

Chapter 27
2515 words

As Nü-kua and he arrived at the kaochang, Ao Rue was doubly, no triply, irritated. Despite how carefully he'd explained, Nü-kua couldn't accept the majesty of Lord Chu's heroism. All she could say was "Well, he's only a cat. How much can anyone expect." No matter how much he talked, no matter how patient he was, how painstaking, she couldn't see anything redeeming in something so small. He stopped short of anger and telling her exactly how bigoted she was. Mei-chou would be proud; at least he was learning some tact and the necessity of silence. Having to be at the kaochang didn't help his bad attitude. He hated meetings. All they were were a bunch of dragons trying to generate intelligence from sheer numbers. As if even a thousand mediocre brains could equal one good one. Everyone would be mouthing off, trying to show how smart they are, trying to impress. There was so much posturing going on that Ao Rue wondered if they weren't gathered in Yün-t'ung's memory. Teachers always swelled with pedantry and self-importance at the mere sniff of a meeting.

To add to his exasperation, Nü-kua hadn't even stayed with him. She'd gone down into the depths of the ravine to be with some group of friends who'd waved frantically that they'd saved a place for her. Once she was down there, she fawned all over every dragonette in sight and marveled in syrupy delight at every egg-swollen belly. Ao Rue didn't go down. He preferred the heights and the wind to the stuffiness and crowds of the depths. Nü-kua's friends kept looking at him and giggling, talking more, looking again and giggling some more. Ao Rue secretly thought he made an excellent picture outlined against the washed-blue sky. He didn't mind being admired at all if that's what Nü-kua's friends were doing. He wondered; they were quick to mock anything they thought different. He noticed that they didn't giggle at Erh-lang who was a few ledges below them with Yolbas on the main outcropping.

Holding the kaochang in the Ravine of Baboons was an excellent choice, even Ao Rue had to admit that. It was easy to find. The great pile of quartz next to it -- romantically named the Starry Mountain by some because of the way it glittered in the moonlight -- was a landmark not even a half-blind dragon could miss. The dragonettes called the pieces of quartz Star Stones and played some obscure game with them that confounded most adults. The ravine had been one of the main conduits when the sea had rushed into the caverns after what was now being called the "Terrible Terraforming." Ao Rue took perverse pleasure that Lei-kung's idiocy and madness were now generally recognized, even if Nü-kua was still having trouble understanding how authority had betrayed them. The rubble-covered floor had been deeply cut by the rushing water. Its rugged sides insured that the numerous dragons could all see and, more importantly for many, could be seen. The walls had been washed to bare stone, and numerous perches had been eroded when the clay and sand had been dragged away. The atmosphere the gray stone created was somber. Everything seemed shifting and shadowy even under the direct glare of the desert's merciless sun. Out of the corner of his eye, he would think he'd seen

movement; yet, when he looked directly, it was just another dour rock formation. The only relief was the white granite that occasionally streaked and webbed the stones. A small sweet-water stream snaked through the crags, making it popular among the baboons and giving the ravine its name. Of course, on this day, its bubbling was unheard and not a baboon was in sight. There were too many noisy, rambunctious dragons for anyone's comfort except their own. There'd been some confusion getting settled. A few harsh words, occasional snaps and snarls that no one would admit. But after so-in-so's tail wasn't hanging in anyone's snout and no one was stepping on anyone else's claw, the moment became relatively peaceful.

As the dragons shifted and caught the light, the many colors of their scales gave the moment festive tones. If Ao Rue could have forgotten the dark meaning of the glitter sand, he might have found the scene pretty. Nü-kua's stunning gold shimmered as he glimpsed her among the more predominant greens and browns of her friends. Occasional whites reminded Ao Rue of Chih-nil, and he twinged with memories of her scorn and her death, so darkly cruel that not even he could find justice in it. Erh-lang was framed by Yolbas' greater bulk, but the acrobat's crimson scales made him seem larger, more important. Salted among the dragons were the inevitable cats. They were everywhere: tucked in the open area under bent legs, stretched out on their backs in the grooves formed by touching tails, crouched in the smallest crevices. They were like points of color amid great smears of pure minerals. Their blacks, grays, whites, oranges, silvers, and browns were never fully lost. In fact, they made the dragons appear coarse and crude. The cats' lazy beauty always drew Ao Rue's eye. Every so often, one would dash to a spot, pretend there had been no hurry at all, and relish an errant puff of smoke.

