

Chapter 21  
2775 words

Ao Rue hung in the web. It had been a long night. He hadn't slept much. The Demons had been busy. Fireball after fireball had marked the night sky. If he had not known what they were, he might have thought the falls of multicolored light were beautiful. As it was, each dragon's bejeweled death took a piece from him just as surely as Lei-kung's talons soon would. Over and over again, he tried the spells of opening. The web twitched and jiggled, mocked his strength, and refused him the freedom to be a hero. Now, as the sun began to reveal the wasteland, he could see the dragons already gathering for the morning's festivities, fewer than yesterday, more than tomorrow. *I should forgive their macabre fascination. Lei-kung drags them here on his black threads. They know not what they do. Still resentment rose in him: None of them ever thought of me, cared for me. They mocked what I loved even when we were in the sea! Do they ever know what they do?*

His web-darkened eyes could just make out two dragons, flying and dancing among the distant clouds. As the dawn caught the smaller, he thought he saw a flash of rose-gold. *Nü-kua? Nü-kua and Erh-lang? No, it couldn't be her. She would never betray me. I'm sure, absolutely sure! Still, if it is her, perhaps she'll be safe for a little while. Erh-lang would protect her as long as he didn't tire of her. He'd certainly give her her egg. He might even be better for her, make her happier. The more traditional ways; the normal things I can't give her. What a wonderful end to my pursuit of the arcane, the special! I've made a bad job of everything!*

Pinned to the dome like a prize butterfly, he exercised his cramped muscles against the web. *Might as well be ready for the unexpected. More likely the impossible. At least, I'm to have my moment of fame. Oh, Feng-po, if only I could have served you better. Now we all die in vain. My Nü-kua, my Bright Eyes, where are you? I'm useless. I should have stayed alone and composed poetry that no one would sing, gathered wisdom that no one would heed.*

"Bet you're hanging up there feeling sorry for yourself." Ao Rue looked down. Mei-chou was sitting in front of him on the walkway.

Ao Rue panicked, desperately he tried to talk. The web choked his sounds. He screamed as loud as he could with his mind, *How did you get here? Get out of here! You'll be killed!*

"Calm yourself and stop mumbling. I can barely hear even your mind. That web makes you sound like you've got a hair ball in your head. No one's going to kill me yet. Everything's under control. I'm here. I'll take care of you." Mei-chou wasn't comfortable instilling false confidence, but she felt the poor hanging beast needed every edge. "I got a ride most of the way from a little friend of yours, Wen Ch'ang. Walked the rest." She wasn't about to admit she'd ran from where Wen Ch'ang had set her down.

Lei-kung appeared from around the dome. "Well, well, well, you have a visitor Ao Rue." He walked by the helpless sorcerer, casually slapping him in the stomach as he passed, and confronted Mei-chou. She matched him glare for glare.

"I've come for my friend."

"So, little beast, one of you has finally decided to talk to me. I've been meaning to turn my attention to you little furred turds. It's about time you learned your place in my Great Society, about time you started to earn that smoke you love so much. No one has a free ride; everyone must contribute."

"You can take your Great Society and jam it up under your tail. No cat will ever serve you."

"Oh, now that's just not polite. You see, Ao Rue, this is what all your magic and learning bring you. The only friend you've got is nothing but a rude cat."

"I am not just any cat, content to bathe in your smoke and ignore your stupidity. I am the First of the First. I am the Keeper of the Bond between Talon and Claw, Flame and Fur."

Mei-chou's mention of the ancient union made Lei-kung uneasy, but he resisted its lure. "You're nothing but vermin. Fit only for extermination!" Ao Rue had a much different reaction. As he heard and saw her defying Lei-kung -- she who was smaller than the tiniest talon -- he felt a warmth begin to swell within him against the icy web.

Mei-chou chuckled, "You have no fire, and I could dance around this hovel forever without you catching me. Your fell magic won't work on me. There's nothing you can do to me. I'm not one of your dragon puppets. Release him before I lose my temper!"

"Release him yourself if you can! You can't; of course, you can't, you worthless fur ball." Lei-kung laughed. "I don't need flame to take care of the likes of you. That's why I have servants. Yolbas, get up here."

Behind Lei-kung's back, a faint blue glow had begun to pulse at the center of Ao Rue's body. Mei-chou saw it and repressed a grin. "Do your worst, you poor excuse for a rotten clam!"

Yolbas climbed out onto the walkway. Despair and agony marked his face. Tears rolled down his snout. He muttered repeatedly to himself, "A real dragon. Will I ever be clean? A real dragon." His body moved in jerks and starts as he futilely fought Lei-kung's control.

"Move it, Yolbas. Incinerate that cat!"

