

Chapter 13
3335 words

Ao Rue admired his handiwork and hoped that Nü-kua would like it. He had labored long cleaning and planting the oasis. Even with magic, the sand didn't yield well to flowers. Some things he'd done by claw and muscle, feeling good to stretch and test himself against barrenness for her. Now he was dusted with gold. He was finally comfortable after bathing in the clear waters and washing the sand from his body and the remains of all the dead fish from his talons. He was waiting for her. Extracting the gold for them from the nearby cliffs had been so easy; the magic had bounced among his talons as he called to it. Then, he powdered it until it was as soft as talc. *What's the sense of dragons dulling their talons in dark caves to get it?* he wondered. *Despite all of Kuan-ti's teaching, all my reading, I'm still mystified by the world. Let it rot and die! Nü-kua and I will live here in our little world!* He reached out again to her from the deep warmth of his mind. *My love?*

My Thoth. Wonderful here. Exciting!

My Bright Eyes, come when ready. All is prepared. I hope you like.

I will. Soon! As she faded, he felt her deep affirmation of him, what he was. He felt so essentially good not to be alone anymore.

With his snout resting on his arms, he drank in the exquisite scent of the sand-jujube. He thought of it as his flower, their flower. Hidden among its silver leaves were small golden blossoms that made the air sparkle with their perfume. He had planted them so carefully among the poplars. *She moves in me so softly. My Bright Eyes!* The golden scent mingled and enhanced the smells of fennel, coriander, and poppies. *Here the Breath of Fury cannot blow!* Even as he walked around their oasis, his weight released the aromas of the ginger and licorice. The janüsta offered a celebration with its cherry-flavored fruit and its coral-colored sprays of flowers, a coral that matched the faint shadows of skin beneath Nü-kua's scales. The pink of the tamarisk shaded so well into the coral. He'd planted a bunch of those and had great hopes for the contrast with the blue flax seedlings once they were grown. Ao Rue had been enjoying various tastes, so much he wondered why he bothered with meat at all. Currants, plums, figs, nectarines, and pears could have been a steady diet, but it would take orchards to fill his appetite. Of course, he'd made mistakes: mugwort was not a treat; no one would like that. And while someone might like the cucumbers, he much preferred the asparagus. In fact, he liked it so much he'd decided to call it "dragon's beard"; it was shaped so much like dragon tendrils. *Tendrils, such tail-quivering touches from Nü-kua! Will she like asparagus? Will she taste some of these new things? Ah well, I can always go back for oysters, tuna, kelp, and sturgeon if she likes. She won't learn the spell of transformation anyway, and it's good to serve her happiness! My Bright Eyes!*

He gazed out across the still water of the oasis as it curled in and out of the poplars and fig trees. It was so different from the sea's ceaseless movements and caresses. The ducks that now lounged their way about the pool's surface would have to be much stronger

to dance the movements of the waves and rollers. As still as the oasis was, its sounds were sharper than the whales' crooning. Waytags cried as they skimmed the water to catch mosquitoes and cicadas. Their small sounds were frequently marked by the sharper calls of the geese and crows who circled above, still unsure of his alien presence. Ao Rue wished he could shut out the too-dominant shouts of greed from the carrion-loving black eagles and vultures as they continued to feed upon the death that circled the oasis like an army at siege. For a bit, he had watched the timid groups of camels, asses, sheep, and gazelles. The water called to their thirst, but they too were still afraid of this new, silver beast. *I will have to make a point to leave often enough so they can drink. I would not harm them, but if they come to be comfortable with dragonkind, they will be even easier prey for Erh-lang and his killers, those who murdered more than they could eat. Soon the herds will have enough to contend with -- wolves and mastiffs are moving in those hills. The air is so clear I might even see the snow leopards in the mountains if I tried.*

For some time, though, his eyes had stayed within the oasis. He had laughed at the scorpions' strange pride as they stalked around with their stingers raised in arrogance and threat. The rabbits nibbled their soft, fluffy way around. They too enjoyed asparagus. The jerboas, far nimbler than other rats, leaped and bounced among the flowers and scrubs. Occasionally one fell to the cats that moved like sliding silk. So far, it seemed the cats hadn't even noticed him. They varied their routines only so much as his bulk took up space.

