

Chapter 14
1655 words

"Now children, stay together! Don't malinge. Let's get those blocks in careful rows. Each exactly the same distance from each other. Quickly now!" Yün-t'ung had carefully led her charges to a flat plain just outside Lei-kung's nearly completed chorten. Her pride was obvious. *Of course, Lei-kung would appoint me to bring these rambunctious dragonettes into line. Am I not the Nurturer of the Young! About time too! I was so proud to receive the leader's instructions. So grateful to be the first to share The Teachings of Lei-kung. If only they weren't so hard to remember. So delighted to receive his wisdom:*

"Yün-t'ung, you know the great burdens of leadership that have been thrust upon me. I do try to bear them gracefully, but it is so wearisome. Dragons are not a very purposeful, organized lot. Always going off by themselves. Too much independence to build the Great Society. I try; oh, I do try. But even with Heng-chiang's, Yolbas', and Han Chung-li's help, dragons require constant supervision, especially the young ones. Despite all my desires, I can't maintain my stewardship at these exhausting levels forever. We must have a better system. Dragons must believe in discipline without being told. I have thought long and hard on this, and my colleagues and I believe that the only solution is the dragonettes. For eons they have run wild. Little unruly thugs! We must have a program, an educational program. Teach the dragonettes proper behavior. What is expected in a civilized society. What their jobs will be. To be on time. Always to be where they're supposed to be. To show proper respect for their betters. Put aside childish games and antics. We must all contribute! We must conform! Complete social integration is our goal. Everyone marching to the same tune. After long consideration, I have decided that you will be dragonkind's first great teacher. I will get Heng-chiang to help you round up as many as we can. Han Chung-li will gladly help. I am putting our future in your hands. It will be your grave duty to instruct our dragonettes to be all that they can be!"

"Little thugs," I couldn't have agreed more. Yün-t'ung bared her teeth at two that were talking in the back. They were instantly silent. Yesterday's punishment had been very effective. How dare they question me! The field trip to the Flaming Cliffs had been absolutely necessary. A good lesson in discipline. So a few scrapped wings got scrapped climbing the buttes. "No, you can't fly! Lazy slugs! Make those seats. We must have a proper classroom." Told them, I did. So their dainty little claws bled a little while they were carving out the limestone blocks. That was no reason to cry and complain. Can't be running off for a drink every two seconds. Held those two down and beat them silly with my tail! Senseless louts! Who do they think they are! And that little gray! Those grays are always a problem. No one likes grays, congenitally slothful, fit for nothing but games

and songs. Heng-chiang taught him to run away. Smacked him senseless with his golden fist. I will have order!

"Mistress Yün-t'ung, Mistress Yün-t'ung, Mistress Yün-t'ung."

"Now raise your claw when you have a question, Green 2." Yün-t'ung's mood softened. Green 2 was such a sweet child. The little dragon waved her claw in the air. "Yes, my dear."

"Mistress Yün-t'ung, Gray 3 and Gray 1 were talking in the back."

"Name's not Gray 3. It's Wen Ch'ang." He glared at the little Green who the other dragonettes had already named "Teacher's Tail Wiper."

"Now stop that bullying, Gray 3. Stop this instant! You don't want me to call Heng-chiang again, do you?"

"No, no."

"No, no' what?"

"No, no, Mistress Yün-t'ung."

"That's much better. Now let's all take our seats. Yes, Brown 4, I know they're scratchy. Just find your place. Don't squirm, Gray 1! Sit up straight, Black 3! Let's not take all day. Find your places." *Having the dragonettes sit according to color had been a stroke of genius. Painting numbers on them helped even more. Sitting in numerical order helped them with their figures. And I can keep those grays where I can watch them! Now they all know who they are and where they belong. Plus I don't have to remember their silly names.* "All right, children, now that everyone's in place, it's time. Wait just a moment. Where is Blue 4?" Yün-t'ung could have sworn the pretty little dragonette had been primly sitting on her stone just a moment before.

Green 2 immediately began waving her claw. "Ooo, ooo, Mistress Yün-t'ung, I know, I know."

"Yes, child."

"Han Chung-li came and got her. He took her into the chorten."

"Well, that's fine. He's so generous with his special instruction."

"I'll bet he is!" Wen Ch'ang leered.

