

Chapter 20
1485 words

"But you've got to go; he needs you." Mei-chou was beginning to despair that she'd ever get through to Nü-kua.

"Why should I listen to you. Why should I believe you. You never even talked to me before. Why do you cats hang around so much anyway if we're not even good enough to talk to?" Again, Nü-kua began to stalk away. Mei-chou kept after her, ran at her side.

"If you don't go, Lei-kung will flay him alive. You're the only one who can save him. Without you, he's powerless. You know that!"

"I know nothing of the sort! Why should I take your word for anything. How do I know you cats tell the truth. I'm sure Ao Rue's fine. He'd call me if he wasn't. Besides, no one can hurt him. He's the greatest sorcerer who ever lived!" A tone of reverence and awe crept into her voice.

"Nü-kua, Nü-kua, he'd never endanger you if he was in trouble. He loves you, and when a sorcerer loves, it's sealed forever in eternity. You know how his magic works. He can't do anything significant for himself. You've got to go to him! That foul Lei-kung has called the entire might of the Northern Lights down on him."

"I'm not so sure Lei-kung's so foul. Erh-lang says he's a great leader. Continually sacrificing himself for the greater good."

"Oh, save me! You don't listen to that oaf Erh-lang, do you? If Ao Rue's the greatest sorcerer, that lummoX is the greatest non-becomer the world has ever seen. He'll never be anything!"

"How dare you criticize my friends, you little moron. Everyone says Erh-lang's wonderful; a whole lot more dragons like him than Ao Rue."

"So what are you doing? Hanging around as a favor to him?"

"Nonsense, I love him. He's so great, so confident! He makes me feel secure. And when we have our egg, he'll make me the happiest dragon in the whole world!"

"How can you chain him to an egg? You know, there are more important things in the world than breeding and eggs. You're going to drag him down, make him no better than anyone else!"

"You're ridiculous! You cats don't know anything," Nü-kua's anger began to rise to the point that smoke leaked from her nostrils. Mei-chou didn't mind that at all and moved to let it flow over her. "All you care about is smoke. Once we have our egg, Ao Rue will forget his silliness. He'll settle down to a great life. I'll be so happy curled around my egg. Then, when it hatches, I'll have a little dragonling to cuddle. Ao Rue will hunt and feed us and protect us. He'll make Spring Halt even more beautiful. I've already got a lot of ideas for changes. All my friends can bring their dragonlings by. It will be wonderful."

"Right," Mei-chou was losing patience, "you'll lie around as your belly swells, then you'll get to shove food down its screaming throat, and finally when it becomes a dragonette, it will wander off as if you never existed. Terrific plan!" Mei-chou couldn't help her sarcasm. Nü-kua didn't even notice.

"That doesn't have to happen. Yün-t'ung had some wonderful ideas about teaching dragonettes and keeping them around."

"Yün-t'ung's dead."

"Whatever. Her ideas are still good."

"Look, while we argue, Ao Rue's trapped. Are you going to go to him or not?"

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't." Mei-chou's ears were starting to lay back and the fur on her back had begun to rise.

"Ao Rue made me swear never to cross the Barkul Range. He said it was too dangerous. He made me promise to stay on this side."

Mei-chou sighed, "I don't think he had this situation in mind when he made you do that."

"I still only have your word that he's in trouble. And he wouldn't make me promise something if it wasn't for my own good. Even if he is in trouble, he'd want me to be safe. Anyway, he's so strong, that even if I left him, he'd be all right. It wouldn't hurt him. I think the best thing, what Ao Rue would want, is for me to find Erh-lang and have him protect me. Yes, that's it. That's what I'll do. There's no point in me staying here, listening to some doomsayer of a cat, and getting depressed. Ao Rue wouldn't want me to be upset!"

"So you're not going; you won't help him."

"Ao Rue wouldn't want me to. I've made up my mind. I'm doing what he'd think is best!"

This time when Nü-kua stalked off, Mei-chou didn't follow. She just sat there, her tail lashing in frustration. *That was a major waste of time. I'll have to go myself. Long run. Enough wolves, mastiffs, snow leopards, eagles, and vultures between here and there to have me for lunch a hundred times over. I'll never be in time without a ride. No idea if I can do anything if I do get there.* She shivered in fear. Nevertheless, she started out. *No one lives forever. Might as well go out in glory, even if it is for that hothead Ao Rue. Didn't I tell him to stay calm, didn't I! Who knows if evoking the Ancient Bond of the Guardianship will even work? Will I be enough to arouse his protection? Damn that Nü-kua; she was a sure thing!*

Mei-chou broke into a ground-eating lope. As she started to head out of the oasis toward the Ravine of Baboons, she heard the black eagles and vultures begin to hunt the helpless. *So much for paradise. Nothing I can do.* Then, she heard a strange sing-song chant in the undergrowth, "cow, wow, sow, dow, crow, so, mellow, hollow, loaw, mau, jell-o, gallow, row." Going to its source, she found a little gray dragonette sitting all by himself, playing with rhymes.

Surprised by her good luck, she called, "You, boy, get over here. I need you!"

He looked up, a sullen look immediately forming on his snout, "Name's Wen Ch'ang; how come nobody calls me right. Ain't no boy. Stupid cat! Practicing. Go away! Ye bother me."

"Forget that. We don't have time to dance around, boy. Get off your tail! You have to take me to Ao Rue; he's in dire peril."

"Don't hafta do nuttin' I don't want! Hit me with his tail, he did."

"I'm sure there was good reason. I'll bet he apologized."

"He did, he did. Never hadda big one say sorry before. Maybe OK."

"Fine, fine. I need you to fly me to Lei-kung's chorten right now."

"Chorten's too ugly. Lei-kung's bad. No way, cat!"

Mei-chou took a deep breath; she didn't have time to cajole. *I'd hoped to save this energy. Glad I didn't waste it on Nü-kua! Can this possibly work after all these eons?* She looked directly into Wen Ch'ang's eyes. "I am Mei-chou, the First of the First, the Guide Eternal. I invoke the Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur! The ancient mind oath. I call upon our friendship and your aid!"

Something clicked in the back of Wen Ch'ang's young mind. He snapped to attention. All the belligerence fell away from him. "How can I serve ye."

"To Lei-kung's chorten; and don't spare the wings, boy."

"Still not sure."

"All right, tough guy, how about just getting me close. I can walk the rest of the way."

Wen Ch'ang paused and thought for a moment, "Can do that." The little gray extended a claw; Mei-chou climbed into it. He curled it protectively to his chest, did a short run, and took to the air.

Mei-chou had forgotten that dragonettes weren't the fastest things around. She settled in for a long flight. "Boy, could you pick it up a little? At this rate, we won't be there 'til dawn tomorrow."

"Will try, but it's a long way."

"Give some thought to the fact that this might be the single most important thing you've ever done in your short life. That the future of the world's greatest dragon, if not the world itself, hangs on your wings today. Consider that, if we don't make it, there won't be even a slim chance that you'll ever fly free as an adult or speak another rhyme!" Wen Ch'ang's wing beat deepened and quickened a bit.

"Best I can do."

"That's all I can ask. You're already doing more than that baby Nü-kua. By the bye, what color are your eyes?"

"They aggramarin."

"That's 'aquamarine.' You sure they're not blue?"

"No, no, not freak. Don't wanna be no freak! Not special."

"Wen Ch'ang, one day you may have no choice about that."

The little gray dragonette had no answer for her, but he was inordinately pleased that Mei-chou had remembered his name. He did so like feeling important.