So if the cats wanted to ignore him, he would them too. Obviously, that business in the tablets about talking cats had been a myth. As it was, he'd been fascinated for some time by the pair of gray herons that so carefully kept themselves on the opposite side of the water. He toyed with them a little. Two paces to the right, they'd prance to the left; three to the left and they'd mirror him to the right, keeping their distance with almost mathematical precision, with Tu-suan. Now, as he rested, he regretted his intrusion. Love should never be troubled. He knew herons mated only once, and he cringed within himself over his wasted time with Chih-nil. *I was better than that. Nü-kua has taught me that. If only I could have come to her clean!* The herons paused often from their fishing to share a choice morsel, to intertwine their necks, as if to polish each other's feathers. In their grayness, they seemed suspended above the land and water. When they faced him, they were like slate slivers, almost too thin to see. From the side, their bodies were all curve, stiffening to their long, slender beaks. Their bodies snaked and waved as their long legs seemed to march over unseen obstacles. No sounds came from them; they made the geese seem crazed in their constant announcements of comings and goings. *Dignity and Grace! Are there two better virtues?* In the air, the herons were effortless; they floated above the land, long legs trailing behind, pointed beaks cutting the way. Any dragon, any bird would envy them, but Ao Rue feared for them now that death had drawn so many winged predators. His eyes narrowed as he watched the kites and eagles beyond and above the oasis. *There is no prey here!* He threw thoughts of anger toward the sky. The space above cleared abruptly. The predators had discovered better tasks. *There will be no prey here!*

No death! No pain! Not in Bright Eyes' place! He sent thoughts of love and safety across the water to the herons.

Ao Rue began to doze amid the stillness and beauty. He was awakened by a thump and a small weight on his snout. At first he thought a piece of fruit had dropped on him. He reached up to brush it off.

"Hey, watch that talon!" The command was strong enough that Ao Rue immediately lowered his claw. "Are you going to sleep forever or do you want to talk?"

"I really can't see you." Ao Rue gave up trying to cross his eyes. "So you can talk."

"Sure, when we want to. Is this any better? Though I don't know why anyone needs to see to listen." The cat had jumped down from between Ao Rue's eyes and now sat on his outstretched talon. "So, you're Thoth, the Last of the Blue-Eyed." The cat licked a paw and did a quick jowl wash.

This cat moves around as if it owned the place. As if it owned me! And how can it know my secret name? "No, I am Ao Rue, Member of the Council of Five, Last Student of Kuan-ti, Comrade to Feng-po, Beloved of Nü-kua, Keeper of Spring Halt and the Gate of Sand. And I will be addressed properly! Who are you?"

"Fine, call yourself whatever you like. 'Ao Rue' it is. We've got more important things to talk about than names."

"OK, but what's your name? It would hardly be polite if I just called you 'cat.'"

"You have some manners. Excellent! I am Mei-chou the golden-eyes, She Who is First of the First, Teller and Recorder of the Past, She Who Sits Upon the Lotus, Guide to All, Prime Silver-Mackerel Tabby. Let's skip the rest of it; it goes on for hours." She had left his talon and was now walking around and over him. "You are some piece of dragon. The most ancient Tellers of Tales were right about you blue-eyed ones. Sorcery practically runs from under your scales. Never felt anything this powerful." Ao Rue tried to interrupt her. However, her tour and commentary gave him no chance to speak. She acted like she was buying a used camel. "Look at those wings. Bet you're a screamer in the air. Terrific tail. Split a rock with it!"

Ao Rue was wondering if he should be flattered. The cat had returned to his talon and was admiring it. He managed to get a "thank you" in.

"Wasn't complimenting you. Just observing. I'd say the same things about a good mountain or a well-formed alligator. Spin your eyes for me once!" Without thinking, Ao Rue roused his magic. "Yo, enough! Wow, it's all there all right, magnitude prime! You're going to need every ounce of it if there's going to be even a remote chance against the Azghun Demons."

"The Demons are real?"

