

Fire and Fur
The Last Sorcerer Dragon



By Roger C. Schlobin

FIRE AND FUR:
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Readers' Praise for Fire and Fur:

"...best dragons I've ever seen...cinematic descriptions...finally some real love, emotion and humor in a fantasy novel...painfully beautiful...passionate, sensual...loved the sarcastic cat...bittersweet...full of action...awesome love scene in the thunderstorm...heartbreaking...best adolescent hero since **Catcher in the Rye.**"

Originally published in 1994 by Omnimedia.
It is the first, original fantasy novel published electronically.

DEDICATION

To Joshua Thunderpussy,
Who stayed when so many others left
and who could only be parted by death.

May he forgive me for turning him into a "she" to make the pronouns easier.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The references to Chinese mythology and the Gobi desert were inspired by *The LaRousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Roy Chapman Andrews' *The New Conquest of Central Asia* (The American Museum of Natural History, 1932), the ubiquitous 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and Mildred Cable and Francesca French's *The Gobi Desert* (Macmillan, 1944). The last was supplied by Andre Norton, who graciously accepted my first piece of fiction and who has ever and always been a faithful and loyal friend. Other of my odd research requests have been expertly fulfilled by the library staff of Purdue University -- North Central Campus, under the direction of the librarian, K. R. Johnson. As with much "creative research," many liberties have been taken with both facts and beliefs to suit the author's fancy.

SUMMARY

A vivid and descriptive novel in search of a feature-length, animated film, *Fire and Fur* might more properly be called "Smart Dragons, Dumb Choices." It is set in the pre-human Gobi desert and draws on Chinese mythology. Its major characters are dragons and cats. Of course, the cats do speak (often caustically) since a few dragons are interesting enough (cats can still speak but no one is interesting enough to talk to anymore). *Fire and Fur's* plot concerns the dragons' terraforming the Gobi from sea to land (historically accurate) in a desire for power and amid excessive pride. In

doing so, they release an ancient enemy and their bane, the Azghun Demons, that had driven them into the sea in the first place. The problem is that the dragons have grown lazy and dumb, and while they once had a cadre of sorcerers to call upon, they now only have one. The last sorcerer dragon, Ao Rue, is something of a misfit, and his efforts for dragonkind are, perhaps, either very generous or very foolish. He is aided in a major way in both his own troubles and his challenges by the blunt and clear-headed Mei-chou; she is the cats' first-of-the-first and their shaman (it appears). Further, and also central to "Talon and Claw" is a star-crossed, poignant love story as Ao Rue seeks a fulfillment he cannot have with a vain and young female dragon, Nü-kua.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Roger C. Schlobin is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at East Carolina University and Professor Emeritus of Purdue University. He holds a Ph.D. in Medieval Literature and Languages from Ohio State University. He has authored six scholarly books and edited over fifty. His various other publications include over one-hundred essays, various poems, short stories, reviews, and bibliographies that range over such varied topics as fantasy literature, pedagogy, science fiction, medieval and Arthurian literature, feminism, shamanism, linguistics, and microcomputer hardware and software. He is one of the founders of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and its conference and of the "Year's Scholarship in Science Fiction and Fantasy." He is a past editor of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. He is the author of this -- the first original, electronic

novel to be published over the Internet: *Fire and Fur: The Last Sorcerer Dragon*.

When not writing or teaching, he enjoys his family; tinkers with “Baby” (his souped-up 1977 Datsun 280Z); is president and founder of the Emerald City Z Club; chases great food and drink; takes occasional photographs; collects dragons and t-shirts; plays computer games; and still mourns the passing of his silver-mackerel tabby, the great Joshua Thunderpussy.

His personal website can be found at <http://www.wpl.lib.in.us/roger/>.

*THE FALL OF ANY DRAGON IS HEART RENDING
THE FALL OF THE LAST SORCERER . . .*

Chapter 1

1030 words

The last sorcerer dragon woke. The usual inescapable, chaotic thoughts were there. Thoughts too agonizing to speak bound his mind: *It is easy to see the future when you're alone in it. She is gone.*

Ao Rue stretched carefully, keeping his wings tight, his movements small. Cascades of gold dust slid down with his cautious stretchings. *Carefully! Softly!* It wouldn't do to disturb the small feline stretched across the warmth of his snout. Leave it to a cat to find the one warm place amid the penetrating cold of the desert night.

