

Chapter 9  
3505 words

"I never would have gotten away if Ch'ang-o and Feng-po hadn't been asleep. They must have spent the whole night fawning all over each other. I knew if we had talked she'd have forbidden me to come. I doubt they'll have too much energy left for the Great Spell of Terraforming." Ao Rue was a little shocked by Nü-kua's awareness of her guardian's lustiness. "I swear she spends most of her time telling me what I can't do. 'No, Nü-kua, that wouldn't be seemly.' 'No, Nü-kua, you shouldn't go there alone.' 'No, Nü-kua, that's too dangerous.' You'd think I just crawled out of the egg! I swear she'll never see me as anything other than an irresponsible dragonette! All the way home last night, she kept asking me why I wanted to see a bunch of rotting tablets. I tried to explain that you said it would probably be my last chance. She just couldn't understand why you take them so seriously."

Ao Rue had been spending most of the time they had been riding the draining currents down to the deep caverns admiring her, listening, and occasionally showing off by executing various maneuvers. He didn't think Nü-kua noticed. He was trying very hard to be dignified and not to frolic. She was certainly different today from the shy, demure ward of Feng-po's little party. He did a loop to swim backwards in front of her and said, "I'm sure Ch'ang-o wants the best for you." Actually he was delighted Nü-kua had escaped. He was enjoying her company more than he had anything in a long time. "She's just playing the parent. Kuan-ti treated me like an empty-headed child. Of course, compared to him, I was. Ch'ang-o just takes her guardianship very seriously. Maternalism and paternalism go hand in hand with freezing us at certain ages. Even if we were in our dotage, they'd still see us as little more than dragonettes."

"Well, I'm not a dragonette anymore!"

"No, you certainly aren't." Ao Rue was taking deep pleasure in admiring her body. She was no dragonette. She swelled with her adulthood. Her body was taut, athletic. She moved with an unpretentious grace. He thought she must have been blessed by some benevolent spirit at birth. He noticed now that she wasn't a uniform rose-gold. She was patterned in small spots, especially on her snout, sort of like freckles. *They were freckles. By the Seven Sleepers, the sun is good to her! The water sings as she moves!* The new sun, brightening as the water lowered, bleached Ch'ang-o, but it lit Nü-kua. She shimmered in his eyes, trembled at his heart.

"Was Kuan-ti really smarter than you are?"

Ao Rue started out of his rhapsody and laughed. "Oh yes, I don't think there's been a better scholar since the ancients. He'd been studying for many of my lifetimes. I don't think I ever would have caught him. He was always learning something new. He called himself 'the Eternal Student,' and that's what he was. Whenever I said that he made me feel dumb, he'd say that it was a good state of mind. He kept reminding me how dangerous it was to feel smart."

"What's wrong with feeling smart?"

"It stops learning."

Nü-kua paused to consider that. "I think he was right. I guess it's good to feel dumb, if uncomfortable. Then you keep working, and you don't surrender to stupidity. I think that's what Ch'ang-o has done."

Ao Rue was a bit surprised by her insight. *Bright as well as beautiful*. "You mean Ch'ang-o's an anti-intellectual?"

"Does a conch live in a shell? Has a squid got ten tentacles? Are oysters tasty?"

"That bad."

"I don't think Ch'ang-o has managed to string two coherent thoughts together in her entire life. She thinks reasoning is free association."

Ao Rue was surprised to find Nü-kua so vehement. "Well, that doesn't make her that unusual."

"True; most of the dragons I've met haven't escaped the 'me, me, mine, mine' of their infancies."

"I wish you weren't right, but you probably are." Ao Rue tended toward being too forgiving despite what he knew to be true. "It makes them all victims."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you don't understand something, you're at the mercy of it. I fear that's what's happening at the terraforming today."

"Ch'ang-o would tell me that was trust."

"Blind faith is a better description."

"Maybe, but I am a little uncomfortable about missing today's Kaochang. Everyone seemed so committed and enthusiastic. I think it's the first time I haven't been with Ch'ang-o or my friends."

"Ao Rue's law: if a lot of dragons are doing something, at least be skeptical. No one ever did anything worthwhile by being like everyone else. Look at egg laying. Everyone makes such a big fuss about it. Yet it's the commonest thing there is. All organisms reproduce. That's not what makes dragons special. Thinking is supposed to. Besides, I think you'd be a whole lot more uncomfortable if you were there. There's something very disquieting about the terraforming and using the Northern Lights. It's not natural. We have our own magic. Drawing upon those Lights will probably disturb the balance of things. Lei-kung will maim the order."

