

Chapter 29
1170 words

The ravine's topology hindered the dragons as no foe could. For once, their great size and strength were useless. When the Azghun Demons attacked, there was just nowhere to go. Dragons clawed at each other trying to force a path to the air, desperately seeking maneuvering room. The Demons suffered no such restraint. Their plastic forms let them ooze through the smallest space. In desperation, some dragons released their flame in the crowd. Cries of pain were soon mixed with those of fear. Their panic became more frenzied. Ao Rue drove his wings in the tightest patterns he could, trying frantically for clear targets. He was puzzled by the Demons' timeliness. Catching the dragons at such a vulnerable time bespoke a planning and forethought that the Demons had never shown before. At best, they swarmed, instinctually dominated by their insatiable hunger, never by tactical intelligence.

Yolbas and a few others managed to work their way free. Many others tore out of the crowd only to seek death. Even the most callous of those who fought felt the hideous impact of the glitter sand as it showered and pinged on the taut membranes of their wings. The cats had begun to run out of the ravine. At first, they had tried to mourn the passings. But it was too much. Their heads swiveled incoherently. Too many souls sailed away to watch. The carnage defeated even their great grief. They fled before unimaginable slaughter. Ao Rue thought he caught a brief glimpse of Nü-kua working her way down toward Erh-lang. He couldn't be sure, and there was no response to his continued screams.

As he and Yolbas flew side by side, Ao Rue realized that the best thing for him was to guard the backs of the untainted dragons. Their great vulnerability was unseen Demons, death too silent to be heard. Again and again, he twisted his hurtling body through impossible maneuvers to save yet another dragon. He flashed through invisible openings, driving his wings and body through torturous curves, stops, and starts. His muscles tore in agony as he repeatedly forced his body to someone's aid.

Yolbas followed him almost beat for beat. And even though Ao Rue had to somersault in full flight a number of times to kill Demons craving Yolbas' life, the Tiger Prince distinguished himself over and over. Like Ao Rue, he had no concern for his life. Unlike the sorcerer, though, Yolbas could be killed by the Demons.

On and on they fought, but the battle was without glory. The Demons, despite their deadliness, were unworthy foes. They summoned no respect, were without valor. They burned like dried leaves, made no cries of victory or defeat. Ao Rue felt no joy as he spewed death among them. He felt no more hate than he had clearing and burning Spring Halt's underbrush or cleaning rotten vines out of the palace. The battle was empty necessity.

As the air began to clear and Ao Rue could look around more, he noticed there was no sign of Erh-lang. *Dead? Maybe. Hiding more likely. Discovered that real flying and fighting is more than a side show!* Shame rose in him. *Such thoughts are cruel, beneath me!*

Finally, the air was clear of Demons. Dragons sank to the ground in exhaustion. Ao Rue and Yolbas remained in the air. Hovering, they watched and checked for any strays.

"Ao Rue, today, you are dragonkind's greatest hero."

"No, not me, Yolbas. I am no hero. The Demons can't kill me or Nü-kua. Yours is the far greater courage. Yours was the life in peril."

"Then, you gave us your compassion, shared your power and your greatness. You have given us far more than we ever offered you. No one could have blamed you if you had left us to our foolishness and stupidity. Many more would be lifeless stones were it not for you."

"Far too many are gone despite all our efforts."

The two dragons looked down. The ravine was a lapidary of broken and scattered gems. Its floor was filled with glitter sand to a revolting depth. The crags were edged with colors made on a palate of mindless hate. Crippled and wounded dragons writhed in pain. Many had been burned and rent by their own kin. Finally, Ao Rue could see Nü-kua just under an outcropping. Instantly, she had his full attention. He yelled down to her. "Are you coming up or what?" The distraction was tragic. One last Demon slipped by him and brushed against Yolbas. As it did, the Tiger Prince's body spasmed and jerked. With a great cry, he flew toward the sun, his wings beating with manic intensity. Before Ao Rue could reach out with his magic, Yolbas exploded into a great cloud. The falling gems beat on Ao Rue, punishing him for his neglect.

Nü-kua took that moment to step away from the depression where she'd been shielding Erh-lang from the Demons. She called up in irritation when she saw he wasn't looking at her. "Erh-lang needs me! Are you listening to me? He needs me!"

"And I don't!" Ao Rue felt instant regret for his anger but couldn't repress it. He could only excuse some of it with Yolbas' death. Once free of Lei-kung's power, Yolbas had tried so hard to rally the dragons, fought so many battles, done so much, only to have it all taken by the mere touch of a Demon.

Ao Rue slumped into himself in disgust, saw Mei-chou, and landed on the rim near her. She was wiggling out of the burrow. There was a bit of blood on her claws. Once she was completely free, she began to wash herself rapidly, her tongue making quick, almost frantic strokes. She muttered to herself, "Stupid shrews! You'd have thought I was going to stay forever. All I wanted was to get out of the way. Who'd want their filthy hole anyway. Hope I didn't kill any." Suddenly, she sensed the souls that filled the air. Her head flew back, and she emitted a long, grief-laden wail. Then, her grief yielded to bewilderment. Her stunned eyes scanned the glitter sand that shifted and slid on the ravine's ledges, flooded it, still sparkled in the air. The talons of those dragons who remained at the bottom sank full length into the shining carpet. Her voice became soft and cracked, "So many. So many."

Ao Rue tried to wait until she was done in spite of his fearful need to get to Nü-kua. The magic was draining from his eyes. When he spoke, his tone was a pained combination

of anger, fatigue, and sorrow: "You get back to Spring Halt if there's a wing available. I've got to talk to Nü-kua. I'll, we'll, meet you there in awhile." Ao Rue was plunging toward the bottom of the ravine before Mei-chou could respond. She satisfied herself with a deep sigh and began to look around for a willing ride among the few survivors.