

Chapter 12
1600 words

Lei-kung's kinked tail kept banging and dragging as he went down into the map cave. Regardless of what he did with the spell, he just didn't fit. If he decreased his weight to get it off the floor, his head hit the ceiling. As it was, he felt a bit weak and didn't want to bother too much with magic. More and more, he had to make this descent to revitalize himself.

The increased frequency of these trips puzzled him. He was so strong, yet each time he grew weaker faster. *Perhaps I overdid my last session with Chih-nil. Now that she's dead that won't be a problem anymore. She had the strangest look when I wrung the last bit of life out of her. Such a strange look. It hadn't been the rough sex. The fates know we'd had enough of that. She hadn't been much fun lately. Such a look. She'd hung limp just letting me.* He felt a small twinge of arousal. *It was as if all the spirit had gone out of her. I could have slowly roasted her and she wouldn't have cared. A look. I've never seen a dragon look like that. As if I'd beaten all the future out of her. Such a look. Almost gratitude at the end. Even after I'd drawn the thread of control out of her. Pathetic. No power in her. Glad she's gone. The black vultures and maggots could use her now. I only kept her for sport. Because others wanted her so much. Leave females to scum like Erh-lang and Ao Rue. Wretched pieces of tail!* He felt his gall rise at Ao Rue's name. *There's one worth strangling. I had him. I did! I did! Stupid Nü-kua. Had him, had him hanging. One more instant. Such a look. Thank the pit no one had seen Ao Rue leave during Erh-lang's show. By Chih-nil's rotting corpse, that silver eel could fly. Scary!* Now his mind shifted with the easy irrationality of the fanatic, and he smiled in deep satisfaction. *What can anyone say about Chih-nil; accountable to no one anyway. They're all mine. Let them live out the white silence of their lives; let them wallow in sand and brine.* He pulled at one bundle of threads. He felt the suffering and misery slide into him. He smiled more. *Such a wonderful look.*

Lei-kung forced Chih-nil's last fleeting look of thankfulness from his mind and let his euphoria rise. *It's better, so much better. All that individual stuff is gone. Dragons move across the land in regular lines, each with a purpose. The chorten rises above me in fitting tribute. Han Chung-li actually was keeping them at it even if the slime-trailing snail dragged some female dragonette off every time he thought no one was looking. Let Yolbas and Heng-chiang think the terraforming had something to do with them. Fools!* He giggled to the dripping walls, *My fools! Feng-po and Ch'ang-o had been the funniest. So glad to be groveling in the clay and rock for gold together. Didn't have the heart to tell them it was because they were next to each other in line. Lu-hsing's work details were doing so well. Would be a whole lot easier to use magic, but there's no value to that. The order, the regimentation, are too valuable. Besides I'm not going through anything like Erh-lang again. Trying to teach him the transmutation spell had been like trying to drive an octopus through a rock. Wonder if a seed would fit in his head? I must try some time when he's of no further use. Put a burr into his brain. There's an itch for him to scratch.*

Lei-kung laughed aloud at his own cleverness. *How much longer am I going to keep that tool around. Until I don't need the air shows. Maybe I'll just slowly atrophy his muscles. Let him watch himself waste away.* He laughed again. Life had never been so sweet for Lei-kung.

He slithered into the map cave. At the far end, the table still stood. One small spot still gleamed -- Kuan-ti's tomb. Otherwise, it looked as if some noxious spider had made a nest and spawned its young. The map was thick with the oily black threads, dripping, spreading. Lei-kung thought of it as the monument to his inspired and committed life. He didn't expect anyone to understand or appreciate it. He labored for his dream, nothing else. The cave did annoy him. Even though the tops of its crystal windows were open to the sun, the air was still stained by some sort of oily smoke. The cave still resisted all natural and supernatural attempts to light it. Phosphorescent lichens died as they were spread, leaving slimy ash all over the floor. Light spells shrunk into themselves as if the air sucked them into some dark maw. Even Lei-kung's fire rolled into some void. But he didn't care. He didn't have to see well for what he had to do.