The serpentine body was still supple, still powerful. The silver lids lifted slightly. Even at first waking, the oddly-hued blue eyes glowed with energy long dormant. The pointed tail curled lazily back upon itself and flicked an annoying nugget from beneath a scale, leaving behind the protective coating of gold.

The dragon smirked slightly: *If ever the future remembers us, there'll be some aerodynamic justification for the tail's fine point. Perhaps? Once it had been a source of great pleasure. Now, it was a wonderful scale and tooth cleaner.*

The cat stirred, sensitive to his tiny movement. The dragon stilled. *Cats and dragons; dragons and cats. So it has always been. Cats are art; dragons are power. Cats' softness brought beauty to dragon eyes. Always posing, always graceful. Cats are soft warmth; dragons awesome glitter.*

This cat was old. Deeply hollowed in the flanks, given more to sleep than waking. Her fur was matted and uneven. She was never too far away. The dragon could hardly focus on her where she dozed between his eyes. But she was familiar. They had been together for a long time. A deep, pained affection flashed across his burning eyes, replaced quickly with arrogance.

It wouldn't do to let the little devil know. Who could guess how much longer she might live? And then our small joining would only be more pain.

As the dragon recalled the once-bright silver-gray fur, vaguely marked with dark stripes, the golden eyes, the once full and sleek body -- he wondered who she would talk to if he passed on first. A small snort of blue-gray smoke popped from the nostrils: *passed on first? Dragons always pick their own time! Well, they were supposed to, supposed to. In those dark, demon-filled days, nothing had been natural, nothing right.* The cat sighed

with seeming pleasure as the small smoke cloud rolled over her, billowed up and out the cave mouth.

Still, cats had spoken less and less as, one after another, the dragons had their immortality ripped from them: *For what? Power? Glory? Destiny?* The furred creatures always seemed to know when a dragon would choose the Last Flight. They'd gather on the dunes and on the lingering warmth of the black stone slabs. Their eyes would raise toward the flash of incandescence as the dragon unleashed the full power of its fires. In unison, they'd cry out with the Pain Beyond Speaking, that long, eerie wail that comes both from nowhere and from everywhere. It was as if their little bodies held all the pain of the world. Their eyes wouldn't follow the sharp rain of gold and multicolored gems that fell from the dragon's pyre to color the pale sand. Instead, they always watched something move away from the flash, something not even a dragon's sorcerous eyes could see. Later, they would shun the patches of glittering remains. There had been many dragons, and as time passed, the cats had fewer and fewer places to tread. Was this strange ritual their deep wisdom or only simple hope? No one knew. And if the cats did, they weren't telling anyone.

I wonder if there will be any cats left for my time? There are fewer and fewer each day. This desert is not comfortable for them. Were it not for me this nose nester would have been dead or gone long ago. Cats hardly speak anymore. They probably lack the interest. They're the last of the animals who remember how. They found us interesting. When I go, they will probably still know how to talk, but they'll be silent. Nothing will intrigue them enough.

Dawn cracked over the far plateau. A thin, eerie sound trembled the new day's air. The dew in the sand made it sing as the sun stole it away. The dragon dropped translucent membranes over his eyes, dulling the blue. The cat wisely slept with her tail to the cave mouth. There would be no rude awakenings for her! Leave that to kittens.

Will I fly today? the dragon thought. *It has been a long time. The air is so sharp: distances that were long for wings looked short. The thermals won't rise till later. Perhaps then? The good feeling of lazing high on an updraft. No, probably not. Solos were for the young, and they were back in the sea. Duets are best. Everything is more when shared. That is gone too.*

The dragon dropped back into fitful sleep. The cat waited and waited a bit more until she was sure he wouldn't wake. *It's not good to leave the great beast alone when he's awake. Not with what that dark mind holds.* She

slipped from the great snout. Four puffs of gold dust rose as she landed. Dragons could go without eating, but cats rarely suffered such indignity for long. *Perhaps, a plump jerboa, as long as the little rat doesn't jump too quickly.*

The cat stopped before stepping out onto the brightening sand. Sharply, one paw at a time, she snapped the gold dust away. *The price of that lovely warm place. Why else would I stay if it wasn't for that heater? Thanks to all that the beast doesn't have to dust his snout too. Gold doesn't yield to tongues very well.* She took a few stretches to limber what she could and began to summon the kill mood. Then, she paused. The hunter looked back over her shoulder to the silver and gold shape. A deep, pained affection flashed across her golden eyes, replaced quickly by aloofness.

