

Chapter 31  
1580 words

Erh-lang and Nü-kua were lolling in the ruins of Lei-kung's chorten. The stones provided some shade and important protection for Erh-lang's back. While the Azghun Demons were still in the land, they could never be too far from shelter. Ao Rue had hunted well in the year and months that had passed since the Ravine of Baboons, but there were still too many Demons.

"You're not thinking of flying and hunting again are you?"

Erh-lang looked back from the Barkul Range. The wistful look faded from his eyes. "No, I guess not. I do wish there was someone around to hunt with though, to play with."

"You're better off without your cronies and your silly hunts and games! You have more important responsibilities. And don't you look at me like you had the weight of the world on your wings. You should consider yourself lucky to be with me. Anyway, I think we're the last two. The progenitors of a new race of dragons!"

He ignored Nü-kua's constant fascination with eggs. "We might be. It's been a long time since I've seen any other dragon except Ao Rue." He shuddered a bit at the mention of that dread name.

"No one could very well think of him as a dragon anymore. A raver, maybe; or a berserker; mostly a lunatic. He grows more terrifying each day. He's become part Demon he spends so much time chasing them. Not even civilized; no manners in him at all anymore. To think what I might have done! He could have been my mate if you hadn't won me." Nü-kua looked fondly at Erh-lang.

He didn't return her glance. "Whatever he is, it must be exciting. Always on the hunt. Forever burning Demons. Ever on the wing."

"Exciting? That's for stupid, wild dragonettes! Him tearing all over with those bloodshot, glaring blue eyes. Living in mud. Painted dirty brown with it. He looks like a snail without its shell. Bet he leaves a slime trail." She giggled. "A big, rabid snail with wings."

"You shouldn't make fun of him. What he's doing is vital to all life."

"If he's so wonderful, such a powerful sorcerer, why aren't all the Azghun Demons gone?"

"Well, there were millions. He can't be everywhere at once. And they breed like sand fleas. Do you think everything takes as long to give birth as dragons do?"

"Of course not. And don't you get condescending with me!" Her angry glare turned soft as she looked back over her wing at the light-blue egg wrapped in her tail. As she did frequently, Nü-kua caressed it lovingly with the tip.

"Ever since we had that thing, you hardly pay any attention to me at all. 'Egg. Egg. Egg.' That's all I ever hear. I can't go anywhere; I can't do anything. It's worse than Lei-kung's threads!"

Nü-kua's head snapped around. Her anger swift and vicious, ready and waiting. "Don't you get smart with me! You wouldn't last a minute out there without me. What did Ao Rue say your stupid name means? 'Bane of Demons'? That's a joke. Without me to protect you, they'd drink your soul in a second! Get some reality!"

"Who are you to talk about what's real! When you're not yelling, you sit here mooning over Yün-t'ung's little classroom out there -- all those perfect little blocks all in rows -- babbling about lessons, what a great teacher you are, how smart it's going to be. What are you going to have, a class of one?"

"We're going to have more! We are! If you'd stop sucking vines and passing out all the time."

"What do you expect me to do with only you to talk to? There hasn't been an intelligent word out of you in months. 'Oh, Erh-lang, I miss my girlfriends.' 'Oh, Erh-lang, can you feel the tickling of our dragonling beneath the shell?' 'Oh, Erh-lang, our dragonling's going to be so beautiful.' Wouldn't let me near your tail as soon as your belly got the tiniest bulge! I wish your goofy friends were alive; then, I wouldn't have to put up with you all the time! Beaming like an idiot at that egg and constantly telling me what to do!"

"What's the matter, little boy?" The two dragons were snout to snout; both their eyes, slits. "No more little females around to 'oo and ah' at what big wings you have. To tell you what a great whale slayer you are. Why don't you dance in the clouds for me?" Nü-kua's voice oozed with black venom.

