

Chapter 10
4395 words

As he swam toward Yolbas' palace, Ao Rue was feeling odd. He felt happy but didn't really think he should, not with what had happened to Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. What he and Nü-kua had found on their return just couldn't quite overcome their meandering and very amorous trip up from the caverns last night. His creamy contentment was marred with flashes of Feng-po and Ch'ang-o twisted in clouds of their own vomit and excrement. *Is the world ever a clean place?* he wondered. *Am I ever to have a full triumph, a pure joy? Time with Nü-kua had been so sweet. After the horror of Chih-nil, I didn't believe I had the emotional courage for another female. Nü-kua has proved me wrong, so wrong. Made me feel so good to be myself.* Still that fussy little voice in the back of his head, like a cat whispering in the wind, proclaimed fear and caution. He shoved it aside, wondering where that odd, popular expression had come from. *Shark entrails! That broke it. Doubt spoils all. Now, I can't push the images of my twisted friends from my mind. Lei-kung and his terraforming had flayed Feng-po's and Ch'ang-o's guts and minds. They had been wearily twisting about themselves, snapping at their own limbs. So little noise, whimpering, grunting mostly, like they'd lost speech, turned into dumb beasts. Ch'ang-o had flung Nü-kua into the wall before I could calm her manic torment. Nü-kua made the magic come so easily. But trying to heal them, that wasn't easy even with her help.*

When Ao Rue had taken Nü-kua's tail in his own, such a mocking contrast to their earlier bondings, after he had so reluctantly used some of her power and strength, his eyes spinning until he'd thought they'd burn from his head, even then, all he could do was bring them to a life that reeked of death. Both Ch'ang-o and Feng-po had immediately begun talking as if nothing odd had occurred. Nü-kua had hugged Ao Rue. She kept saying he'd saved the pair from certain death. But he couldn't share her joy. Feng-po was babbling about building a great pyramid for the "Leaders," as he now so reverently referred to Yolbas, Lei-kung, Heng-chiang, and even that remora Han Chung-li. He went on at great lengths about the glory of labor: crazy talk about gold for beds; how he would join Luhsing, a minor functionary, now with the glorious title of Finder of Gold, rooting out the soft metal for some yet-to-be-announced major function. While scolding Nü-kua about wandering off, Ch'ang-o was babbling on about great labors and destinies. Ao Rue had been revolted: *Dragons digging in the earth like clams? Dragons serving dragons? How can they think of this as noble?* Even Nü-kua was stunned. Ao Rue realized that there was no magical poultice for what ate at Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. As he looked at the two dragons, now apparently well, if repugnantly deranged, he did not see the health Nü-kua had lauded him for creating. His eyes revealed an odd hue to their scales, as if the edges were tinged with soot, and if he squinted and strained, they seemed bound to black threads that vanished into a ugly web that stained the sea.

As thoughts of Feng-po and Ch'ang-o blanked his mind of Nü-kua, the old weariness began to cling to him again. *Will I ever be free from pain?* Thoughts of isolation, beyond the hooks of involvement, beyond the problems of the mere company of

others, rose in his mind. That he had promised Nü-kua that he'd talk to Yolbas about this unnatural terraforming and the desertion of the sea did nothing for his deteriorating mood. Now as he approached Yolbas' castle, stained dark by the sea's torment as it was dragged down into the caverns, his stomach began to curdle. He wanted to go back to the serenity of his tablets, the oblivion of Nü-kua, but a promise was a promise. He could no more turn from what Nü-kua wanted than he could murder a whale.

He found Yolbas curled about the convoluted crystal rack that most dragons choose for comfort. He was picking at his teeth with the tip of his tail. Off to his left Heng-chiang, surrounded by his usual cloud of mucus, was talking with Erh-lang. Their animated gestures cut clean lines through the cloud, lines that quickly blurred as Han Chung-li capered about with his silver sieve. They looked like characters in a fever dream, potent but vague. Like Feng-po and Ch'ang-o, their scales were tinged with that strange sooty stain that had resisted his magic. One good thing about the land; Heng-chiang's sniffing would only soil himself and the ground, not the entire atmosphere.

"Ao Rue, we missed you at the Great Terraforming." Yolbas interrupted Ao Rue's observations. "Lei-kung asked for you. It's a great day for dragonkind. Fulfilling our destiny, we are. Yes, yes, everyone's very excited. Heng-chiang is planning the Celebration of the Return right now. Never before have we embarked upon"

"Hail, Yolbas, the Tiger Prince." Ao Rue had to interrupt him quickly. He knew all too well that, if he didn't, he'd have to hear yet another empty-headed political speech. Yolbas did love to listen to himself.