If Ao Rue squinted, the dragons' great colors and the cats' graceful accents broke into slivers like sharp gems. The shifting patterns turned and oscillated, opened and closed, never the same twice. As individual cats and dragons vanished in his distorted gaze, he found himself happier with the kaleidoscope of wonderful colors. As he was lazing in his created and animated lapidary, he felt a small weight light on one of his talons.

"What are you looking at with your eyes all screwed up like that?" Mei-chou treated her unexpected arrival as if she'd been born on the spot.

"How did you get here? I was just looking things over." Ao Rue was a little embarrassed to be caught playing a game with the kaochang.

"Caught a flight with one of the dragonettes. I think though I'm going to have to start scheduling them. Little cretans hardly leave on time for anything. So you're bored."

"I guess so. The pretension of these meetings gets to me. They make me feel dull, like someone had sucked the juice out of the air."

"Is that why you're all the way up here? Trying to get some air? Or are you just flexing and posing?"

"A little of both. And who are you to criticize posing? You cat types do it all the time."

"Sure we do, but it's natural for us. We're organic art. You can't tell me we're not great to look at."

"No, you're right; I can't. That must be why cats and dragons are always together. You like the smoke; we like the art."

"So it is. At least in part." Mei-chou never would elaborate on the cats' passion for smoke. Some called it an addiction. "Where's her ladyship?"

"You mean Nü-kua?"

"That's what I said, didn't I?"

Ao Rue ignored Mei-chou's sarcasm. "She's down in the ravine. Just a little above Yolbas and Erh-lang."

"Oh, Erh-lang again. She certainly does gravitate toward him."

"Nonsense! That's just where her friends are."

"Is that what she calls that group of vapid tail wagers? Friends?"

"Nü-kua's very popular. Everyone likes her. What am I supposed to do? Tell her she shouldn't have friends?"

"That's not friendship; that's behavior. She's locked in. Ch'ang-o talked to everyone; she talks to everyone. Female dragons want eggs; she wants an egg. Sometimes, Ao Rue, I despair of you. Don't you know what friendship is?"

Ao Rue was particularly sure he did, but Yolbas had begun to drone in the background, and Erh-lang was sure to follow with his lecture on aerial acrobatics and Demon evasion. Anything would be better than those two. So he responded to Mei-chou, knowing he couldn't stop her anyway. "Well, I think friendship has something to do with commitment."

"You bet it does! How much commitment do you think is in this ravine right now?"

"A bit. Yolbas and Erh-lang are serving the rest of the dragons."

"That's duty. And in Erh-lang's case, it's egotism."

"Well, Nü-kua's friends were certainly happy to see her."

"That's socializing."

"OK, I'm certainly bound to Nü-kua, and she to me."

"That's, in part, correct." Mei-chou's manner was beginning to lead Ao Rue to a strong feeling that he was being tested. "You dragons are certainly good at bonding and loyalty, but commitment is a little different than either of those. It's more like real generosity."

"Do you want my definitions of those?"

"No, let's not waste time." Mei-chou had obviously decided Ao Rue's opinions weren't worthy of the non-directive approach. "You see, both commitment and generosity are based in sacrifice; so is real love for that matter. And sacrifice isn't very well understood, much less embraced. Too many dragons, even a few cats, deeply and earnestly believe that giving is tied to gain."

"Are you sure there aren't more than a few cats?" Ao Rue interrupted with more than a spark of irritation. He didn't like being talked down to.

"Now you're getting defensive and contentious; just listen. Anytime someone expects something in return, that's not generosity or love. Beings that enter into relationships with a goal, in search of a prize, really aren't interested in the other being but in getting or achieving something. Then, once they've got what they want, they discover they haven't thought any further and they don't have idea one of what they should do next." Mei-chou didn't really expect Ao Rue to make the connection with Nü-kua and her egg. "The few good relationships I've ever seen are in a constant state of becoming. No one gets lazy and takes anything for granted. The concern for the other is supposed to be natural, which is why neither one wanders off alone."