The blue glow had almost enveloped Ao Rue; it pulsed brighter and faster.

Yolbas lurched forward to face the tiny cat. He grimaced as his useless claw thumped against his chest. Smoke began to well from his nostrils. His head reared back to throw his fire. Mei-chou could begin to see Ao Rue's spinning eyes through the inky web. With quiet resignation, she realized that he wouldn't be free in time. Without her to save, he wouldn't be free at all. The magic would die. She lifted her head in defiance. *At least it will be quick. WHAT!* From behind Lei-kung and Yolbas, a gray blur streaked around the dome. The dragonette slammed the full force of his little body into Yolbas' shoulder. It wasn't much of a blow. But it was enough. Yolbas was too close to the edge. He teetered, couldn't sink his talons into the smooth stone, lost his balance, and fell. He tried frantically to open his wings before he hit the ground.

"See ye, Mei-chou. See ye, Ao Rue . . . if yere lucky," Wen Ch'ang called. He fled toward the sea. As he did, dragonette after dragonette rose to follow him.

Lei-kung's only warning was a rush of heat that came from behind him. It struck the dome and Mei-chou's glistening fur. He turned to see Ao Rue stepping toward him through a rapidly dissipating, silver-blue halo. He was peeling the web from his body as he'd skin a fig. Mei-chou jumped to the top of the chorten's dome. *This is going to be fun!*

Lei-kung stood his ground, confident in his power. "You think I fear you, sorcerer. Flee with your dragonettes; flee while you can! I am the ultimate dragon! I am as far beyond you as you are beyond that stupid cat!" Laughing, he threw the second globe.

Ao Rue caught it before it could hit him or Mei-chou. He closed his claw around it and squeezed. For a moment, it swelled, trying to break his grip. Ao Rue's eyes spun faster. There was a flash as if a small sun had gone nova. He opened his claw. It was filled with soot, molded with the pattern of his claw. "Now look at this, Lei-kung. My claw is dirty. We can't have that in polite company, can we, Mei-chou." He blew it in Lei-kung's face. "You are no ultimate dragon! You have no fire to burn, no wings to flee, no strength to fight. Together, my friend and I are beyond your magic!"

But Lei-kung was not done. He tilted his head back and an unnatural keening rose from his throat. It was the same hideously shrill cry that the Demons had made to the Northern Lights. "Blue-eyed fool, I've called the Azghun Demons. Soon you'll be nothing more than gravel. And you, fur turd, will be ashes. I've already called Yolbas back up here!"

The three paused. Lei-kung anxiously scanned the sky, then looked down at the dead, salt flats for his yellow rescuers. The day remained clear and clean. No dots of yellow marked anything.

Mei-chou spoke from the top of the chorten, "They won't help you now. You were their tool. You released them with the terraforming at their command. They don't heed or need you any longer. Besides, Ao Rue's here, and they're terrified of him; sacred of me too."

Lei-kung began to blubber. Ao Rue addressed him coldly, despite the pity he felt, "You are not a dragon; you're a slug, a scarecrow, a leech upon the cosmos. You are no better than the scavengers who benefit most from your wonderful terraforming. Your great vision has doomed us all."

Just as he had years before with Chang-Lao, Ao Rue reached out with his magic and wished Lei-kung gone. Nothing happened. Lei-kung stood before him untouched, immutable. Oddly, Ao Rue felt no life in him. He looked up at Mei-chou. She shrugged but didn't look concerned. She paused from her washing, "When in doubt, Ao Rue, use dumb muscle." The silver dragon brought his tail up behind his left ear and whipped it around in a full circle. It slammed into the unflinching Lei-kung. Like a stone idol, he exploded into black dust, crumbling as easily as fragile clods of sand after a rain. The cruel wind of the Breath of Fury began to rise and sweep the walkway free. From the ground below, dragons cried a confused babble of release, fear, surprise, joy.

Mei-chou seemed to have known all along. "Any real life was long gone. The puppeteer was a shell, an effigy. Lei-kung's consciousness was a dream the Demons gave him. Dragons really do have too much innate nobility ever to act like that without compulsion."

Ao Rue was too tired to care. He slumped against the dome but stood quickly as he heard the massed dragons beginning to chant his name. He looked around, fully expecting to see Han Chung-li leading the chant. But it was Yolbas playing cheerleader, swinging his one good claw in cadence. His face was still marked by remorse and grief. Ao Rue couldn't resist. He joined Mei-chou on top of the chorten, gathered her up, held her to him with both claws, and raised her and his wings to accept the dragons' adoration. He basked in his glory. *Finally, I am a hero!*

"There's your fame, your worship, Ao Rue. You can be leader. Nü-kua will be thrilled. Erh-lang can write your name in the sky."