"Oh, sorry, hail to Ao Rue, member of the Council of Five. Didn't mean to skip the amenities but everyone's so excited. I'm thrilled. You know we're going to live in a chorten, Lei-kung and I and the others. What's a tiger?"

Despite how long Ao Rue had known Yolbas, he was always surprised that anyone could sound so good and be so stupid. If he'd ever doubted that Lei-kung was feeding this oaf his lines, he didn't anymore. Yolbas was obviously the wrong one to talk to about this abomination, and he certainly didn't want to talk to Lei-kung. His promise to Nü-kua forced him on. "A tiger's a mammal, a hunter; it's got stripes like you."

"You mean there's something up there just like me?"

"No, no," Ao Rue held his patience. "It's much smaller than you and covered with fur. Four-legged, and it doesn't have wings. But that's beside the point." Ao Rue realized that, if he continued, he'd have to explain fur. "Yolbas, dragons are sick. I couldn't heal my friends Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. There's something deeply wrong with this terraforming. I don't think we should continue."

"I haven't felt exactly super serpentine myself, but Lei-kung says that's just the strain of such great magic. There's nothing to worry about. Can't move mountains without breaking a few eggs." Ao Rue winced at Yolbas' callousness. "We'll all feel wonderful once we're on dry land. Lei-kung's told us so much about how great flying will be. You'll love it. Let's get Erh-lang over here. You know him, wonderful fellow, great athlete. He's

been up there practicing for the Great Return. It's going to be a tail-twister of a celebration. Erh-lang, come on over here and tell Ao Rue about how great the sky is."

Erh-lang swaggered over. He had the rolling movements of someone who wanted to be sure that everyone noticed his muscles as they rippled beneath his crimson scales. He kept glancing at himself. Ao Rue doubted if anyone had ever seen Erh-lang pass a mirror without looking at himself. As he got closer, Ao Rue noticed that he was marked with smears of what looked like gold, like the rubbings Heng-chiang's artificial arm left all over his chest. Ao Rue thought to greet him too by his hereditary title, "Bane of Demons," but he wasn't quite ready to explain what a demon was to these squid heads.

"Hail, Ao Rue; it's super, just super. What a terrific feeling. Just hanging up there on a thermal, checking things out. Swooping around. I never knew wings could feel so good. Really great for the chest muscles." Erh-lang flexed to demonstrate. "Then, diving down so fast. The wind drowns out everything. I had a great time spooking herds of some four-legged things; Lei-kung says they're camels or gazelles, asses, wolves or something. Tasty by the clawful. We won't starve up there; that's for sure. Only pesky stuff up there are these funny little fuzzy things. I had to practically land on them to get them to move. Contemptuous little bastards. Threw some fire at them. Did you know our steam is fire on the land? Terrific fun. There were some small birds up there. Cooked 'em on the wing and ate 'em without losing a beat." He paused his non-stop prattle for a moment. "Where was I? Oh yea, those fuzzy things. Quick as eels. Couldn't get many of them with the fire. Just the old ones I guess. They'd duck and then jump back out again. They'd leap all over the place in the smoke. Almost as if they liked it. I don't think I'll burn anymore though. I'd swear some of them yelled at me. Silly, musta been 'rapture of the sky,' flying too high." He smiled at the cleverness of his own phrase. Ao Rue almost missed what Erh-lang said next. The mention of small furred mammals had struck a memory: an old poem in the tablets, something about a comrade, great beyond size, a warm friend. He suddenly found himself angry, irrationally protective, that Erh-lang would kill any of them.

"But let me tell you, Ao Rue; it wasn't easy at first. Oh no, it took a real dragon before we got the problems solved. You know why I've got this stuff smeared all over me?" He answered himself before Ao Rue could say anything. "It's gold, a soft, mushy metal. There's oodles of it up there. You gotta smear it all over yourself or your scales fall off. Something about being out of the water; the air dries you out. But the gold protects you. Your friend Feng-po is going to help mine it; Lu-hsing is supervising. He's got all sorts of plans -- foremen, assembly lines, delivery dragons. General Heng-chiang figured the gold thing out. We'd all be bald as fish tongues if he hadn't noticed that his chest was the only place that stayed normal. Makes up for losing that arm, doesn't it, General?" Heng-chiang glowered at the babbling youngster, mumbled in his own gravel-throated, nasal way. As usual, no one could understand him, except maybe Han Chung-li.

