

Chapter 15
1220 words

Panic and fear gave Ao Rue a speed he'd never suspected. As he banked toward the gold mine, Ch'ang-o shot into the sky. Her flight was erratic, broken. She snapped at her own tail. She careened first one way, then another. She cried emptiness. Before he could get to her, she exploded into a brightly-colored cloud. He cringed from the blast. She was gone. All that remained was a cascade of jewels. The cats yowled along the ridge, a choir of agony. A small one skittered away from the falling gems; its wildly flailing legs threw a wake of sand, gouged ruts and furrows. Ao Rue's eyes blazed with useless magic. He reached out for Feng-po. Insanely, his friend was still in the mine. Blue fire crinkled over Ao Rue's wings. He snapped them out to stop his hysterical flight. They chipped and scored the stone as he plunged into the mine. The rock yielded easily to his scales and magic. He madly raced down the winding tunnels following the mind scent.

He finally found Feng-po in a dark grotto of his friend's own making. The hellish scene stopped Ao Rue's rush. Feng-po was mining the gold in a whirlpool of Azghun Demons. Wave after wave spun around him. Ao Rue could barely see him through the whirling hive. Feng-po was whimpering, but not for a moment did he stop digging, cease clawing at the wall. Over and over again, he scraped the gold ore out, pushed it beneath his belly, caught it with his hind legs, and threw it into a waiting pile. His head swung wildly from side to side, spit flew from his slack mouth as the Demons closed on his life. Terror ripped the lids back from his eyes. He stared wildly at the circling Demons. Still he dug and clawed, a terrified puppet. In that instant, Ao Rue had a vision of Feng-po's body packed with vermin, eating him from the inside out, pus-covered grubs spilling from his nostrils, mouth.

NO! Ao Rue screamed fire. Yellow spheres burst like polyps; ichor bubbled across the floor, etched the walls. As one, the Demons streaked for a dark tunnel. Ao Rue threw a sun-struck blue sphere. Their hole sealed; stone melted into itself. They turned; sensed their new enemy. In mindless hunger, they dove for his eyes. He burned them all. Fanned his flame about the cave until the walls shone white. Burned until nothing remained. Still deep in the blood rage, he splashed through their remains to Feng-po, grabbed the black thread that bound him to Lei-kung, and ripped it to shreds in his claws. Feng-po collapsed in a sobbing heap.

"Easy, old friend, easy." Ao Rue slid Feng-po's wing over his shoulder, lifted him easily, carried him up the tunnel into the sun. Ao Rue's eyes still burned brightly; he sent wave after wave of healing into his friend's scales.

"Nothing . . . Ao Rue . . . nothing; I could do nothing." Feng-po's voice jerked and wracked with sobs. "Ch'ang-o, is she all right? They touched her, lightly, almost lovingly. She ran. Screamed and screamed. I couldn't follow. Couldn't call. Just dig, dig, dig. Scrape, claw, scrape. As if all the world were in that vein. Ch'ang-o. Ch'ang-o." His voice rose in hysteria. "Ch'ang-o! Ch'ang-o!"

Ao Rue held him. Grasped his struggles in his arms; curled his talons around the heaving body. Pulled Feng-po to his chest. Rocked him. Poured healing into him. Slowly, his friend yielded to his own deep fatigue and Ao Rue's magic. His struggles eased. Ao Rue still held him.

Finally, Feng-po gently pushed himself away. He looked up into the blue of Ao Rue's eyes and whispered plaintively, "Ch'ang-o?"

"She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"No, Feng-po, dead. The Demons poisoned her. She took her life with her own fires. She's beyond pain now. She's free of Lei-kung's tyranny. We should be so lucky."

"Dead? How can that be? I could have loved her, Ao Rue. I could have! She stayed so close. Always at my side. No matter how horrible, she never abandoned me. I could have loved her. I could have." His voice began to fade to failure.

"Listen to me!" Ao Rue jerked him up. "Go to Mud-Pit Hollow. No one will think to look there. It's got water, fruit. Do you know where it is?" Feng-po shook his head a defeated no. It hung like an overripe fruit from his neck. "All right, all right, it's that way." Ao Rue pointed, not even trusting to tell him a direction. "Bury yourself in the mud. Keep your mind closed. I'll find you when need requires. Avoid Lei-kung and his slime at all costs. Do you understand? Do you understand!"

Feng-po finally acknowledged. "Water, you say. I'm so tired. Maybe I can wash. I've felt so filthy for so long."

"Now you're just dirty, my friend. Go, go, I'll cover your back until you're safely away." Feng-po had little will; little fight left in him. He finally responded to Ao Rue's pleas, gathered what meager strength remained, and took to the air. Ao Rue watched him fly off; his friend looked so tired. His wings trembled against the air. A rush of deep sadness descended on Ao Rue: *I wonder if we'll ever have another party? Any more oysters and bubbly? The time, the mood, for parties is done! Slain by mindless creatures who know neither pleasure nor pain!*

As he turned to the strange glitter that now marked the yellow sand and clay in front of the cave, he felt no triumph in his first victory. Mei-chou had been right; the glitter sand was beautiful. He scooped some of it up. It sickened him. *Touching it. Is this a violation, a desecration?* He let it run reverently from his claw back on to the sand. Its colors caught the fading sun. *Is this all a dragon is? Rose-pink for compassion, pistachio-green for growth, tender peach for love.* Large tears formed and welled down his snout. They smacked and pushed the sand. He let them mingle with the jewels: *glowing lilac for contemplation, ruby red for passion, pearl black for perseverance, warm rust for tenderness. Is there no one who will speak for Ch'ang-o? Porphyry white for purity, orange-tinted carnelian for energy.* He let his tears give the colors luster.

The moment gave him voice: "Ch'ang-o, no one would call you a great dragon. You nurtured Nü-kua with a purpose bordering on obsession. You may rest easy that I will protect her as the sun guards the sky! You loved my friend, Feng-po, with an energy that

he probably didn't deserve but that gave him pleasure. Your purity remained in your soul, in your intentions. Of all of us, you may have been the least soiled. We are diminished by your passing. Wherever it is you go, whatever place of wonder only the cats can see, may it be soft and warm and free from the world's pain. Your death is the first; you have escaped the dread that now haunts us all. Go in peace. Travel in safety. Be well. We will miss you."

He left her remains scattered where they were. That felt wrong. But he knew that the vast sea would never hold all the jewels that would soon fall like hail.