"What makes you believe that?" Nü-kua was having trouble accepting Ao Rue's radical views, especially his comments about eggs. He was saying odd things and challenging ideas she'd never thought to question. After all, the fulfillment of all females is giving birth; everyone said that.

"It's in the oldest of the tablets. I can't show you those. I sealed them in with Kuan-ti. Not even he could translate all of them, but he thought there were dire prohibitions about the use of the Lights' power. Those are the tablets that relate the story of the Azghun Demons and the dragons' retreat from the land. There's also reference to a great horror, called the Dragons' Bane. He was never sure whether it was the Lights or the Demons."

"Perhaps it was both."

"Could be. Kuan-ti said that he never found anything else in the Tablets that was so surrounded by such dreadful warnings. He kept saying that one of the prices that dragons paid for the sea's security was that they've forgotten what fear is. But enough talk of fear and horror between us. We're getting to the caverns, and I have wonderful things to show you and tell you about." Ao Rue was grateful they'd reached the Cavern of Literature. He was starting to feel preachy, and he certainly didn't want to bore her.

After they'd gotten settled in the newly flooded cavern, Nü-kua had done nothing but wait and wait some more. Sitting in the half light, all Ao Rue had done was hang his head and pick flakes off the tablets with his talons. She was getting irritated. She wasn't used to being ignored. *Is he just going to sit, forever flipping shards to the floor, cutting scars into the black stains that ate the tablets? Erh-lang always gave me his complete attention, and he was an great athlete, even with his filthy whale-hunting habit. Everyone admired Erh-lang.* That thought also reminded her that everyone thought Ao Rue more than a little weird. She was beginning to think that ignoring Ch'ang-o's obvious disapproval of him had been a big mistake. She hadn't expected to spend the day twiddling her talons in some dark hole. She decided she'd had enough: "Ao Rue, AO RUE," she had to yell before he turned his head.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Nü-kua." She took a step backward; she had never seen such grief. His eyes were scarred with it. His body was humped beneath it. "They're dissolving, like bird droppings hitting the water. They're disappearing, rotting. Look at them."

"But they're emerald. Water can't hurt them?"

"Who knows what they're made of. All of Kuan-ti's work, silt, scum, green sand."

"But won't the water drain through and leave them dry? They'll be in the air again. Some of them could be saved." Nü-kua was desperately trying to comfort him. His pain made her uncomfortable. It embarrassed her.

"Never. These are the lowest spots. They'll turn into salt marshes, brackish puddles of death, stone white. Nothing will grow around them or in them. No creatures will ever come to drink; none will breed near their shores. As the sun beats on the water, it'll just become more and more salt, more and more barren. The glory of dragonkind turned into death soup!"

"How could the ancients have been so stupid!" Nü-kua used her anger to cover how ill at ease she'd become. "I thought you said they were so smart, so clever!"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a punishment? A curse? Perhaps they thought if we were foolish enough to leave the sea, that we didn't deserve a past, that we didn't merit knowledge. Certainly we've forgotten far too much, too much. We've become so powerful that we've actively denied knowledge. So many dragons don't know anything and are proud not to -- militantly ignorant! So stupid! So ignorant! Chase whales, kill dolphins for sport, barbarians, barbarians . . ."

As Ao Rue's voice trailed off into grief, Nü-kua saw herself being neglected again. She couldn't stand being ignored. She called him back. There was more cunning in this

little dragon than anyone realized. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue," she softly touched his wing, their first contact. "What's written on these tablets?"

"These? These are stories, wonderful stories: poems, epics, tales of love, heroes, greatness." He reached out and caressed the crumbling tablets as if they were the tenderest of females. Nü-kua was irritated that he hadn't even noticed she'd touched him. "These are the distillations of dragon imagination. They are our greatest flowers, our most bountiful fruits, our greatest eggs."

"Stories." *Stories, is that all*, Nü-kua thought to herself. "How can stories be so important. They're not real. Ch'ang-o always says they addle the brain. They turn dragons into silly dreamers who don't know what's going on, who have no common sense!" She was smart enough not to say that Ch'ang-o had said that about Ao Rue.