"And that spell. You know the one, Ao Rue, the one that changes weight, lets us breath air. I can't tell you how long it took me to memorize that. I thought Lei-kung was going to strangle me with my own tail he had to repeat it so many times. Lei-kung's

wonderful." Ao Rue was startled to see a beatific glaze come over everyone's faces at the mention of the little yellow dragon's name. His power was obviously even more than Ao Rue had suspected.

After a reverent pause, Erh-lang went on. "But he can get impatient. I thought he was going to boil me when I told him he'd have to tell me and show me. I've been too busy to learn to read those silly tablets. Mussel guts, Yolbas and Han Chung-li can't read, and look who they are."

Ao Rue tried to conceal his contempt. Holding Yolbas' and Han Chung-li's ignorance up as an ideal shocked him more than he thought he could be. And to have trouble with the metamorphosis spell? Why that used to be one of the basics taught to the youngest dragonlings. It was one of the first he'd learned. Even as he thought of it, he could feel his cells getting ready to slide easily into air breathing. It was that easy.

"But after I've sat in the shallows for an hour or so to get the spell working, then, I can leap into"

"Erh-lang, pardon my interruption, but I've come to discuss something very important."

"More important than flying? What could be more important than flying?" Han Chung-li chimed in. "I can't wait to fly. Erh-lang's going to teach me all sorts of tricks that he says the females will love."

"I know about flying. I've done it, done it off and on for years." They all seemed surprised that Ao Rue took for granted something they thought was a major effort and revelation. "We've got to talk about this terraforming and the danger of those black lights."

"By the way, Ao Rue, wasn't that Nü-kua I saw you with last night, coming up from the caverns." Ao Rue couldn't believe Erh-lang was going to change the subject. The tip of his tail began to twitch in frustration. But he did. "She's a nifty piece of tail! Isn't she, Han Chung-li?" Han Chung-li's tongue began to play over his fangs. "Wow, I'd like to get her tail wrapped around me. All I have to do is look at her and mine starts swelling. How was she, Ao Rue? I betcha she makes all sorts of great noises." Erh-lang stopped abruptly. Ao Rue's eyes had begun to glow and spin. Erh-lang suddenly realized this wasn't one of his whale-hunting cronies. He knew absolutely that all his trophies, all his fame, would do him no good in a contest with this strange silver beast. "Ah, ah, err, you were saying, Ao Rue; you were saying something about the terraforming."

Ao Rue's anger eased a bit as he remembered his purpose. He repeated again and again in his mind, *I am not an animal, I must try to save us from the land, from the Demons, I am not an animal, I will not yield to rage, I am not an animal.* Still, the idea of smashing Erh-lang's and Han Chung-li's heads together and watching their brains and blood explode into the water gave him a shiver of delight. He repeated his litany, breathed deep, and tried again. "Fellow dragons." At least he now had their undivided attention. "This terraforming is evil. It will destroy us all. The magic of those dark Northern Lights, the ones you call the 'Dancing Lights,' will eat our flesh, our minds, our souls. In ancient times, when dragonkind fled the land to return to the sea, it was because a dread enemy had

been summoned by the Lights from some foul place. This enemy was the Azghun Demons. They could be killed, but they multiplied faster than they died. Destroying them had an obscene effect on us. As they died, they struck deep into us and ..." Ao Rue realized they were no longer listening to him. Their heads had turned in unison as if someone had gathered the strings of their minds and pulled. From behind him, he heard Lei-kung's thin, slithering voice.

"Fled? Fled? Ao Rue, dragons don't flee from anything. Where did you get this strange idea about demons? That's the stuff of dragonlings' and dragonettes' nightmares. Are we going to talk about imps next?"

Despite the odd chill he felt, Ao Rue turned confidently to tell Lei-kung the truth, but as he looked, he was struck speechless. If anything, Lei-kung was more shrunken than before. His eyes were lusterless, black stones. They were streaked with crawling mustard patterns that shifted like the tracks of maggots and snakes shifting across his eyes and made pilgrimages to and from his brain. His body looked as if it was retreating, shrinking back, from those corrupt stones. Bones strained his scales to breaking. His tail was kinked upon itself. His ecru hide, never attractive, now was drained into the color of something that had been too long in a broken shell. Yet as ugly as he looked, nothing could prepare Ao Rue for the sight of the once-beautiful Chih-nil. She peeked out from behind Lei-kung. Her body was so weary that her legs were bowed. Her wonderful flat and tight belly now hung within inches of the floor. She had been gleaming white; now she was blanched, boiled bloodless. Her wings dangled lank. Had it not been for the expression on her face, Ao Rue would have been most sickened by the purple bruises and welts that bulged like hungry parasites about her snout and tail. All her haughtiness, her arrogance, was gone. She looked as if someone had just smacked her across the snout with his tail as hard as he could. She was eternally on the edge of tears; hysteria haunted her failed eyes. But Ao Rue knew there were no tears underwater. They would wait for the land.

