

Chapter 11
1920 words

"That's funny."

Erh-lang paused from shaking the alligators off his tail and trying to step on them at the same time. "Well, if I hadn't had to sit in the shallows for two hours getting that damn spell right." He stopped, realizing that he was talking to a voice that shouldn't exist. He was supposed to be alone, waiting for the great dragon exodus from the sea. "Who's laughing!" He lashed out with his tail, turned to see who he'd smacked. No one was there. All he could see was one of those small fuzzy things. It had easily hopped over his tail each time it swept by.

"I'm laughing. And watch that tail; you might hurt yourself."

Again, Erh-lang looked all around, stretching his neck, trying to find the dragon who'd dared laugh at him. Once he found him, there'd be a reckoning. Finally, in frustration, he called out, "All right, smart tail, show yourself. You afraid?"

"Afraid? Hardly! You're much too slow and clumsy to be afraid of."

"Oh yea, well come out from hiding and I'll show you who's slow!"

"I'm right here, on the ledge, next to your head. Are you blind?" Erh-lang turned to see the small spotted and orange-patched fuzzy looking at him. It laughed again. "You've been a real show. I thought you'd never get out of the water. You'd get the weight right, bob to the surface, and nearly suffocate. Then, you'd get the breathing right, get the weight wrong, sink, and nearly drown. Thought I'd break my ribs laughing."

"WHAT ARE YOU?"

"Hey, easy on the volume, lummoX. Think you're still muffled by the water."

Erh-lang wondered what a 'lummoX' was. Lei-kung hadn't prepared him for strange, talking beasts. He began to wonder if he should flame it before it confused him anymore. As the smoke began to leak from his nostrils, he was further confounded to find the animal liked it. It turned in circles, rolled on its back, made an odd rumbling noise. He was so surprised he swallowed his own smoke and gagged.

"Yo! LummoX! You didn't have to stop."

"What are you? Wait a minute, I know, something that misfit Ao Rue said. You're a tigger."

"That's tiger. And no, I'm not. Tigers are big and dumb, sorta like you."

"I'm not dumb!" Erh-lang thought about flame again, but stopped. The beast liked it, and he was getting a little frightened of this poised and obviously confident thing. "That's a hard spell! Took me weeks to learn it! It's whale guts trying to get all the parts together."

"You think transformation's hard? I guess you are as dumb as that alligator dance you were doing. Looked like you were trying to turn yourself inside out, like you'd forgotten which end your brain was. Look, if you want to kill things, how about knocking off a few of those eagles and kites up there. Death attracts 'em like crazy. They're cowards, but real problems if not watched."

"You mean those wonderful fliers. They're beautiful. Masters of the air!"

"Beautiful? Those carrion eaters. Only time they're beautiful is when they're dead. Swooping from all over the place. Kitten killers! Wouldn't dare take on an adult. Makes me wish I could fly. Kill a few of 'em, I would!"

"Oh, you're a kitten?"

"Look, now that the show's over, this is getting boring. You can forget about what we are. I don't think anyone's going to bother talking to you." It turned and gracefully slid among the rocks.

"Oh yea," Erh-lang yelled after it. "You think I'm dumb! Wait'll you and that blue-eyed freak see me fly. Wait'll that morsel Nü-kua sees me."

"Why did you call him a freak?" The cat had come back. It actually seemed interested.

"He's weird. Reading tablets. Off by himself. Talkin' strange. What Nü-kua sees in him I sure don't know."

"No, no, I know all that. What about the blue eyes?"

"Oh, those. He's the only one."

"The only one with blue eyes; may the gods preserve us! Are you sure?" The cat sounded much less arrogant, even frightened.

"Of course, I'm sure. What do you think I am? Stupid?" Erh-lang was enjoying his seeming triumph over this smug creature. He liked to see fear. "Why don't you get out of here. I've got important business!"

But the cat was already leaving. Absently, it called over its shoulder, "I think we'll call you Goofy; lummox is too dignified." Erh-lang was now the furthest thing from the cat's mind: *Must find Mei-chou; she must know. Only one with blue eyes. He'll be hers; she is the First of the First, the Guide. But only one. Could he save the dragons from the Azghun Demons? Would he care? Only one. How could the dragons be so mindless to leave themselves with only one?*

Erh-lang was beginning to wonder if he'd actually won that encounter. *Winning is everything.* He began to think he'd been insulted and thought about going after the thing, whatever it was. Then again, finding something that small among the crags was more than he cared to bother with. Besides, he had to get ready for his welcoming flight. He began to scan the cliffs for a proper place for his majestic entrance.