"Nü-kua, I thought we'd decided that Ch'ang-o doesn't know her own tail from a moray eel. Common sense isn't the goal. Uncommon sense is." Nü-kua didn't care what he said about Ch'ang-o; she was smugly pleased she had his undivided attention again. "I bet Ch'ang-o says things like 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'"

"She does say that." Nü-kua wondered how he knew.

"Next time she says that you might suggest that some eyes are better than others. No, don't say that. It will only get you in trouble. She'll think you're trying to be a smart tail. What I'm trying to say is that she and others like her just don't know enough to talk."

"Well, stories are just make-believe, made-up stuff! Aren't they?" Nü-kua wasn't happy about losing this one, but she was beginning to feel reassured, superior, in control again.

"Yes, yes, in a way they are. But they're more than that. Make-believe is the bedrock of our lives. Dragons are off today changing the face of a planet. Their belief makes them think they're supreme. They're so full of their particular make-believe that they think they're subject to nothing but themselves, free to claw over anything they like."

"Well, we are special; Yolbas says we are!"

"We could be. But it takes a lot of work to be special, to be unique. It's not genetic. How would we know if we were anyway? And I wouldn't put too much faith in Yolbas; I think he swims at the end of Lei-kung's line. Besides, everything's perfect, special, until something better arises or until something terrible happens. We just don't really know, not in the same way we know that dead fish float to the surface, that sand under our scales is a pain in the tail. Dragon's teeth! Some of us don't even believe whales sing and compose. We hunt and butcher them and leave the carcasses to float. Most of us can't read and write; those who can, don't. Barbarians! We're too busy in our own complacent visions of the world. Are they real? No way! Even if we were all-powerful, that doesn't mean we can rend anything weaker or smaller! We aren't automatically smart, naturally worthy of respect."

"All right, if make-believe is so ugly, what makes these tablets so important?"

"It's not that some of them aren't dark, filled with fear and terror. Ah, but others, they're another kind of fantasy. The dark side of our minds makes us ugly; the bright side

makes us noble. We are both. The dark is here for us to understand ourselves, the bright to glory in ourselves. These tablets are great visions, the magic words of our nature. Bright, dark, the tablets are filled with art and grace, the essence of the dragonheart brought to its finest moments. The history of our souls is stacked here, captured with skill and talent, pain and passion. These are the visions of the magic makers, the spellbinders, the star trippers, the poets, the singers. Once read, once heard, they haunt, dreams in the mist. Their echoes shape our minds and our lives. They live in my grief for Kuan-ti, for dragonkind's foolishness, in my joy as the beauty of you falls upon my eyes. There's a special one, a young refrain by a great poet; it's echoed in my mind since this terraforming madness started. I wish I could recite it for you. Kuan-ti would beat me silly if he knew I couldn't remember it word for word." His voice grew soft. "It's about a call to a lonely dragonette. It promises a better place than this weeping world, a haven for the tempest tossed, the alienated, the misunderstood and wounded. It's always been one of my favorites. I always liked to think it had been written just for me."

"Ao Rue, you can't swim away from the world."

"Swim away!" Ao Rue's head snapped around, his eyes spinning cobalt anger. "How can you be so shallow! I will not be mocked again!" Nü-kua took a quick step back, turned to flee; he was instantly ashamed. "Please, please, Nü-kua, don't go." He reached out and took her claw. She had never had a male get angry with her. They were usually too busy trying to ingratiate themselves, trying to wrap their tails around her, something she'd never allowed any of them. She suddenly felt vulnerable to this great male who moments before had been so easy to manipulate. They stayed, talon in talon, for a time: he feeling his anger drain into a weak calm, she feeling soft and secure as she realized that, perhaps, she alone was safe from his great fury. When they both realized how long they had been touching, the claws slipped apart, but intimacy remained.

She spoke first. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean you were a coward. It's just that facing things seems best."

"It's all right. I'm just too quick these days. The once-familiar sea is suddenly filled with wrongness, polluted with evil. Everywhere I swim, there are stupid misconceptions, twisted half truths. Besides, Nü-kua, there are no brave heroes anymore. How can there be when no one knows what's good or worthy, when selfishness is admirable and self-sacrifice silly. Heroes must give themselves. They can't exist when no one wants what they offer. I fear we will see no more heroes in our time."

"I think you could be a hero, Ao Rue, if you wanted to."

