

Chapter 18  
1725 words

Ao Rue loafed along on the warm currents that rose from the sand. He flew toward the peaks of the Barkul Range. Snow was now beginning to form high up. Once these mountains had been no more than islands, craggy resting points punching out of the sea. The terraforming had changed so much. If he looked carefully, he could still see the faint-green dusting of dead algae that marked the slopes and enormous jagged stone slabs. They looked as if they had been thrown upward by some great magic. They hadn't; the ocean had simply dropped away, took her warmth, and left them to the desert air. The great streaks of salt exposed their origins. Dawn might have thrown great colors on them. Now they were simply dull. *I wonder how many freezing nights and blazing days will crack enough stone into soil for anything to grow?*

He felt comfortable having the mountains between himself and Lei-kung's chorten. So far, not even Erh-lang had been able to top the summit of the Bogdo-ola, the Barkul Range's highest peak. *I wonder if I could? Not this morning! Not after a night with Nü-kua! Air's too thin at the summit to fly anyway.* They had laughed to discover that her bed of herbs had made them both a cacophony of scents. Love turned even smells into music. The licorice had dominated with subtle hints of saffron and ginger. It made a good excuse for a bath and a gold dusting. Which, of course, had led to more love play. *I could spend my life being this kind of weary!* She hadn't even mentioned the egg in the morning and had readily shared his offering of currants and figs. He hadn't been sure if she'd liked them, but their future held more than enough time to taste all the varieties of the world. *My Bright Eyes, I have so much to show you. So many dreams to create for us both. The egg can wait! If an egg at all. This is our time!* He was firm in his uncertainty. *Now all I have to do is figure out how to tell her. It's so hard to say no to her.*

He glanced again at the heights. For now, Ao Rue wasn't too interested in climbing the clouds that tipped and ringed the summits. *There are enough passes to cut through before and beyond Lei-kung's salted plain. I wonder if he is actually clever enough to have put his chorten where there's no direct route between it and Spring Halt? I must say I'm grateful not to have to look at his brine pools and lines of grunting dragons!*

As he began to bank through the Ravine of Baboons toward Mud-Pit Hollow, he was becoming increasingly anxious to see Feng-po. Now that he was closer, he saw a small group of dragonettes playing Find the Tail amid the crevasses and outcroppings. He had to laugh. Not only were those strange screeching, indignant baboons giving away every hiding place, but the little ones were so excited that small puffs of smoke rose from each haven. That, of course, drew the inevitable cats to bask in it. So where the cats were and the baboons weren't, there were dragonettes. Ao Rue dropped a little lower. He could now see the little gray who was IT. Hiding places fanned out above him. His snout was buried beneath his wing; he was counting so hard that his tail thumped the cadence. *Leave it to the young to find games in the midst of disaster. At least, for the time being, they're safe from Lei-kung on this side of the Range.*

Knowing that Feng-po would have reached his mind if he wasn't safe, Ao Rue lingered on the thermals, spinning about and waiting for the little gray to finish his count and the game to begin in earnest. Suddenly, the cats scattered; even the baboons disappeared into silence. Ao Rue was puzzled. He scanned the mountain for the cause. *THERE! THERE! DEMONS! THIRTY OR MORE. COMING UP THE MOUNTAIN. AFTER THE DRAGONETTES!* Ao Rue's reaction was instantaneous, thoughtless. His eyes lit; his wings snapped back; he streaked for the space between the dragonettes and the speeding Demons. Blue fire streamed from his wings as he closed the distance. The little gray counted on, oblivious to his certain doom.

*Gravity not enough! Too slow! Won't make it!* Just he thought he wouldn't be in time, Ao Rue felt the magic rise higher in him. Now he pushed the air. It screamed through his scales, turning their edges red with heat. His claws gouged the stone with the force of his landing. His wings snapped out to block the Demons from their unsuspecting prey. Billows of blue force rolled from his wings. Like ghostly waves, they tumbled noiselessly down the slope. The Demons flying above the rocks were immediately destroyed in sparking moments of silver lightning. They made no cries. Ao Rue fought in the silence of the whistling, mountain winds. *Still among the rocks. Closer.* He summoned the silver-blue sword and brought his fire up. He had no time to warn the little gray, who seemed to be counting all the stars in the heavens. Demons began to pop from among the stones, dancing in chaotic frenzy. Now he had no time to think of anything. He spun madly, tumbled, stood on wing tip as he threw fire and cut demons in a blur of magic and motion. Slowly, despite all he could do, their swooping numbers backed him closer and closer to the cliff face and the dragonette. His mind screamed out, *YOU CANNOT PASS!* Full arousal came. His words rushed from his mind unsummoned: *I AM BEYOND THE POWERS OF EARTH, WIND, AIR, FIRE! I AM PRIMAL! I STAND BETWEEN DEATH AND LIFE! YOU CANNOT PASS!* The Demons hesitated before his terrible majesty. It was all Ao Rue needed. With a rush, he dismissed the sword and gathered them all into his wings. Pulled them to his chest. He felt their craving, their hunger. The membranes of his wings bulged as they frantically sought escape. His magic spoke again: *YOU CANNOT PASS!* His wings slammed closed on empty air.