"Does a cat purr? Is a jerboa tasty? Believe it. They're breeding like maggots in the caves right now. They'll be tens of thousands of them just to start. Soon enough they'll boil like spiders out of their holes. The dunes are going to be spitting dragon spirits all over the sky. And you're going to have to lead the fight against them alone. Not an exciting task. They're about as boring as the pit vipers. The last time the dragons fought

them, there were over fifty blue-eyed dragons, master sorcerers all. And the best they could do was drive the Demons back into the deep caverns and seal them with the sea. Still fifty or not, you're certainly something special. You may be alone, but the world has never seen a sorcerer dragon like you!"

Ao Rue was puzzled. "But I can only work my magic for someone else. Most of the time, I don't even do it deliberately. It just comes."

"Of course. You think nature is going to let something as powerful as you remain unchecked? All life is balanced. That's another thing the Demons spoil. If you could be omnipotent, you'd go power mad! There are no real gods in the universe, only beings who think they are and those who worship them."

Ao Rue doubted he could even approach Lei-kung's cruelty, be power mad, but he was gaining increasing respect for this small creature's knowledge and wisdom. *Could a dragon be a cat's student?* "What do the Demons do? Are they immune to magic? Flame?"

"Most magic doesn't bother them at all. Yours will if you're aroused enough, committed enough. You have to believe in sorcery for it to work. The Demons are magic nulls. They're nulls in most ways. Don't think much. Just urges, very ugly urges! Flame gets 'em though. They're easy to burn. Speaking of which, blow a little smoke over me."

"Then, it's easy. All dragons have flame." Ao Rue was startled to see her go into what appeared to be a small fit of ecstasy as the smoke flowed over her. "What was that?"

"Nothing, just some flea removal. Do try to stay on the subject at hand. Killing Demons isn't that easy. First of all, the Azghun breed as fast as they burn. Some sort of splitting. A small thread appears, bulbs, and breaks away. I don't even expect they enjoy it. Strange. But killing them isn't the problem. All they have to do is touch a dragon; the slightest brush and it's all over."

"They can kill dragons?"

"No, it's not that simple, not that clean. They feed on something in the dragons' minds. Don't you know this?"

"The tablets weren't clear. Even Kuan-ti couldn't read some of them."

Mei-chou let out a long, sad sigh. "You know you were once very noble beasts. Now only one blue-eyed, and you can't read all your own history. No wonder you were stupid enough to come back here. At least you're free of those filthy black threads."

Ao Rue thought to tell Mei-chou about how close he and Nü-kua had come to being enslaved like all the rest. Pride stopped him. "Now who's off the subject?"

"Sorry, it's just very painful to see smug ignorance."

Ao Rue felt a bit insulted, but he knew she was right. Sadness and a small fear came to him. *My Nü-kua, sucked upon by some mindless, hive creature!* Just the thought made the magic spin in his eyes.

"Easy, there'll be time enough for that. Save it; you'll need it. Let me finish. The Demons' power is psychic devastation. They bring emptiness, desolation. They feed on the future, on hope. Dragons despair."

"How does that kill?"

"It doesn't. That's the worst part. Without any shred of hope, the dragons kill themselves. They commit suicide. Wait 'til you see the glitter sand. You won't believe anything so beautiful can be so repugnant."

Ao Rue was speechless. The horror was too much. *Dragons suicide? Never! A dragon couldn't take its own life, Or could it? How I felt after Chih-nil scorned me. I thought then to die. If not for Feng-po and Nü-kua. My Bright Eyes.* Both cat and dragon were silent. Ao Rue recovered, "But why do you care what happens to dragons?"

"Because, thick-head, once the Demons finish off the dragons, they'll start on us. They're drawn to intelligence. Once we're gone, they'll move down the chain until there's nothing left."

"I don't know if there's anything I can do. I'm only one dragon despite what you say."

"Don't you mean 'won't do.' Aren't you even going to try?"

"Well, it's not as if you could know, but I'm not exactly a popular dragon."

"You'd be surprised what I know."

"I'm an outcast. I wasn't fooled for a second that this remote post wasn't Lei-kung and Yolbas' way of getting rid of me. No one even talks to me anymore. They all think I'm weird, a freak. Why should I help them? All Feng-po does is dig. He's not a dragon anymore; he's a shrew, a mole." Ao Rue felt a little guilty. It wasn't as if Feng-po could control his betrayal. "Nü-kua's all I've got."

