

Chapter 16
2125 words

Ao Rue was slow getting back to Spring Halt. He had wanted to return to Nü-kua as quickly as possible; she hadn't been pleased with his abrupt departure. However, his first encounter with the Azghun Demons and healing Feng-po had exhausted him more than he'd thought. *Magic is so curious. When it rises, I feel as if I have the strength to split the world. When it passes, I'm no stronger than a kitten. Kuan-ti, you should be here! I have so many questions, so few answers.* The sea called to him: her comforting depths, her effortless existence. *To return, to rest in her lull. The land is not a good place.* He landed at the edge of Spring Halt. Walking was much slower than flying. *I need the time to think. Wouldn't do to have Nü-kua see me weak and confused! Heroes don't get this way.*

"Well, if it isn't the late-night bird." Mei-chou was sitting in a small clearing. It was like she had been waiting, had known where he'd pass.

"Ch'ang-o's dead. Demons nearly got Feng-po too. You were right. There is an ugly beauty in dragon death. It's something I hope I'll never see again."

"Guess again. The Demons struck again shortly after you saved Feng-po. They got Yün-t'ung and a bunch of dragonettes."

"Not dragonettes! What lives did they have? All they ever got to do was play and run wild. Shame about Yün-t'ung; she always cared so much about the young ones."

"That old battle-ax. All she cared about was her own power. Wanted to remake every dragonette into some crystal image of perfection. The problem was that she thought they should be small adults. Took a whole bunch of them with her. The Demons hadn't even touched them. She called them to her."

"Mei-chou, it's not good to speak ill of the dead. Show some respect!"

"Respect? Camel dung! Save me the clichés. Respect is earned, not given. What are you trying to tell me? You think that bad livers turn into good corpses? Do you?"

"I'm not sure what I think. Right now I'm wondering how I'm going to save dragonkind if I've got to be in two places at once. I'm going to be leaving torn, bloody hunks of myself all over the place."

"You've got to get rid of this adolescent melodrama for one thing. Of course, you can't be everywhere. You also can't be all things to all dragons. Leave that to entertainers and politicians. They're useless anyway. Well, a good entertainer's worth something," Mei-chou muttered under her breath. "You need to get organized. Free some more dragons from Lei-kung's control. Raise an army. Teach them to flame the Demons without being touched. You can name yourselves the Shin-tien Yen-wang, after the Yama Kings, the Kings of the Ten Law Courts if you insist on being dramatic. Appropriate name, ancient enough to have mythic value, and you will be restoring proper law to this tortured world."

"How can I do that? You yourself said I was a dreamweaver, at my best when I'm alone. Who's going to listen to me? All Lei-kung has to do is trot out Chih-nil, and I'll be a clown again. They wouldn't listen to me anyway. I have the charisma of a hedgehog."

"That's not completely true. You could have charisma to burn. You've just never tried. Understandable -- it's not one of the great traits. Motivating a lot of superficial minds for ephemeral reasons isn't admirable. It reeks too much of propaganda and brainwashing! Anyway, you don't have to worry about Chih-nil; she's dead."

"Dead? The Demons got her too?" Despite the way she had used him, Ao Rue felt grief. *She was so beautiful!*

"You love far too well, my large friend. Your loyalty, your quickness to be vulnerable, will be your downfall if you're not careful. One day you'll be faithful when you should be wise and prudent. You have no reason to mourn her. She was slain by her greed, by her own selfishness. Lei-kung killed her; you can't blame the Demons for her."

"Lei-kung again!" Ao Rue's eyes began to spin in rage. "I'll tear his heart out and feed it to him while it's beating!"

"Easy; take it easy. There'll be time enough for that. And you mustn't go after him in anger. He's too clever. This is a time for intelligence, not emotion."

Ao Rue cooled. "What do you propose then? Lei-kung's got almost every dragon dancing on the end of a black leash. Yolbas, Heng-chiang, Erh-lang, and that scum Han Chung-li are all over the place doing his bidding. Lu-hsing has got most of the stronger dragons groveling at veins of gold. You didn't see how helpless Feng-po was. Lei-kung could raise an army against us with a tug of his claw. The odds are too great. I just don't know; I don't know."

"This is a bad time to be negative. You can hardly expect this to be easy." *He's so emotional, so mercuric. But he's all we've got!*

"All right, how about this? Tomorrow I'll go to Mud-Pit and get Feng-po. Then, he and Nü-kua can sit down with you and me and try to figure something out."

"Me and Nü-kua, me and Feng-po?" Mei-chou obviously thought the idea was completely outlandish.

"Of course, what's the matter with you? You say a world hangs in the balance, and you've got a problem talking to my friends? You know Feng-po's name means 'Quick Stepper, Earl of the Wind.' Sure he drinks. Sure he used to chase tails more than ideas, but that's all over. He's a good dragon."

"Ao Rue, those meanings are very, very old. They don't mean much anymore."

The dragon went on as if he hadn't even heard. Indignation had taken over. "And Nü-kua, she'll always be at my side! She'd die for me!"

"You don't understand. You talk to them for me. Cats just can't talk to anyone. They can't hold our attention. And you've got to be careful of Nü-kua. She's barely an adult. She believes in things that aren't good for you, may destroy you. She's like the others."