"Now, Ao Rue what is all this hysterical, senseless talk of demons?" The scorn was thick in Lei-kung's reedy voice.

Somehow recovering his composure and realizing that the others were too entranced to listen, Ao Rue began what he knew was an appeal to the void. "In the Emerald Tablets, in the oldest ones, there are dark tales and dire warnings of a race of mindless, malignant demons, the Azghun Demons. Shapeless, amorphous -- destruction and poison are their only purposes. They're yellow, and they spawn and spread quicker than imagination." Ao Rue realized that the tablets were describing Lei-kung's color.

"Well, dragons need fear nothing. We'll just destroy them. Gather up an army." As Lei-kung casually spoke, Ao Rue realized that the little slug was extending a thin, black thread toward him. It curled its way through the water. "Most dragons could use the discipline, the regimentation. Yes, our Sniffing General and Tiger Prince will enjoy giving orders. Dragons are just too independent for their own good as it is." Lei-kung's voice was fading into a lulling monotone. Ao Rue noticed that many threads extended from him. He was a growth, a centipede. Chih-nil had a thread; others went beyond him to Yolbas,

Heng-chiang, Erh-lang, and Han Chung-li. "But, how is it you think there are demons lurking in ambush for us innocent, helpless dragons?"

"Ah," Ao Rue's own voice sounded like it was faraway as he tried to think and speak. That little thread fascinated him. "The oldest tablets. The story's there." Some small part of Ao Rue knew that if that thread touched him, it would pierce him from brain to tip of tail, impale his spine. His soul would hang quivering upon it. Yet he couldn't muster the strength to move.

"Well then, we can see them then. Certainly the water hasn't completely destroyed them?"

"No, no, they're safe. Sealed them in with Kuan-ti." Ao Rue was having more and more trouble concentrating. *That thread, I will be suspended, gibbering, from Lei-kung's will!*

"Oh yes," Lei-kung sneered in his smugness and power, "that must be that one cavern on the map we couldn't open. That was mighty magic, Ao Rue, mighty magic indeed. We'll never get that open. Can you open it?"

"Don't think so." *It's closer, so close. It's at the tip of my tail,* Ao Rue's soul wailed; his body and will remained frozen.

"Too bad. You know I'd like to believe you. I really would. Wouldn't we boys?" Lei-kung looked over at them. Their snouts bobbed like apples. "Yes, indeed, we would, but without proof, we couldn't expect dragons to abandon so great a dream as the great terraforming, give up their manifest destiny, could we? Are you all right, Ao Rue; you look a bit stressed." A high-pitched giggle snuck from Lei-kung's snout.

The thread had touched Ao Rue's tail. He couldn't move; he screeched soundlessly. A sharp spike was driving its way up through him. He could do nothing.

"Ao Rue, there you are. Aren't you important types done conferring yet?" Ao Rue's heart froze; Nü-kua had followed him.

Lei-kung's claws came together; they caressed each other. "This is wonderful. The young and tender Nü-kua! I hadn't expected your pleasure quite so soon." He extended another black thread toward her. "But Chih-nil is growing a bit used and boring." One thread moved closer to the little golden dragon; the other moved deeper into the helpless Ao Rue. "Say something to Nü-kua, darling." All Chih-nil could manage was a whimper.

Nü-kua was frightened; she wasn't quite sure what Lei-kung was talking about but she didn't like it. She looked again at Ao Rue and from her mind she called, called to his love.

The palace shook! Yolbas and Erh-lang fell as Ao Rue slammed his tail upon the floor. The thread shriveled away, scurried back. He moved so fast his body snapped between Nü-kua and Lei-kung. He swept his left wing out and gathered her to him. His eyes burned and spun like blue suns. He came to full majesty, a master sorcerer the like of which the world had not seen in eons. A beloved dragon in full arousal. Lei-kung cowered. What seconds before had almost been his slave now burned with a godlike power that lit the palace like a beacon. For leagues dragons turned to marvel and wonder

at the light that banished all darkness. A gleaming silver-blue sword formed in Ao Rue's right claw. As he whipped it in circles, the water seethed and boiled. He slashed the thread that threatened Nü-kua. Blue fire shot back along it and struck Lei-kung full. He cried out, screamed blind fear. Ao Rue raised the sword to banish the yellow snake forever from the world, to strike this abominable worm from Nü-kua's sight.

