either Nü-kua or Ao Rue could say anything, the two lovers swept each other away.

By all the tablets, this is awkward, thought Ao Rue. *Now what do I do?*

Nü-kua saved him his embarrassment. "She can be such a squid! How could you have enjoyed the Kaochang after what they did to you!" Ao Rue was surprised by her vehemence. "No wonder a shadow crossed your eyes when she brought it up. She's as tactful as a tentacle."

"You noticed me?"

"Of course, I noticed. Your pain was obvious."

"You're the first to ever say I was obvious. Most claim I'm opaque." Ao Rue marveled at what seemed magical insight. "Still what Lei-kung and company are preparing to do may doom us all." *Her eyes are green, green flecked with gold. The green of the tablets.* Her beauty dulled his shame and anger and made even the demons insignificant.

"You make it sound threatening, evil."

"It was; it is." Ao Rue's mind returned. "Didn't you see what happened to Kuan-ti?"

"I hardly saw anything. Ch'ang-o was so excited she practically pushed me into the parade. She's always pushing or pulling me somewhere! What happened to Kuan-ti? He's a seer, isn't he? Aren't you are very close?"

"Closer than dreams. He made me. He died, died from a vision too terrible to hold."

"Oh, Ao Rue, I'm so sorry."

"Sorrow won't save us."

"Save us from what? What did he see?"

"He saw the Azghun Demons. He saw dragon after dragon exploding into death. The death of our race."

"Die? All dragons die? You scare me, Ao Rue."

He suddenly felt ashamed. "Oh, Nü-kua, forgive me. This is no talk for you." *You who are so soft, so tender.*

"But if there's such terror, such agony, in what's going to happen, we, you, should do something. Ao Rue, why don't you go talk to Yolbas. Certainly, he's a fine leader and thinks only of the greater glories of Dragonkind. I know Lei-kung is a bottom feeder. What he did to you at the Kaochang (Ao Rue dulled in shame) proved that, as if there was ever any doubt! But Yolbas will listen to reason; the young dragonettes worship him. Everyone thinks he's so wonderfully forceful and right! He'd be glad to have the fruits of your learning and wisdom. Feng-po and Chang-o have told me so much about how smart you are."

"Nü-kua, Feng-po exaggerates, and I fear you don't see all that's going on here." *By the Spirits of the Four Immortals, she's astonishingly naive, thought Ao Rue. But sweet as an oyster, and generous. Can it be that everyone believes this horror so easily, so deeply? Go easy; she's lovely. She makes me ache to be myself. Don't be stupid. Go softly!* "Nü-kua, I don't think you quite understand. Yolbas is nothing more than a loud voice, charisma from snout to tail tip, but his noise far exceeds his brain. He's Lei-kung's tool. Lei-kung tells him what to say, winds him up, wheels him out, and reaps the benefits. That snout-leaker Heng-chiang does most of the real work, all the day-to-day sorcery. Han Chung-li scrubs them all under the tails" -- *Argh, I've embarrassed her.* He went on quickly, trying to slide over his crudity, "By himself, Yolbas is capable of little more than loud, if occasionally dangerous, ruckuses."

"No, that can't be right. How can so many be wrong?"

"It's the fallacy of numbers."

"What's that?"

Ao Rue warmed to the task of being impressive. "The fallacy of numbers means that just because the count is high doesn't mean that something's true. In fact, if you see a lot of dragons doing something, it's a good idea to be very cautious."

"Feng-po did say you were something of a elitist."

"He probably said I was a snob or conceited. That would be more like him."

"Actually, it was more like that."

"Oh, he has a good heart beneath all that tail thumping." They both smiled.

"I really do wish you'd go see them. At least talk to Yolbas," Nü-kua became serious again. "After all, what could they have to gain?"

"I don't know, but you can be sure it's not for the betterment of all."

"You're not afraid of them?"

Ao Rue tried to crawl inside himself. "If you want me to . . ."

"Are you sure you're not afraid?" Nü-kua pressed her insight.

"Yes and no. Fear is healthy as long as it doesn't take control. Despite our power, many a dragon has prospered from warning. That's from the Emerald Tablets."

"I can read a little. Perhaps one day I could see the tablets?"

"They're there for anyone to see."

"I'd be afraid; there are terrible things down there, voices."

"Now who's giving serious warning? You needn't worry. I'll protect you." Ao Rue enjoyed that thought a lot.

"I guess even a cliché has value."

"Little in the tablets are clichés. They hold the greatest wisdom of our race. I could show them to you; I wouldn't let anything hurt you."

"I'd like that. I don't expect you're going to be at the gathering to finish the project? Chang-o says it will be a lot of fun. She says every dragon in the vast sea will join in to summon the power of the Northern Lights, but now I'm frightened. I don't want to go. I wish I could avoid going," Nü-kua appealed.

"That kaochang may be the bane of us all. Perhaps, we could take the time to get to know each other better. I'm not much for these group things myself. They make me feel normal."

"What's wrong with being normal?" Nü-kua seemed miffed.

"Well, no one ever did anything worthwhile by being like everyone else."

"You are an elitist!"

"I'm trying to be special."

"Look, Feng-po and Ch'ang-o are coming back." For once, Ao Rue wished Feng-po's legendary staying powers were even greater. The time had flashed by like a dolphin. *She's become so close so fast! She makes it all so easy!*

"Well, did you two get along?" Ch'ang-o quickly resumed her maternal duties.

"Oh yes, Ao Rue's going to show me the tablets tomorrow." Ao Rue was inordinately pleased with Nü-kua's quick decision.

"But you'll miss the gathering. I don't think you going off like that is a very good idea," said Ch'ang-o. Feng-po leered secretly at Ao Rue, who tried to ignore him.

"So? Anyone can herd along like a school of dumb fish. Ao Rue and I are going to do something different. I'm going to help him read the tablets." Ao Rue rolled his eyes at her presumption but found himself feeling very good about himself.

"Well, we'll discuss it later." Ch'ang-o was clearly disturbed that her once-worshipful ward was going off on her own. "Now, we must go. Come on Nü-kua; I find myself much interested in a nap. Must have my beauty sleep, you know." She looked longingly at Feng-po.

"Must we go," Nü-kua said as she looked at Ao Rue. He found himself squaring his wings and pulling in his abdomen under her gaze.

"Yes, yes, I must rest for the gathering. They'll need everyone's magic at its best," the last with a slight look of scorn at Ao Rue. Ch'ang-o didn't like dragons being different. It unnerved her. "Feng-po, you'll be by early?"

"If you wish," said Feng-po, bowing and playing the gallant.

"Come along, Nü-kua."

"If we must. I'll see you tomorrow, Ao Rue," Nü-kua managed to get out as Ch'ang-o dragged her away.

The two males were quiet as they vanished into the distance.

Feng-po broke their silence. "Well, well, well, into a little tail twisting of your own."

"What?" Ao Rue pulled his gaze from Nü-kua's golden trail.

"I said that you're going to lure that poor child down into your learned lair."

"It's nothing like that; she's lovely."

"We'll see. You've got a look in your eye I haven't seen in some time."

"It's nothing like that, like nothing before." Ao Rue was so sure this time.