

Chapter 8
2490 words

Feng-po and Ch'ang-o swam slowly toward what Yolbas had promised far and wide would be the majestic step toward dragonkind's ultimate future. Feng-po wanted to be somewhere else; anywhere he could nap. "How is it, Ch'ang-o, that sex is so good for females and so exhausting for males?" She giggled as she made lazy spirals around him while they made their way through the vines that leaned toward the draining water. They lifted up to let the occasional schools of tuna pass beneath their talons. Obviously, he wasn't going to get any answer from her. She was simply too pleased with herself to do more than bask in their company. In fact, she obviously and continually turned her belly toward him and made small caresses with her tail. Her blantant love made him uneasy. *What if someone saw them?* Feng-po never had quite understood what it was that transported dragons in love. Ao Rue said it was because he was too vain. Feng-po did wonder sometimes if he wasn't missing something and thought about the mental intimacy his friend had mentioned. He blotted those feelings out by remembering what a slobbering seal Ao Rue had made of himself in the past. That last episode with Chih-nil

"Feng-po! Feng-po!" He suddenly realized that Ch'ang-o was talking to him.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I was thinking of our coming responsibility at the Kaochang."

"I'm worried about Nü-kua. Are you sure she's going to be all right with Ao Rue. I wish I'd talked to her before she'd left. It's not like her to go swimming off without me and without saying anything. Before she talked to him, she seemed so committed to Yolbas' call for unity."

"I'm sure she's safe. No one is safer than a friend of Ao Rue's. You should see his magic! Soon, she'll be off whale and male hunting? She isn't a dragonette anymore, you know."

"Oh no, not her, never that. She doesn't approve. She says whales are too gentle, too smart to kill. That's why she never got interested in Erh-lang, Yolbas' friend. He certainly is fascinated with her. He'd come back from one of those hunts, a whale in his talons for her, and she'd hide. Said it made her sick. If anything, she'd rather listen to the whales sing."

"That sounds like something Ao Rue would say and do. He was always going on about not eating or killing things that are probably smarter than we are. He's crazy about porpoises and whales."

"Nothing is smarter than a dragon! How could Ao Rue believe any such idea. I thought you told me he was so intelligent." Ch'ang-o was indignant.

"You never can tell when Ao Rue's just saying something for effect, but he has taken a lot of the thrill out of the hunts for me."

"That just goes to show you what too much thinking can do. Ao Rue's too smug, too arrogant. He acts like he's the last noble beast among a tribe of stupid scavengers!"

"I wouldn't say that." Feng-po reluctantly rose to his friend's defense, but before he could say more, General Heng-chiang's enormous castle came into view, and Ch'ang-o's mind had skipped to another topic, both Ao Rue and Nü-kua forgotten.

"Oh look, look at all the dragons." The crystal walls of the palace were a kaleidoscope of shifting colors as it filled. Still more dragons were coming. They were like jewels on invisible filaments being pulled down into the palace. Feng-po had never seen so many gathered in one place.

"Oh, this is so wonderful," Ch'ang-o bubbled. Feng-po half wondered how Ch'ang-o could criticize anyone's thinking. About the only time she could concentrate on one thing was when he was sliding his tendrils up and down her tail. And although he had to admit that the strings of dragons were an amazing sight, he was angry how quickly Ch'ang-o was distracted and had stopped caressing him. "Hurry Feng-po so we can get a place. You're so slow, even after lying around all day." She giggled again. He had to move quickly to keep up with her as she took the lure of dragon destiny and joined one of the descending strings.

Once they were inside, any discomfort Feng-po might have felt with the solemnity of the moment quickly vanished. It was just another party! Many of the dragons had brought wine vines and snacks that were freely passed around. Both he and Ch'ang-o were immediately involved in numerous conversations, not too surprisingly invariably with the opposite sex. It seemed everyone would be content to just suck vines and talk, but their attention was soon caught by the rising, guttural chant of the male dragonettes. "YOLBAS, YOLBAS, YOLBAS, YOLBAS." Yolbas, followed by his retinue, had come out onto the central terrace and was standing with his wings and claws raised. Turning, so all could see him, he acknowledged the tribute. No one seemed to notice that the Council of Five was missing.

"Look, look, Feng-po, how seriously Lei-kung and Chih-nil are talking. It must be about some critical part of the great spell."