He looked at her and started to laugh, but he was frozen by her green eyes, by her glowing innocence and faith. He suddenly knew how lesser creatures felt beneath a dragon's hypnotic gaze. He didn't mind being mesmerized at all. "Nü-kua," his voice had grown husky and soft, "no one is ever a hero for himself. It has to be for someone else."

"Would you be a hero for me?" They both chuckled at her obvious flirtatiousness, comfortable together. "Will you be a hero when I call?"

"Ah, fair maiden," he mirroring her teasing, "for you, I will be the greatest hero this tired planet has ever seen. When you call, I will bring the lightning to your rescue. I will gladly sacrifice my all to your beauty." They both laughed and began to move out of the cavern, but as they did, a strange and wondrous something took shape within Ao Rue. A fantasy formed, was fired and tempered. It became inviolate, indestructible. As he looked at her again, a vow was in him. It would stand against all else, beyond all pain and all terror, beyond the limits of time, forever more than himself, ever and always hers.

"Could I see where you and Feng-po put Kuan-ti? I've heard so much about him."  
"Sure, it's not far. Just a little deeper." As she moved toward the tomb, he gazed at her from a place he didn't quite understand. He marveled at how she moved like dancing gold threads, so supple, so sensual.

"You did this?" She was clearly amazed at the glass-smooth basalt. She touched the deep-cut verse very tentatively.

"I guess so."

"And wrote this?"

"It's not a very good poem, Nü-kua."

"It's a great poem. Your heart speaks in it. Kuan-ti would be very pleased."

Just as Ao Rue was about to say something, his head snapped up; his eyes blazed.  
"WHAT, WHAT, DO YOU FEEL THAT?"

"Feel what, Ao Rue? What is it? What's wrong. I don't feel anything."

"DRAGONS IN PAIN; DRAGONS DYING. AGONY, HORROR! CAN'T YOU SENSE IT?" His head thrashed the water as he frantically tried to look everywhere at once.

"Look, Ao Rue, look! What in eternity's name is that?"

He looked where she pointed. Rolling toward them from the Kaochang were great, oily clouds of darkness. They were held together by webs of flaccid strikes and globs of moiling, putrid yellow. All Ao Rue could think of was broken teeth biting into rotten fruit. Blackness bulged from the yellow webs. It was grainy, sliding, barely under control. Most of all, it was greedy. Fear struck Ao Rue's heart cold. He opened his wings to flee a horror that would burst his mind and rot his flesh. He knew absolutely that his soul alone would survive the foul bondage that the yellow offal offered.

As he gathered the water in his wings for his mad rush away, Nü-kua's call cut like pure truth through his terror. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue, Ao Rue, Ao Rue," over and over again. His fear vanished as quickly as it had come. Calmly, he turned to face the bane that would soon boil over them. She was helpless, paralyzed. She felt him gather her within one great wing, felt the power that vibrated within him. He easily moved them until the tomb was at his back. She sensed, rather than heard, the words that he threw out against the foulness that wanted them. She could see the blaze of his eyes through the membrane of his wing, saw it play like glowing puppets against the dead darkness. Suddenly, all she could see was a warm azure glow. Peace descended upon her, a calm beyond understanding. Slowing, she brought her head out of the curve of his wing, sliding her cheek against his

snout, only to snap it back in. They were enclosed in a glowing nimbus the color of his eyes. Slime, clinging silt, crawled over it and slid away from the surface. Yellow fangs tried to rip away the nimbus. The mindless web hungered for them. Oddly, Nü-kua felt no fear. She felt the heat of Ao Rue's silver scales, smelled his strength as he mocked evil in her name. She coiled closer into him and wrapped her tail around his. She could have stayed welded to the curve of Ao Rue's strength for all eternity.

"It's over; you can come out. We're safe, though I dread to think what that did to everyone else." Actually, the cloud had passed some time before. Ao Rue had been enjoying holding her, reveling in the feel of her in their own small world. He could have held her forever against anything. As he opened his wing, she stayed close. Her tail was still locked around his. He looked down and was completely taken by the adoration in her eyes. She was fully his. For an instant he understood the godhood that Lei-kung sought so mightily, at such great price. But this was giving, not taking. She would do anything for him; he all for her. He spoke and instantly regretted breaking the moment. "Thank all-that's-sacred you called to me. I was so panicked I would have left if you hadn't."

"Called? I never spoke. I was too frightened."

He looked at her in puzzlement and felt a strange and wonderful touch upon his mind.