"So the Azghun Demons are the ultimate perversion of friendship and love. All they do is take."

"True, but that's so obvious. It's easy. The greater evil is more insidious; it comes from those who don't even know that selflessness is a virtue. It's a great strength and the final sign of real strong self, solid in independence, lush in giving. I'm frightened by the many who don't know that self-interest is a vice. They're like those strange bats that feed on the blood of others; they're too much like the mindless Demons."

"Is that why my magic rises fully only when it's for someone else? Why it won't completely work when I want something for myself?"

"In large part. Of course, it could also be caused by a character flaw or an intellectual failure." Mei-chou grinned. Ao Rue glared at her attempt at humor. She got serious again. "I wonder too about those who enter into relationships and then spend significant amounts of time apart. Strange. Why do they get involved in the first place? Possessiveness? More likely, it must have to do with that weird security business."

"What's so odd about security? A lot of dragons, and I'll bet cats too, make it a very serious hunt. Aren't we ignoring the nature of beings, the way they are?"

"We probably are. You, of all dragons, should know that the greatest cynics, the most monstrous curmudgeons, are blithering idealists who've gotten their tails crushed once too often. They won't give up being pollyannas, so reality forces their odd perspectives. Besides, Ao Rue, you're too smart not to know what the world would be without ideals, aspirations, what many call utopian nonsense. We'd might as well dump it all into one of those pools of death, the salt marshes."

"No one could argue any of that." A small shade of grief passed over Ao Rue.

"But we were talking about security."

"You were talking; I was listening."

Mei-chou ignored Ao Rue's less-than-subtle hint that she was pontificating. "Security is the false refuge of the insecure, the chronically dependent. Mostly, it's a product of time and place, not actual star-bound love. For most beings, it's whoever is around when they're ready or whoever has hung around from the beginning and sustained a habit. The only thing I've ever seen security do is set all sorts of hooks, hang weights and

nets. I'm astonished what gets traded for it: freedom, independence, fulfillment. Its rewards just don't make sense. It doesn't satisfy real needs. In the face of cries for help, it fails. I'd swear it's for those idiots who think sand clods are stones. As soon as they need to grab onto it, it crumbles, much to their surprise. It's certainly not nurturing or supportive and far from generosity and sacrifice. Why do so many chase emotional death? Security's the greatest sacrifice of self born of the most pathetic of needs."

"Now, Mei-chou, you know you can't intellectualize emotion."

"No, sadly, it doesn't yield to the mind. And I could go on for hours more trying to make sense of it all, keeping you entertained while Erh-lang muddles on. I wonder if he knows how stupid he sounds? Anyway, you're right; relationships are beyond any kind of good sense. When they're right, when the one bond flourishes, when the self and all others are forsaken, even in retrospect, you can't figure it out. Look at Chu-Chu and Pita, for example. Who could imagine?"

"Mei-chou!" The fur on her back went up at his rude interruption. "Do you smell something odd? It's so familiar. What is it? IT'S THE DEMONS! FLY, THE AZGHUN DEMONS, FLY!" Mei-chou immediately dove into the safety of a burrow. Ao Rue bel-lowed again and again down into the packed mass of dragons. "FLY! FLY!" They looked up in confusion, those closest to him beginning to blunder against each other as they tried to move. Demons were boiling out of every crack and cranny. Ao Rue rose on great wings but fluttered wildly about like a mother bird with a weasel in her nest; he couldn't get a clear angle for his flame. Too many panicking dragons and fleeing cats were in his way. The tightly packed ravine was a riot of colors and wails. Dragons clawed over each other in mad rushes for safety. Silent, mustard blurs of Demons zipped among tangled bodies, touching and taking all they could. Already suicidal dragons were blasting up through the mob, despair and the need for death overcoming all other thoughts. Gibbering cries shook the air. Glitter sand rained down into the ravine, fuel for the dragons' hysteria.

Ao Rue's magic rose to the full. His eyes burned uselessly with his passion. His madly beating wings blew the falling sand into grating sheets that clattered off the rocks. He hurled cobalt bolts and flame whenever he could. But it was so little. In desperation and frustration, he cried. His sobbing voice screamed love into the twisting chaos of dragons, "Nü-kua! Nü-kua! To me! To me!"