"No! Don't! I'll kill them!" Lei-kung screamed as he began to twist and knot the black threads. Ao Rue saw the life begin to go out of everyone there. Yolbas' and Erh-lang's struggles to stand grew weak. Han Chung-li simply slumped against the failing Heng-chiang. Chih-nil's eyes pleaded for at least her life, all she had left. Ao Rue felt dragons everywhere cry out in pain as Lei-kung frayed the cords of their lives. Only Ao Rue and Nü-kua were without pain.

He lowered the sword, and it vanished as quickly as it had come. The light from his eyes dulled a shade. They still glowed with harnessed power and protection. He glared defiantly at Lei-kung, daring him to make one move toward Nü-kua.

"Ao Rue, why are you holding me so tight? Everyone's watching us." He eased his grip and was surprised to see everyone standing and talking as if nothing had happened.

"Well, Ao Rue, we must recognize your contribution to dragonkind even if you've decided not to participate in the great terraforming." Astonishment filled Ao Rue. Lei-kung was talking as if nothing had happened. "As you know, once we leave the sea, dragons will have to drink. We won't be able to just absorb water as we do here." Ao Rue was struck dumb. Nü-kua, everyone, was listening to Lei-kung as if he'd just dropped by to eat a few oysters. "We've decided to make you Guardian of the Spring Halt, Protector of the Gate of Sand. It's going to be one of our important sources of fresh water. It is a little out of the way, but I know you scholars need your isolation and solitude."

Ao Rue was mystified. *How could no one know?* He began to pull Nü-kua toward the open sea.

She strained against him. "What's the matter with you? Lei-kung's offering you a great honor. Say something! Thank him! Don't you want to serve dragonkind. Lei-kung, I'm so sorry. I just don't know what's wrong with him. I'm sure he's delighted. Both of us are. He'll do it." She was now calling over her shoulder as Ao Rue pulled her away.

Even after they were out of the palace, she continued to carp at him, "What is the matter with you? How could you be so rude? What a generous kind offer!" He had been mute since he'd dragged her out.

Finally he turned to her. He was obviously shaken. "Didn't you see what was going on in there? He was going to use you like he does Chih-nil. Didn't you see those black threads? Didn't you see how terrible everyone looked?"

"Ao Rue, I think you've been sucking too many vines. I saw nothing of the sort. Everyone was very nice to me, to you too. They looked fine. Chih-nil is as stunning as ever, Lei-kung very dignified, and Erh-lang handsome and fit as usual. Why are you acting so strange?"

"You think Erh-lang is handsome?"

"Yes, I guess so, in a common, popular sort of way. But you're changing the subject. I'm going to go back and accept that offer for you. You'll love a place like Spring Halt although it sounds awfully isolated."

"You'll do nothing!" Nü-kua was shocked by Ao Rue's vehemence. "I don't want you anywhere near Lei-kung ever again! That goes for the muscle-bound lout Erh-lang too! You'll stay with me. And if you want Spring Halt, I'll tell Yolbas myself." Ao Rue didn't plan on getting anywhere near Lei-kung again himself. And he now understood that only he and Lei-kung knew anything of their duel arcane. He yearned to confide in Nü-kua, to convince her, but as he looked at her and his love welled up within him, he knew he couldn't tell her of anything ugly despite his desire to spill his heart into her.

"Well, all right, but you have to promise to stop acting so strange, and I hope we're going to have a lot of my friends visit us and we can visit them. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life sitting out in some forsaken oases in the middle of nowhere!"

"I thought just the two of us would be nice. You know I'm not very comfortable around other dragons."

"We'll have plenty of time for ourselves. And that reminds me: I have something else I want to talk to you about." She lowered her eyelids and Ao Rue wondered why she was being coy. All this visiting and socializing didn't sound right to him, but he was beyond the point of choice. *Even if she's wrong*, he thought to himself, *she's right because I'm hers*.

The two lovers swam further away, Ao Rue thinking that he might drown in her eyes, Nü-kua talking away about their future. If they'd listened more carefully or weren't so fascinated with each other, they might have heard Chih-nil's cries and sobs as Lei-kung vented his fury and failure on her mouth and body.