"All right, where are you? Get out here! I'm tired. I need you." Only silence and the stillness of the grave greeted his command. "You hear me. Get your loathsome self out here!"

Slowly, from deep recess, a pus-yellow cloud began to roll up into the cave. Lei-kung was surprised: it seemed bigger than last time. It began to mushroom toward the ceiling -- an amorphous shape, never quite the same, twisting, moving in and out of angles that tormented the eye. Lei-kung always had trouble keeping it in full focus. Some of it was never quite in the same place, like parts of it were bouncing in and out of existence. It was veined and scored with inky blots and lines. A thicker thread than all the others, a platted cable, snaked from it to Lei-kung.

"Well? Get to it. You think I've got time to spend with a foul abomination like you! A world waits!"

In reaction to Lei-kung's insults, the cloud threw out a second braided cable. It smacked against the side of Lei-kung's head and clung. His body arched and jerked in response; then, his movements settled to a steady trembling with occasional twitches. Globes began to move along the threads: black from Lei-kung, yellow from the Azghun Demon. The Demon leaned back and forth as it pulsed at and sucked on the dragon. Their antic shapes threw half shadows through the darkening air, two open wounds drinking at each other. The dragon's obsidian eyes crawled faster and faster with the yellow patterns. They swelled and surged like infected scabs until it appeared his sockets could no longer hold them. The Demon changed little. It just grew. As it did, small pieces elongated from it, snapped their yellow strands and vanished into the deeper recesses of the caverns. Lei-kung's eyes grew large enough that a quick glance made him seem some magnified insect, all eyes and wings. The Demon drew back its cable, drawing the other taut to keep the slumping dragon from falling.

Slowly, Lei-kung regained his senses. The Demon waited passively. The small dragon's head snapped up; the Demon eased its control. Lei-kung's shrunken body glowed with dark vitality.

"Aaahhh," his long cry of pleasure filled the cavern. "That's much better." If anyone had seen his pleasure, they might understand why he no longer missed Chih-nil's body and mouth. "Oh, that's so good." He turned to leave, ignoring the Demon. Something called him back. "You want what?" Communicating with the Demon was always hard for Lei-kung. Its mental images were so primitive, so alien, so fragmented, like trying to listen to a coral. He often wondered how something so big could think like one cell.

"Feed!"

"All right, go ahead and feed. Nothing's stopping you."

"Feed dragon!"

"You want to eat a dragon?" Lei-kung was astounded. Not because of the cannibalism, that didn't bother him. He'd just never thought of dragons as food. "Can you eat something that big?"

"No eat, feed! Feed must feed! FEED!"

Lei-kung was impatient. This was almost as bad as talking to Erh-lang or Yolbas. However, even the Demon's nagging and his new exhilaration didn't fog his native cunning. "Yes, yes, but find an isolated dragon or two on the gold crew." The Demon began to billow and boil toward the outside. "Stop, stop, STOP." It slowed. For a moment, Lei-kung had the odd feeling that it could have ignored his commands. "Don't let anyone see you. You're my secret until I decide otherwise." Lei-kung felt a little foolish. He really had no idea if it understood him. "Hold, HOLD, I say!" The Demon quivered before him. He could feel the feral lust burn against him. Lei-kung had a delicious thought, one that made him feel very good. "See if you can find Feng-po and Ch'ang-o alone." He threw strong mental images of Ao Rue's two friends at the thing. "Now you may go." It surged up the tunnel, burst away as if it had been straining against some great restraint. Lei-kung felt a deep chill in his marrow as it flashed by. He was deeply glad, no, relieved that he had complete control. He didn't want to imagine what that thing could do to a dragon.

Once the Demon was gone, Lei-kung bathed in his latest infusion of power. *I am the superior being. Oh yes, it is me. Let the ancients babble about blue eyes. It is me! I am the one! Let's see how insolent that silver worm is when that thing gets done with his friends!*