Stunned by his own actions, he slowly opened his wings. He looked down, expecting to see ravaged scales, plundered flesh. He cried his relief to his heart, *There's nothing. I'm whole, whole in body and soul!*

As he turned to see if the little gray was safe, he almost burst out laughing. He was still counting away. Ao Rue moved closer. Yet one more Demon shot from a fault in the rock almost at the little gray's feet. Ao Rue slapped the dragonette out of the way with his tail and flamed the Demon gone. For good measure, he scoured the fault with fire.

"Hey, whata ye doin'. Watch it, ye oaf! Hit me with yere tail, ye did!"

Ao Rue turned to find a very angry dragonette picking himself up from the ground. Ao Rue was taken aback; the dragonette wasn't.

"Big dragons always bossin', smackin'. Why bother with ye? Gotten too dumb to fly. Diggin' around in the ground."

"I did save you." Ao Rue had recovered his poise.

"From what? Ain't nuttin' here. Get outta here."

"There were Demons all over the place!"

"Yea, where are they now?"

Ao Rue knew this conversation wasn't going anywhere. Dragonettes were always difficult. *Can't imagine why Nü-kua wants one.* He smiled laconically as he realized that he was a hero with no witnesses again, which was no hero at all. He decided to try another approach. "What's your name, little fellow?"

"Not little, almost full grown. Name's Wen Ch'ang! Mine, it is, it is! No one gonna call me Gray 3!"

"That is an auspicious name." Any anger that might have been gathering in Ao Rue vanished. He realized this might be the only survivor of Yün-t'ung's attempt at teaching.

"What's 'oorspeccess'? Ye bein' mean again?"

"No, it was a compliment. You're quite a dragonette."

"I'm the champeen silly rhymer, I am, I am!"

"With that name, you should be." This one was audacious even for a dragonette. "You do know who I am, don't you?"

"Yea, yere the weird one Yün-t'ung was warnin' us about. Ao Rue, funny blue eyes, know ye anywhere. Ye really a sorcerer?"

Ao Rue had a strange thought. "Yes, I am, Wen Ch'ang, Champion Silly Rhymer. I am the last great sorcerer and I'd like you to think about something. Do the other dragonettes listen to you?"

"Course, champeen, ain't I!"

*I'll have to take a chance that he's not all bravado. That the sorcery has some weight.* "Wen Ch'ang, I want you to talk to your friends about going back to the sea. What's left of it anyway. You remember the spell?"

"Sure, any dummy can do that."

Ao Rue smiled as he remembered Erh-lang. "Well, would you think about it?"

"Why should I do anythin' ye say!"

"Easy now. It was just a suggestion." *So much for sorcery gaining any respect.* "You don't have to do anything you don't want. But you did like the sea better than the land?"

"Right about that, ye are. Don't hafta do nuttin'!"

"But don't your friends listen to you?"

"Sure. OK, think about it I will. Sea was better. Now get outta here. Got a game to play!"

"Certainly. I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Ye bet ye are! But ye ain't too bad. Not like that witch Yün-t'ung or that scarecrow Lei-kung."

"Why, thank you, Wen Ch'ang; you're not too bad either. I'll see you around."

As Ao Rue took to the air, he heard the little gray's parting call, "If yere lucky."

Ao Rue looked back. Wen Ch'ang was happily hunting among the rocks for his friends. *Well, it was a good try. One valuable piece of information out of all this: missing the terraforming has made me immune to the Demons. Their touch had no effect. Probably Nü-kua too! Good. She's safe, but no one else. Another mixed blessing. Only an empty world is a simple one. Need to talk to Feng-po about all this.*

Ao Rue increased his speed toward Mud-Pit Hollow. He wondered if Wen Ch'ang would grow up into anything worthwhile . . . if the Demons let him grow up at all.