"Mei-chou! How can you say that. She'll never betray me! She knows me, believes in me! How dare you believe that the most meager dragon isn't better than the greatest cat. How can you be so stupid!" Ao Rue turned abruptly and stalked off to talk to Nü-kua. *She'll understand my pain!*

The First of the First watched him go, *Oh, Ao Rue, greatest of the great, is your soul afraid?*

Ao Rue slowed his rush when he realized he was tearing up his own flowers. Carefully he patted some of them back into the sandy loam. *I'll have to apologize to Mei-chou. She means well; she just doesn't understand the pressure I'm under. Doesn't understand anything about dragons, especially Nü-kua.* With his rambunctiousness slowed and his mind closed upon itself, Nü-kua didn't notice his arrival. His first look drained all anger, all pain, from him. She was curled near the edge of the water. The moonlight burnished her rose-gold scales. The landscape, the flowers, the moist air were blended around her. *Have I ever seen such beauty? She is beauty incarnate!* Gathered at her side were the wild sheep, the argali, that had avoided him the day before. A ewe and lamb slept against her haunch. Somewhere she'd found some dried grain and had it cupped in her claw. Crowd after crowd of gerbils and hamsters harvested the plenty and ran back to their burrows with the unexpected treasure. Red-leg partridges pecked at the bounty that spilled from their packed cheeks. Nearby, a family of hedgehogs were eating some grubs from a rotten log. All nature seemed to embrace her benign presence. Ao Rue opened his mind and called in a mental whisper, "My Bright Eyes."

Her head turned slowly toward him. She radiated caring. To Ao Rue, it seemed all the love in the world glowed in her face. "Come, my Thoth; see my babies. So helpless. I could lie here forever caring for them."

"I can't," he spoke as softly as he could, but already the animals were uneasy. "They're afraid of me. I'll wait 'til they go."

"I don't think I can wait for that." She slowly rose to her feet. The ewe and lamb bleated at the disturbance. She tossed the grain into the undergrowth; scurrying feet chased it. Gently, she tried to nudge the argali away, tried to shoo the partridges. "Oh, Ao Rue, they won't go. I can't hurt them. What should I do?"

"It's all right, my love. I'll take care of it." He rose to his full height and quietly cleared his throat. The animals just looked at him. He was doubly surprised since the light breeze was carrying his scent to them. He took one step into the clearing. Still no effect. *My Bright Eyes, she has overcome even their fear of me.* Since he didn't want to hurt them either, he projected a mental need, a welcome, to the other side of the water. Reluctantly, they began to leave. The ewe still needed to nudge her lamb with her nose. It bleated again as it moved away. Nü-kua's head tilted to the side in response and concern.

She turned as he came to her side, "Thoth, you've made me a paradise!"

"It is ever my hope and intention to do so always."

"You look so tired." She raised her claw to caress his snout.

He reached out and drew her within his wings. "I have something very painful to tell you."

"You're not hurt are you? No one said anything ugly to you?"

"I'm fine. It's Ch'ang-o. She's dead. The Demons took her."

Nü-kua leaned back within his wings until she could look at him. Her eyes began to fill with tears. "Was there much pain? I wouldn't have wanted her to suffer."

Ao Rue couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth, "No, it was quick."

"Well, I guess she had a full life. Now, at least, she won't be worrying about me all the time. The Demons are that terrible then?"

"Yes, that and more. Mei-chou told me they killed Yün-t'ung and some dragonettes today. The first among many."

"Yolbas and Erh-lang will stop them. Lei-kung can't allow dragons to die." She was so confident; Ch'ang-o seemed gone from her mind.

"It's not that simple. Somehow, Lei-kung doesn't care, and what he feels they all follow."

"I can't believe that!"

"Nü-kua, there's a web of evil that will strangle all life if it's not stopped. You must understand that. You must stay here. I don't know what I'll do if anything happens to you."

"Thoth, Thoth, you're overwrought. If no other dragon can stop these Demons, you will."

"You just don't understand. I can't be everywhere. Right now it's just us, Feng-po, and Mei-chou. By the gods, there are enough torn, bleeding pieces of me scattered all over. I don't know if I can do it; don't know if I want to do it."

"Oh, my poor baby." Nü-kua curled out of his wings, opened hers, and drew his head to her breast. "I will help you. You can do anything. You can't leave our friends in need. You mustn't abandon them." As she spoke, he knew that what choice he had was now gone. It was as if fate was real. He sighed his resignation as she continued. "And, my Thoth, there must be a future. We have something of the greatest importance to do." As he raised her head to look at her, he saw that same coy look, "Ao Rue, I want an egg, your egg, our egg. I want that more than anything!"

Ao Rue was absolutely disgusted with himself as he felt a weight descend on him not unlike Lei-kung's thread. "Oh, my Bright Eyes, I don't know. This just isn't the right time." Darkness moved briefly across her face. He tried to justify himself, "Today, today, I've just had too much death to think of life. You must be patient. I don't know if this will be a world I would wish for any living thing. I just don't know. Let's talk more about it tomorrow after I make sure Feng-po's all right."

"You're right. We'll talk more later." He was grateful for her quick understanding. He didn't understand the raw, all-powerful urge that ran in her. "Come, my Thoth, it's time for us to sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow. I've prepared a bed of fragrant herbs. Let's forget the world; forget your Demons. Think only of me! Come, curl your tail in mine!"