"Well, I'm here now." Ao Rue's scorn rose at Mei-chou's offer of comfort -- *This tiny creature, a friend?* -- but then he stopped. *I do feel a kinship, a belonging, with this wise fur ball.* Mei-chou continued, "You're supposed to be strange, be alone, a hermit. You'll never belong; you'll never have a home although it's clear you're trying with this oasis. Little too opulent, don't you think?" She didn't wait for an answer. Cats have absolute faith in their aesthetic judgments. "Anyway, if you could belong somewhere, could be a social being, you wouldn't be special. Nü-kua probably isn't a very good idea, especially if you take her too seriously. You and your magic work behind the veil of illusions, behind appearances, in places general dragonkind can't even imagine. You're supposed to shape the elements: causes, understandings, truths, wisdom, and insights. Forget your hurt; your destiny is as an empath. Non-blue-eyed dragons see only the effects and appearances. That's why they take so quickly to conformity and control. They suffer with awe, belief, reverence, and slavish obedience to incomprehensible rituals. Most of the time, they don't even know why they do things. That's why they need a mentor and you a guide. Forget about being a hero! Sure you need to disengage; otherwise, you couldn't function. But you have to care! You must care! And you will suffer. Count on that!"

Now Ao Rue was really confused. *This cat is making me feel stupid. Still she sounds so much like Kuan-ti.* As he tried to think of a question, stop acting like a dumb lizard, he felt Nü-kua's touch upon his mind, *My Thoth.* Mei-chou jumped down from his

claw and began to leave. He called after her, "Aren't you going to stay and talk to Nü-kua?"

"Talk to her? You're kidding." Mei-chou vanished into undergrowth, leaving Ao Rue wondering why she didn't want to talk to someone as wonderful as Nü-kua. He never even thought how the cat also knew she was coming.

Nü-kua landed softly, like a jujube petal floating to the ground.

Oh, my Bright Eyes.

My Thoth!

As she moved toward him, his tail began to curl in anticipation, all thoughts of Demons, cats, and death vanished. *My love, I will keep you safe in my heart. Let the Demons kill all the dragons. You are my salvation! I will make a haven of our love!* Her walk melted him. Other dragons lurched and rolled. She moved with a slow, swaying sensuality. Ao Rue would have called it a soft slink, but the words were wrong. No, she moved as breeze-swayed flowers, like the poppy's deep-rose gossamer that bursts forth in the spring. *She covers me with herself -- gold and silver, the bonding of all time!* Nü-kua lowered her eyelids as she heard his thoughts. Gently, she stretched her head forward, caressed him with her tendrils. Serenely, they touched for a time.

Reluctantly, Ao Rue spoke first. He could have touched her forever. "My Bright Eyes, I had the strangest conversation with a cat. A very disconcerting talk. Let me tell you about it. There is great danger! The Demons"

"You talked to a cat?" She interrupted him. "I have something much more important to talk to you about than any silly cat, and I'm not worried about any danger. You'll protect me."

Ao Rue yielded to her faith. *There's that strange coy look again.* "Yes, my love, what is it?"

"I love you, Thoth."

"And I you. Yes, very yes." He never imagined his heart could open so wide.

"Well, then, don't you think we should"

"WHAT'S THAT. FENG-PO?" Now he interrupted her.

"What's the matter with you?"

Ao Rue was instantly erect, his eyes spinning madly. "Don't you hear it. A great wail of terror and despair! It's Feng-po."

"I don't hear anything! Will you stop and listen to me!"

"Have to go. Need me."

He was in the air so fast that Nü-kua hardly saw him leave. She stood as his blur vanished toward the cliffs. *I wonder if Erh-lang can fly that fast? Ao Rue is majestic, but so strange. I wonder if what I want with him is right? Why must he always run off. Aren't I important enough!* She stamped her claw in anger, frightening the herons into flight.

Mei-chou had been watching with disdain. *Petulant little bitch! If he gives her what she wants, he'll be wasted. Nothing I can do. Must be his choice.* She turned, flipped her tail straight up in the air, and went to find saner company.