Chapter TWO

2455 words

The jerboa had been quick today; each day they seemed swifter to Mei-chou. Cats are not very good at admitting they are slowing down. Fortunately, two of the rats had collided in their wild sideways springs. Otherwise, it might have been lizard. Mei-chou hated lizard; *cold meat!*

Now she sat at the entrance to the cave. Proud of her kill and wondering if she should bring a rat to the Ao Rue. *Catching another would be so easy. Demon take it! The Old Snake never eats them, never notices, never understands. Besides, it's getting too hot to hunt.*

She never paid much attention to the desert's desolation. "The Wall of Spears," the dragons had called it. "Gobi" in the common tongue; "Han-hai," meaning dry sea, in the high speech. Yet, as ever, she looked again at the writings that the Ao Rue had carved around the cave mouth with the tip of one of his talons. The most recent runes still shone with gold dust. Others were older, darker; stains crawled down from them around the lip of the cave mouth.

Ao Rue called it his "Anthology of Grief." Those cats and dragons who had come to seek sadness agreed. All could see that the verses were the products of a master intellect in great distress. Sorrows too deep for speech, unbearable, only slightly relieved in the writing. They were fragments, without style, too heavy for grace:

From the Flame Hills to the Glitter Sand,
The living waters hide and merge in their hidden places.
They boil with the fury of life.
Tumble and torment, bubbles swirl and rise.
They break and break and break.

Somehow the dragon's litanies of pain had given something to the soul-broken, the heavy-hearted, the exiled, the disgraced, the suicidal, and most of all, to love's fools. Mei-chou thought foolish lovers were all the rest rolled into one. Now only she was there to read the runes, and Mei-chou knew better than anyone what the arch of pitiful dirges and moans was. She called it "The Gate of Sighs."

She looked down into the cave. Ao Rue had begun to stir from his troubled sleep. *Soon, he'll wake. He will need me.* Saucily, she ambled in. It would be a little while yet. She knew his habits well.

There he was. Silver skinned, dusted with gold, rising into the shadows. Mei-chou had no idea how big he was, but he was larger than

average. She knew there was a measure called a Li, and he was many of them long, wide, and high. Cats don't care about size. To them, everything was equal or smaller. She did know that she could easily lie on the pointed tip of one of his talons. She liked to tuck her front paws under her chest while she talked to him. His snout was warm and wide. It gave her plenty of room to roll, to turn and lie curved with one paw curled to her face and her belly up.

Mei-chou had always admired his lithe shape and color. She could see more of the curled body as she moved closer. It tapered; it was all taper. From bulk, it moved to delicacy. The great length was easy grace in the air. He was most beautiful, most himself, when he flew. *He won't fly again until the end.* She knew that, thought it, but would never say it. His wings were hardly distinguishable from the rest of his massive form. They blended in like a resting heron's. The edges were touched with the coral color of the janästa fruit. He couldn't open them in the cave, no more than he could fully rise. She sighed, *He's spun his own stone cocoon.* Mei-chou remembered how they looked open. Their transparency belied their power and size. A dragon in full flight was a lens against the sky. Even the great pinions looked small when he was in the air. She especially liked the sharp, deadly pinions. Cats, like most, admire their own traits in others.

His color wasn't just silver, but a shifting variety of mirrored shades. His snout was stretched pewter, more dull and taut than shiny. His face and the beard-like tendrils that curled from it varied from granite to deep gray. Although Ao Rue said that his face had character, Mei-chou knew he thought he was ugly and unappealing. His talons were long and thin. She often thought the tips were made to play fine, gossamer strings. They were ivory and hooked a bit less than hers. The predator in her envied them. *I wonder if he'll ever hunt again? When was the last time he flew?* All that talons are good for is hunting.

The scales were as smooth as his taper, smaller than anyone might imagine. Mei-chou thought that this dragon was far more delicate than even he suspected. Ao Rue's body had few marks; he had never been an enthusiastic fighter. Not like Yolbas, the Tiger Prince, or Heng-chiang, the Sniffing General. Those two had been scored like dried, spoiled apricots. *Ugly, deep ugly.* Ao Rue's scales were packed and edged with the gold dust from his bed. He glittered with it. Mei-chou knew it for filthy stuff. It got into everything. It had something to do with an ooze between the scales. Mei-chou didn't like the ooze either. It was just another irritation she

endured. The Dragons' need for gold had been great. It had kept Lu-hsing, the Finder of Gold, and his enslaved minions very busy. It got tossed in their lairs, and even the tenderest bellied dragons quickly ground it to dust. Now Ao Rue moved too little to wear it off, and it was all over the desert anyway. There were many empty dragon beds.