Chih-nil was very impassioned: "What do you mean our scales will fall off! My beautiful scales! I'm not going up there. This is crazy."

"Calm yourself, fool. Do you want someone to hear you. You'll ruin everything." Lei-kung was beyond tact; he was too tense to care.

"If you think I'm going to run around naked, like some slick-skinned squid, you're mad! I didn't bargain for being ugly. I'm not going to be ugly! A life of scratching and shedding. Do I look like a crab, dumping husks all over the place!"

"Will you shut up. Let's get this done. We can worry about cosmetics later. Our biggest worry right now is if shark chum can remember the speech."

As if Lei-kung's insult was a cue, Han Chung-li signaled silence to the dragonettes who had begun to bounce up and down in their mindless enthusiasm. Yolbas' majestic voice filled the palace, stilling even Chih-nil's near hysterical complaint.

"Fellow dragons! My friends! Are you ready?"

A scattered "Yes" moved among the encircling dragons.

Yolbas turned to face another part of his audience. "Are You Ready."

"YES," louder this time.

He turned again. "I said 'Are You Ready.'"

"YES," and the walls thundered.

Even Lei-kung had to marvel how quickly Yolbas reeled the dragons in. His voice softened and the silence grew intense. "Today, this stunning morning, we gather in solemn conclave to fulfill our manifest destiny. Look, even now mother sun calls to our wings and hearts." He gestured upward. Every head turned to see the setting sun shining brighter than at any dusk before. The Dancing Northern Lights of Power had begun to shimmer behind it like an undulating curtain; sparks exploded sharply within their folds. The merest dragonette could sense its rising, pulsating power. Like flitting electric eels, dragon eyes began to brighten around the tiers. "Can you feel it? Can you feel the power?"

"YES" thundered again.

"Is it our power?"

"YES!"

"Is it our power to take?"

"YES!"

"Can anyone deny us our birthright?"

"NO!"

Yolbas' body began to gleam from the reflected light of so many aroused dragons. "Easy, easy, my friends, soon it will be time; save your noble magic." The sorcerous glare ebbed, but it was on a tight leader. "Soon, we will be kings and queens of the air. Our great wings will no longer be hindered by the weight of the water. Our matings will move with a grace never before achieved." Now Yolbas had even Feng-po's undivided attention. Tails thumped everywhere. "Imagine our freedom! We will soar with the wind, dance among the stars. The planets will bow in their paths to our greatness. No longer need we weary ourselves chasing mere fish. The universe will fall to our pinions. We will catch the Great Northern Lights in our wings. We will shatter moons with our fangs; melt mountains with our fire." Mutterings rose with his mention of fire. "Yes, fire. The true dragon fire that is at our core. Our bondage in the sea has made us forget. Are we to blow bubbles to the end of our days. Well, are we?"

"NO!"

"Finally we can spit the fowl oceans from our mouths! We will melt stone! We will flame our names across the very center of the cosmos. Can we do it!"

"YES!"

"Will we do it!"

"YES!"

"Han Chung-li and our great General, Heng-chiang, have begun it for us. Now Lei-kung will give of himself to focus our power. My friends, hearts of my heart, he will call upon you now. Will you hold anything back?"

"NO!"

"Will you give him your all?"

"YES!"

"Call upon the Lights. Center it on Lei-kung. Do you accept him as the vessel of your destiny?"

"YES!"

"DO YOU?"

"YES!"

The entire palace burned like its own sun with the light of the dragons' eyes. Lei-kung shuffled forward. His head almost buried beneath his wings in concentration. His ecru hide had turned almost gold beneath the spinning eyes of the multitude. Slowly he rose. His body stretched. It elongated until his entire length was suspended. Only the tip of his tail touched the sand. He closed his eyes, threw his head back. His wings extended fully until he was like a huge net.

"Now, dragons, now! Take from the Lights and give to Lei-kung! Give to Lei-kung!"

