

Chapter 23  
1805 words

"How could you have been off with that idiot acrobat. I told you to stay here!" Ao Rue was still trying to choke down his fury. When he and Mei-chou had gotten back to Spring Halt, Nü-kua hadn't been waiting. When she did finally return, she was flushed with pleasure and smiles.

"I knew you'd want me to be safe. You were off somewhere, doing who knows what with that stupid cat." Mei-chou didn't pause in her careful grooming to acknowledge the remark. "What was I supposed to do; sit here and nap? Watch those dumb birds rub their necks together?" Nü-kua countered his anger with her own.

"There were all sorts of things you could have done. Look! One of the herons is gone. They're inseparable. What were you thinking of? One of those hellish black eagles probably killed it. You should have protected them! Why that empty-headed flying lizard Erh-lang? He's never had a thought in his life! All he thinks about are somersaults and figure eights."

"He's not an idiot; he's not a lizard! He's my friend. He's strong. He protected me, kept me company. I hate being bored! You're just jealous."

"Look, all you had to do was stay on this side of the Barkul Range. Avoid Leikung, Yolbas, Heng-chiang, and Han Chung-li. It's not as if the Demons can hurt you." Now he was trying to console her, trying to ease away from her anger, wondering if he was childish enough to be jealous. Ao Rue was becoming very uncomfortable that he'd said anything. He didn't like Nü-kua upset; it made him uneasy. He didn't want to ruin her pleasure, but he had. Plus hearing good things about Erh-lang from her made his fires rise. He wasn't sure at all what he was supposed to do: *If I say nothing, she plays me for the fool. Would she do that? If I'm quiet, I don't care. If I say something, I'm manipulative, domineering. Ah, for the simplicity of the Tablets.*

"Ao Rue, you're not making any sense." Now that she felt her superiority, Nü-kua wasn't about to let it go. "The Demons can hurt everyone. Erh-lang told me. They turn dragons into dead jewels. He's seen it. And why should I be frightened of our leaders?"

"There's nothing the demons can do to either of us. And they don't turn dragons into jewels. Did you really think Erh-lang could get that right?" He tried to swallow the scorn that rose to his tongue. "The dragons do that themselves; the Demons just make them do it. Those yellow blobs don't have any real power to do anything. Real evil has no positive power. All it can do is take; it can't act."

"There you go, intellectualizing everything again. You sound just like Yün-t'ung and Ch'ang-o, always lecturing. And why are you saying bad things about the leaders? Erh-lang loves them."

"It's too ugly to go into, and I don't lecture. I'm just trying to explain. Let's just leave it. You won't have to worry about them anymore. Yolbas is in charge now. I'm sure he'll do a good job. The dragons listen to him. And since the Demons can't harm you, you won't need Erh-lang again."

"I'll see my friends any time I want! And why can't those terrible things hurt me?"

"You remember when we were at Kuan-ti's tomb, when the Kaochang was going on."

"Sure, that was nice." Ao Rue was very grateful to see her start to soften.

"Since we weren't with the others, we weren't infected by the Northern Lights, by Lei-kung's alien magic. We're the last two clean dragons in the world."

"Then, we're special."

"We were special to begin with. Neither of us need any special benediction for that. But because we weren't there, we have special responsibilities. It's going to be up to us to lead this fight against the Demons."

"I don't like that. Those things are awful. I don't want to go near them. Who says I've now got all these special duties just because I missed a meeting? And what are you doing? I didn't think you wanted to get involved. Remember all your talk about your silly need for solitude."

"I don't like this anymore than you do. If it was just the petty greed for power of creatures like Lei-kung, I could ignore it. Leave dragons to their own stupidity. But the Demons are different. They're real evil, and as long as they're abroad in the land, nothing living is safe. They're mindless, motiveless malignancies. On one claw, the Azghun Demons aren't smart enough to hate themselves. On the other, we can't underrate them. They may be incapable of anything we understand as emotion or feeling. All they may think about is feeding. But when they're frightened, and they are frightened of us, they're capable of primitive cunning and cruelty of the highest order. They may be purposeless, dreaming only of survival, but they're not stupid and they are immensely destructive. You, Mei-chou, and I are going to have to"

"Stop telling me what to do! I'm not going near those filthy things!" She was angry again. Ao Rue began to think of a quiet cave alone or a trip into the depths. "And I'm not doing anything with that arrogant cat." She said "cat" as if she was spitting. "She tried to convince me you were in trouble. There's nothing you couldn't overcome!" Despite her anger and his discomfort, Ao Rue couldn't help but preen. "She never spoke to me before! She won't speak to me now. Watch this: 'Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty.'" Mei-chou looked at Nü-kua with utter disdain. "You see, she won't even acknowledge me. Who does she think it is?"