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Ao Rue carefully guided Nü-kua up into the shallows. Working the spell for both of them had been far easier than he'd expected. He'd tried to teach her to do it herself, but she just wouldn't pay attention long enough. Under normal circumstances, he'd have found her lack of concentration infuriating, but she'd developed a little erotic trick of licking his tendrils and fangs. It drove him crazy! Then, he couldn't think too much either. *I wonder if she isn't making me think with my tail. I'm beginning to think it grew the rest of me to carry it around. All I can think of is making love, wrapping myself within her.* The fang licking had given birth to her pet name for him. She'd wanted to call him "Tooth," but he

complained that it was too undignified. They'd compromised on Thoth. Even so, he'd made her promise that it had to be their secret. No one else must know. They'd both joked and laughed that it would be a name to echo throughout history, one to shape and mold all future minds.

He was actually excited about the exodus. He hadn't even been sure he wanted to leave what little sea remained. But her happiness was his. He was caught up. She was bubbling on and on. He was so enraptured that he wasn't quite prepared when their talons touched the bottom and their snouts broke the water. *THE STENCH!* Instantaneously, he slapped filter spells over their nostrils, as every dragon was doing. But the smell, all Ao Rue could think of was distilled corruption, the essence of death.

"Oh look, it's Erh-lang; he's in the air," but he couldn't hear her. He couldn't hear the dragonettes' mindless chanting -- ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG. All the dragons looked up to see his flight; most had never seen their wings against the sky.

But Ao Rue couldn't hear anything except the battles of the sounds that touched him from land and sea. Before him rushed the microscopic cries of the corals as they died within the drying, tilting walls of the crystal palaces. They screamed out their betrayal as they were ripped from mother ocean. From behind him came the counterpoint. It was the crooning of the whales. Their Ode to Joy. Ever faithful, ever true to each other, they sang their freedom from fear. Now they were the benign lords of their domain. Ao Rue found solace from the corals' agony in the whales' celebration. No one would ever trouble the sweet creatures again.

"Oh, look, Ao Rue, look! We can fly!"

And Ao Rue looked and wished he hadn't. His eyes looked to the land, not the sky. What he saw was desiccation -- a land like a dried animal with tufts of fur still clinging to the cadaver, stirring in a cruel wind, the Breath of Fury. The terraforming had gone awry. Nature lay broken. It was as if the dragons had commissioned some mad mind to build them paradise. What they had gotten was a pit of agony. Great broken depressions marked the scarred landscape. Salt marshes were everywhere, stone-white pools of thirst. Spongy effervescent clay clung to the rocks. It was half-covered by wet, clinging sand. Dead sea life was strewn everywhere. Black vultures waved in celebration over it, their wings kowtowing in gratitude. Lizards, sand fleas, and roaches rose in clouds with every craving wing beat. Almost instantly, the insects descended to feed again and again. It was an orgy of scum, a feast of the moribund. Yet, as he looked over the running mockery of the loathsome yellow to yellow-gray clay and sand where they sucked at the rocks, he could see a pattern, a demented correctness. This horror was right for someone, but not for dragons.

"Oh, see, see the sun shine through his wings." Ao Rue realized he had been oblivious to Nü-kua's trembling excitement beside him. He felt a rush of guilt as he realized he'd been ignoring the center of his life. "Isn't he wonderful," she cried.

"Well, it's a beginning."

"Thoth, how can you say that? A beginning? Look at that turn!"

Ao Rue looked with disdain at Erh-lang's amateur acrobatics. A small sneer crossed his lips and tendrils, but he was wise enough to keep still and he warmed to his pet name. "Let's get out of here, Nü-kua. Let's go look at our oasis." He was finding the pushing crowd, the screaming dragonettes, and the superficiality to be just too much. The death chants of the coral echoed from one side of his brain to another.

"How can you possibly think of leaving now. This is the greatest day in history. Look at him dive!"

"Terrific, the next thing he'll be doing is writing messages in the sky. Enormous smoke slogans: 'Lei-kung for Savior,' 'Han Chung-li is great,' 'All Kneel to Heng-chiang.'"

"What's wrong with that? We owe them all so much!"

"Please, couldn't we go?"

"If you're so dead set on seeing the silly oasis, go ahead! I'll get there later. I'm gonna stay and have fun!"

Ao Rue was hurt by her petulance and thought to speak until he realized she had her back to him. *She's forgotten I'm even here.* He gathered his wings in anger and struck the sky. If Erh-lang had looked to see him in the air, he wouldn't have imagined himself superior. Ao Rue gained altitude so quickly that no one saw his going. He looked back briefly. She still had her back to him, staring at Erh-lang's awkward dance. Ao Rue couldn't help but notice how clumsy dragons were on land. *Terraforming has turned us into waddlers. We could still go back to what little sea remains, but most of us are too lazy or dumb to work the magic. We'll take root in the sterile sand.* His wings took him quickly toward Spring Halt; pain gave him power. He wished he was a whale. Then cursed himself for self-pity. His only delay was to flame a vulture with a limp kitten in its talons. He did it without thinking, in sudden rage. And then wondered why such a natural event summoned such deep anger.