Slowly the water came to dark life. Waves of blackness began to descend from the surface. Currents, never felt before, thrashed the deep sea. Dark lightning struck down from the Lights. Lei-kung became radiant with an emptiness, a void that mocked light. The dark energy struck his wings. He began to rotate. His eyes remained closed. He was doing no magic. He was a receptacle. He harvested; he sucked away at his fellows. The dragons drew the Lights over the setting sun like a shroud. As the magic grew, Lei-kung spun faster and faster. Vast alien energies tore through the dragons. Many screamed. Pillars shattered as bodies whipped in ecstasy. Yün-t'ung, Nurturer of the Young, rended three dragonettes that had curled by her for security. Lei-kung was spinning so fast that he was a sphere of basalt, a black pearl of evil. More and more dragons collapsed under the strain. Still he spun; still he reaped. The Lights had pierced the water like great knives of blinding silt. Feng-po threw Ch'ang-o from him and tried to break free from the draining power. He cried dread at the darkness. He screamed until he thought his bones would break. Power kept ripping through him, giving nothing, taking everything. He could not break free. Just when he thought he would be ripped apart, blessed unconsciousness came.

Feng-po awoke in time to see Lei-kung gracefully snake down until his rear talons touched the sand. Feng-po's head swayed, a weight too great for his body. Dragons passed before his aching eyes. Everyone was duller. They all looked like they had been dragged through soot. Some were retching. They looked like they were collapsing into themselves. Many were still; some were dead. Others were surrounded by the haze of their own blood. Feng-po and Ch'ang-o looked at each other with indifference. Yün-t'ung absently walked over her tiny charges. The dragons who could move just wandered off. The Great Summoning had dissolved into a fatigue so great, so puzzling, that no one knew or cared who they were. Having freely given, many wondered why. Having been given something, many regretted having opened themselves. Feng-po sought an exit, never thinking where he might go.

Yolbas hadn't lost consciousness although he wished he had. He dragged himself up, looked at Lei-kung, only to wish he hadn't. Revulsion and fear filled him. He felt like his soul had turned to bile. He cowered from Lei-kung's power. The little sorcerer was still the same ordinary color, but his eyes had become dead-black stone. They were lusterless, like twin pits. Yolbas wanted nothing of what those eyes promised. If Yolbas had looked carefully, if he could have endured it, he might have seen that every so often a ripples of dark and yellow lights flashed across Lei-kung's eyes. He'd draw the Northern Lights into his skull.

"Well, Yolbas, as soon as you can get your carcass operating again, you'll need to get some spirit back into them. But that won't be for awhile. First, let them adjust to the greatness of the new order. You will do that, won't you?"

Yolbas could only moan, but he knew that from this moment forward the only choices he'd have again would be about things Lei-kung didn't care about.

"For now, we need to start planning for the exodus." Lei-kung was filled with vitality and confidence. He glanced over at Han Chung-li, Heng-chiang, and Chih-nil and gestured. The three snapped awake. "All of you, listen!" His voice was a whip. "Han Chung-li, get out there among the dragonettes. Get 'em fired up again. Heng-chiang, get that carrion spell working; there will be a lot of dead fish up there. We'll want the black vultures, roaches, scorpions, fleas, and golden eagles cleaning up as soon as possible. It will be enough of a mess as it is. Yolbas, what's the mindless acrobat's name? You know, your athletic friend."

Yolbas managed to grind out "Erh-lang."

"Oh yes, Erh-lang, the Bane of Demons. That's what his name means, you know." Lei-kung chuckled mockingly. Yolbas could do nothing more than nod. "I want him in the air turning cartwheels as soon as possible. We want everyone's eyes watching him, not looking at the clay and sand, especially with it littered with rotting flesh."

Even in her exhaustion, Chih-nil was still most concerned with her beauty, "Is anyone going to tell me what we are going to do when my scales start falling off?"

Lei-kung looked sharply at her; she shrank back. "Yes, yes, we must preserve our little temptress, mustn't we. I will have use for your beauty for awhile more. The General seems immune. All we have to do is figure out why. You will continue to work on that, won't you, General?" Not even Heng-chiang could stand before Lei-kung. The master of a thousand campaigns, the one dragon whose courage no one had ever questioned, he who was savage beyond imagining, could mutter nothing more than a servile "of course."

"And now, Chih-nil, we will begin to teach you your new, special duties. Come with me!" She rose and followed obediently. She suddenly wished she already had fire, cleansing fire. His look made her feel filthy.

Just before Lei-kung left with Chih-nil in thrall, he turned and asked his slaves, "Did anyone see Ao Rue?" All of them shook their snouts no. Lei-kung paused; his control halted for a moment. "That's not good," he muttered to himself.