Ao Rue held his claw out in front of him in surprise. She just sat in it and looked at him. "Mei-chou, why do you try to steal my glory?"

"Have you forgotten so quickly that just moments ago they were ready to celebrate your dismemberment. Can't you see that they are only creatures of the moment? Fame is like a butterfly. While you chase it, it's beautiful. If you catch it, it tastes terrible. Leave the butterfly's beauty. You can't be selfish. It will steal your magic! You belong alone in the caverns, wandering the deserts and skies. You can't go down there with them. And even if you're up here, you'll still be on the ground. You are the last sorcerer!"

Sadness weighed Ao Rue's voice. "You're right. This isn't me." He jumped back down to the walkway.

Yolbas came forward and bowed. "Take my life, Ao Rue. Cleanse me with your fire. I killed Feng-po; I killed a real dragon."

"Get up, for dragon's sake, get up; you're embarrassing me. I'm no god. Dragons don't kow-tow. Give me that broken claw!"

Yolbas extended the claw, fully expecting Ao Rue to rip it off. Instead the sorcerer held it in his. A blue orb surrounded their clasped claws; Ao Rue's eyes spun mildly. When he let it go, it was completely healed.

"You'll need two good claws for what is to come. The Azghun Demons are still abroad in the land. If dragonkind is to survive, you must lead them."

"Ao Rue, I murdered Feng-po, your friend."

Ao Rue breathed deeply, "That we will all have to live with. But it wasn't you. It was Lei-kung. You have no time for grief."

"But they want you!"

"No, no, Yolbas, I'm not the one; you are. Soon enough they would become uncomfortable again with my magic. They will find my need for isolation strange. Their lack of understanding will make them uneasy, then fearful, then hateful. They need you to unify them. You're one of them. You're the orator. You're the one who can harness Erh-lang, work with their admiration, gain their faith. I can't. You're the organizer, not I."

"He's right, you know. You can take it from the First of the First. I know."

Mei-chou's affirmation fully convinced Yolbas. He nodded his head, squared his wings, straightened up. He looked like a dragon again.

"There are a few things you need to do right away." Ao Rue used his last moment of political power. "Tear this monstrosity down. No dragon should stand above another. Only I am doomed to stand apart. Find Han Chung-li and imprison him so our females will be safe. Don't kill him. We've killed enough of our own. Most of all, marshal the dragons to fight the Demons. They'll need aerobatics. They can't let the Demons touch them. Get Erh-lang to help. He's better than most of them at flying, especially since too many of them have been crawling around in those mines since we got here. That's all. Good luck, Yolbas. C'mon, Mei-chou, let's get out of here before I change my mind."

Ao Rue curled Mei-chou to his chest again and rushed into the air. As soon as they were clear of the chorten, she reacted to the trembling she felt through his scales, "You were very forgiving back there. What did you really want to do to him?"

"Rip him into shreds and toss him to the vultures! How they would have hovered in delight as I tossed them morsels!"

"Why didn't you?"

"Anger is a momentary urge. For me, it later turns to sickening remorse. I do have to live with myself, you know."

"We all do."

"Then, why don't we? We never do." Ao Rue was a bit irritated with her smugness. Anyone would think he'd be used to it by now.

"You know enough of the me-and-mine not to ask such a dumb question. You'd stopped being selfish; that's why you didn't kill him. You were a wise, rational dragon. You should be proud."

"Proud? Mei-chou, there are moments when fang and talon are far more attractive than reason. There are times I wish I had no brain at all. That I could be as sudden and stupid as Yolbas or Erh-lang or even Lei-kung. It's a pain in the tail being reasonable!"

She was silent and had no answer for him. For a time, they flew in silence. She left him to his brooding silence, his unabated anger. After she let some leagues of dead, white sand pass beneath them, she looked off toward the faint string of dragonettes. "Well, what do you think of the future of dragonkind? The budding poet, your little gray protegee?"

Ao Rue chuckled, his mode changed by the thought of Wen Ch'ang, "Who knows? You can't count on the young. I'd hate to think of generations of dragons talking like that. But he's got courage, spunk. It took a lot for him to go after Yolbas like that. We may never know. Let's get back to Spring Halt. I've got some vines stashed in the water, and I'm anxious to see Nü-kua."

"If she's there," Mei-chou muttered.

"What was that? I didn't hear you."

"Nothing; believe me, very much nothing!"

Ao Rue looked over his shoulder. Yolbas was already on top of the chorten telling the dragons something. He had their complete attention. Ao Rue shrugged. They had already forgotten him. Mei-chou chuckled.