"That will be enough of that filth. Anymore and I'll wash your mouth out with salt and sand. And sit up straight. No respectable dragon slouches! Han Chung-li is one of the founders of the Great Society. You should all hope one day to be as great as he is. Now children, back to business. We were just about to recite the laws." She stared down those few who groaned. "All together now. What is the first law?"

"The greatest good is the community."

"Some of you aren't speaking up! Especially you grays. You don't want to stay after school, do you? Let's try again!"

"THE GREATEST GOOD IS THE COMMUNITY."

"That's much better. Now the second law."

"THE BEST DRAGON IS A WORKING DRAGON."

"The third."

"GOOD DRAGONS ARE ALWAYS ON TIME."

As Yün-t'ung proceeded mechanically through the recitation, her mind began to wander: *I'm a much better teacher than that old fogey Kuan-ti. Look what a mess he made out of Ao Rue. He never should have been a member of the Council of Five. Why bother with reading? Stupid tablets! He couldn't even behave properly. Always off by himself. Just plain anti-social. Everyone knows it isn't good to be alone. Why Ch'ang-o and I talked of that often!* Thinking of Ch'ang-o reminded her of Nü-kua. *Just goes to show you that even the best can go bad. Off somewhere, doing who knows what, with that outcast Ao Rue. I'll have to talk to Lei-kung about getting her back. She has such good breeding. Shame to waste it. With the right guidance, my help, she'd be a fine citizen. Just perfect for that splendid Erh-lang. Yes, I'll have to see to that.*

Yün-t'ung's daydream was broken by a waving claw. "Now, Black 2, it isn't polite to interrupt."

"But look, look, Mistress Yün-t'ung; look at the yellow cloud. Why is it moving so fast?"

In spite of herself, Yün-t'ung looked. Coming at them, snaking in and out of the dunes, was indeed something that looked like a very solid cloud, an odd yellow shape. She saw strange black, twitching patterns on its surface and wondered if it was the beginning of another of those awful sand storms, a Buran that left everyone and everything covered with talc. *Something about the charged atmosphere; never did understand that. Who cares. Most important, if the dragonettes get dirty, I'll have to repaint all the numbers after they wash. There's no chance to get them inside the chorten before it hits.* Yün-t'ung sighed under the weight of another unexpected task. She was too surprised to move when the cloud abruptly changed course, swept by, and brushed her wing.

The dragonettes watched it pass in amazement. When they looked back at Yün-t'ung, they were astonished to find her crying uncontrollably. Between great gasping sobs, she cried out: "Not worth it. Useless. Void. Waste." They tried to repeat after her, not understanding, but she'd never asked them for that. Then, with a great shriek, she took to the air. Being dutiful, well-trained, and trusting students, they followed their teacher into the sky. In her despair, Yün-t'ung pulled as many as she could to her. The dragonettes thought this was a new game and gathered around her, reveling in following her erratic flight. *Why it was Follow the Tail! School could be fun!*

One didn't go. Gray 3 stayed on his block sulking and muttering. "Name's Wen Ch'ang." He ignored the great explosion and ducked his head as colored pebbles began to rain down on him. After awhile, he got down and kicked his stone over. He threw a few clawfuls of the funny stones at the chorten and was pleased when some rattled off the walls. The adult dragons working to finish it didn't even look up. *Gonna find some water. Wash this stupid number off. Find some friends.* He happily took to the air, thinking about a game of Find the Tail or Silly Rhyme. "Rum, tum, cum, bum, gum, jum, plum, flum, lum, dumb-dumb," he hummed to himself. He was the best at Silly Rhyme.

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Lei-kung had heard Yün-t'ung's cries. He rushed to the peak of the chorten. He was just in time to see the chain of bursts that took her and the dragonettes into oblivion. *Shark guts, what a waste! Teach me to put someone as stupid as Yün-t'ung in charge of anything. Do I have to do everything? Still, who better to teach my way. That damn yellow blob! Didn't tell it to feed. Weren't Feng-po and Ch'ang-o enough? Dumb thing! No sense of destiny at all! Acts as if the future didn't exist. About time I taught it who's in charge!* His rage drove him down into the chorten and toward the cavern. Halfway, he stopped. *Easy, clever tail, there's something to be made of this. Use this to make the creature work the lights with me. Maybe get that final spell to put that irritation Ao Rue away? Yes! Yes! Use this. After all, they were only dragonettes.*