"You're too much trouble. Why bother to impress you? All you'd say again is how much a better flier Ao Rue is. Maybe you should have stayed with him! There'd be a lot fewer Demons around if you were out there helping instead of worshipping one egg."

"And where would that leave my great, drunken lout of a lover?"

"Dead, probably. You'd like that, wouldn't you? What do you care about me? I'd be better off blasted into glitter sand. At least, I'd be a real dragon. All you ever wanted me for, all you've ever made me, is breeding stock!"

"And you're nothing special in that category either, limp tail!"

"Oh yeah; got you pregnant fast enough. Never seen anything like it. I'd hardly touched your tail and you were swelling."

"What! This again. Another tale of the Great Erh-lang. The great lover. The great hero. You want to die gloriously? Be a big, brave dragon? Well, here's your big chance. Here they come again." A small swarm of Demons were coming across the desert in full view. They weren't even trying to snake their way through the dunes. It was a direct frontal attack. "What's the matter, Erh-lang, Bane of Demons, afraid?" He avoided her gaze. "I thought so. Assume the position, limp tail! Right now." Still glaring at each other, they assumed a bored formation, smooth in its practiced repetition. The egg was moved carefully into a dark alcove in the ruins. They both shielded it. Nü-kua stood in front to flame the ones that got closest and to make sure that none of them touched Erh-lang. He reared behind and above her for the long-range work.

Even as the Demons darted at them, she still taunted him, "Step out, my great hero, step out. There are just a few of them. And they are so easy to kill. C'mon, Bane of Demons, let's see what you can do!" He didn't move or speak; his claws clenched in silent frustration. Both their heads began to move in lazy, bored sweeps, fanning their flames over the mindless attackers. Demons were easy to kill. But as Nü-kua raised her head to flame one coming in over the chorten, she saw a pair of claws, scabbed and covered with large, running pustules, reaching out from a tunnel behind her egg. They gripped it and began to drag it into the dripping darkness. Instantly, she shoved the unprepared Erh-lang aside and dove into the alcove. Her claws latched around the egg just before it slid into the passageway. She screamed, "It's mine! Mine!" Slowly, her superior strength began to tell. She pulled the egg closer to her; the weak, hidden thief came with it. Han Chung-li's head slowly came into view. He was so terrifying she nearly let go. His empty eye was partially covered with twisted, yellow scar tissue. Its deforming strength had pulled his good eye toward the center of his head. His scales were completely gone. All his skin had begun to rot. Faint white bones were pushing their way out. He was death-in-life. Black vomit ran over his fangs as he strained. His voice was weak and hissing: "Never! I take it! Heal me! Know what it really is!"

Nü-kua renewed her efforts. His wounds began to pop with the strain. The egg began to slip out of his claws, slippery with his pus. She cried triumphantly: "Filth, you're too weak. I'll have it back and flame you to an ugly smear of ash."

"Think not, ugly little girl," he grunted in foul breath. "My friends, my special friends, about to have their way with your stalwart lover."

At that moment, Erh-lang screamed for her. She turned her head to see him frantically burning the Demons that buzzed around him. She'd thrown him into the open. With nothing at his back, he whirled wildly. He spun his flame until he was engulfed in it. Nü-kua knew instantly there were too many. Her concentration failed. Han Chung-li ripped the egg from her claws and vanished into the oily depths. She started to follow him, but Erh-lang yelled again. She turned. Took a step. Thought of the egg. Turned back. He yelled again. She couldn't choose. In complete confusion, utter terror, she did the only thing that her hysteria would allow. She didn't care that the blank, unassailable barrier of the Barkul Range mocked her need, that the Mount of God scorned her desperation, that her own cruelty made doom of her life's joy. She couldn't think. She knew there wasn't time. It was impossible! Not from Mud-Pit Hollow! Not over that insurmountable wall! He would never make it. Nothing would be left -- just her beside glitter sand and broken shell. Yet still she called her greatest need. With all her voice and mind, Nü-kua screamed his secret name, "**THOTH! THOTH! THOTH!**"