"She is a very special cat, the First of the First. While we may debate cats' sense that they're the first, her status is clear. She's to cats what Kuan-ti was to dragons. What I'm supposed to be now, except no one listens to me. She's the Guide, the Teller, one of the Seven Keepers of Wisdom, the living essence of her race. The Emerald Tablets say that she, if not most cats, only talk to special beings. I'm still surprised she does with me. She spoke to you in great need. You should have been flattered Mei-chou came to you. It was her recognition of your value. You should have listened. She and creatures like her never say anything idle; it's beneath their dignity. As you grow, mature, learn, I'm sure one day she will seek you out again."

Mei-chou couldn't stand anymore elementary prattle and decided that there was never going to be anytime she'd bother with Nü-kua again. As she left, her thoughts were best hidden from Ao Rue, *If I ever needed to know what 'vapid' meant, there it is! 'Value,' my tail. She has about as much value as one of those lazy brown vipers. That Nü-kua is gonna be nothing but trouble for him. But do you think he'd listen to me? Not a chance. You'd think he could protect someone worthwhile! As if she'll ever be worth talking to! I can't be bothered with this. I have someone really important to talk to, someone that Nü-kua couldn't comprehend and that Ao Rue doesn't know exists. Chu-Chu will be much needed relief after this!* She chuckled to herself. *He does so hate it when I call him 'Chu-Chu.'*

"Look at that; now she's walking off without so much as a good-bye. Smug, stupid thing, doesn't have any manners. I could care less if the dumb cat ever speaks to me again. How come you always listen to her and never to me. What do you mean 'grow up.' I'm full grown. All you ever do is order me around, lecture me. You're no better than Ch'ang-o. You don't need me. You don't love me. What about my egg?"

"My Nü-kua; of course, I love you. I need you more than you could ever imagine. It's just that this is a bad time for eggs and the young. It's a worse time for you to be pregnant and unable to fly. You're going to have to be in the air with all your strength and flame against the Azghun Demons. And I don't know if our dragonlings would be safe from the Demons. We can't just toss our young into this mess. Who knows if we'll survive this brine-stained world. Look at it; everything seems like it was used and then thrown away. There's no sea to wash anything clean."

"Things may be bad, but they'll get better; I'm sure. And you don't need my help with the Demons. That's not what I'm supposed to do. I might get hurt. We're dragons and we should live like dragons. Ao Rue, it can't always be oysters, poetry, and champagne-laden seaweed. It can't always be fun. I don't think you take me and my life seriously. You don't support me, help me with my needs and problems. When we're together, all you want to do is laugh and be happy and talk and twist tail. When are you going to start acting like a proper mate? How long do you think I'm going to be satisfied just being with you? When are you going to have faith in me, in our future?"

Ao Rue wondered what was wrong with being happy and making love and why she seemed to have so little faith in him, but he knew that there was no talking to her now, not rationally anyway. Her anger had taken her beyond that. It was time to try another approach. He gathered her into his wing. "My Bright Eyes, I want to spend all eternity with you. You are my future. I can't think of myself without you! I have remade myself in our image. I am a part of you. Why don't we talk about this later. We're both too upset right now. I will make our time together everything you want. All you need to do is be a little patient with me. You know I'm a little slow, a little cautious. Come, let's find a thunderstorm. If we can't find one, I'll make one for you. Afterward, there'll be a rainbow." He took her snout gently in his claw, gazed straight into her eyes, let his spin a little, feeling slightly guilty in using even a little of his magic with her. "Come, my love, a

thunderstorm, then, a rainbow. Just you and me, together, let me fly with you on the edge of the rainbow, together we can dive, touched by all its colors, turning in with the bow, to join at the knot, and cling hissing in the dangling strings."