Ao Rue was waking. Mei-chou added a dignified haste and bounced to the top of the middle of the five talons of the right claw. She slipped a bit but hid it well.

"Awwww," Ao Rue moaned in waking. His pain was only silent in sleep.

"Every good dragonette deserves a dream." Mei-chou started as the great eyes sprung open. *Too far this time?* His eyes were sleeping magic. Even in their usual, half-lidded state, they were hypnotic. They were azure, finely starred. He had been only one of two dragons Mei-chou had known with blue. Usually they were black or green or brown. Dragons' eyes normally glowed. Ao Rue's were the more magnetic because they also reflected his silver skin. Fully open -- *When had he fully opened them last?* -- his eyes were the mark of a sorcerer in full arousal, filled with awesome powers -- confident, majestic, compelling. Cats were the only creatures who didn't automatically just fall into their depths.

"Ah, the little princess. Is it light again?" Ao Rue's voice rumbled softly, somewhere a little above bass, slightly stained with hoarseness. "I expect you want your smoke."

Mei-chou relaxed. *Safe for another day.* "Of course! I've been out."

The great head rose to a formal height. "Well?"

"Camel spit! You want that fealty dung again? Watch your head; you'll bump it on the roof."

"I am the dragon. It is as it should be, always has been."

"But we're the only ones here." Mei-chou always had trouble with his difficulty with reality and his pomposity. "And it's been a long time since we've bothered."

"All the more reason for things to be as they should be."

Must have been an unusually horrible nightmare last night. It must have been about Nü-kua, Mei-chou thought to herself.

"Well, do you want your smoke or not?"

"I need this! Here it comes; stop me when you've had enough. All Hail to Ao Rue; Master of the Barkul Range. Sole Conqueror of the Bogdola. Keeper of the Oases of the Inexhaustible Spring, the Gate of Sand, and

the Mud Pit Hollow; Hero of the Battle of the Ravine of Baboons. Slayer of the Last and Mightiest Demons. Friend to Feng-po, Earl of the Wind. Oh, Great Ao Rue of the Word, Teacher, Scholar, Poet of the 'Song Never Sung,' 'Anthology of Grief,' et cetera. Keeper of Wisdom. Student and Teacher of the Soul. Bondmate of the Fair Nü-kua "

"STOP!"

The feline recoiled from the boom of his voice and chuckled inwardly. *That always stopped his nonsense. Any reference to Her.* Mei-chou waited now, wishing she could catch some of the smoke that had accompanied his cry. It would be awhile before he could speak again.

"Mei-chou," His voice was measured; he was calm again.

"What?"

"In the future, you can leave out the Mud Pit Hollow and the Ravine Battle and the 'Song Never Sung' and the"

"HEY, all of it's true, isn't it? You were in charge of Mud Pit. Not one of the more glorious of assignments, I know. And did I lie about the Ravine? Remember, I was there. I know what happened." A rumble rose in the great silver body. "And her and that 'Song Never Sung.'"

"CAT, enough. And get rid of that 'et cetera.' It's cheap."

"And you were never cheap? And she"

"ENOUGH."

Mei-chou quieted. She was in no real danger, but she could feel the fire begin to rise in Ao Rue, and the lids had come up a bit.

"I do like the 'Sole Conqueror of the Bogdo-ola.' That was my best moment." Ao Rue was pleased for an instant.

"Like it? You aren't serious. That was the stupidest thing you've ever done. The one time you summoned it all, you did it for her."

"We do what we must do. We must all cross *K'u-ch'u-chiao*, the Bridge of Pain."

"That's noble. Great drama. Amazing courage. Look what it got you." Mei-chou was getting irritated. Unconsciously, her tail had begun to whip. *Why had he insisted on throwing himself away?* "And can't we skip, at least, the honorific? Can't I just call you Rue? The 'All Hail' is silly. Who's listening? So, where's my smoke?"

"Smoke, you always want your smoke. Sometimes I think that's the only reason you hang around." Ao Rue latched on to the subject change quickly, gratefully.

"What else? You're not such great company, you know."

"Get ready." Ao Rue lowered his head and began to aim. Mei-chou sat up, eyes closed, nose pointed toward the great snout. A quick "puff" and the cat momentarily disappeared in a cloud of blue-gray smoke. As it passed, she was left with a beatific expression, eyes closed, neck stretched out, head high, a low rumble rising from her thin body. She was surrounded by a hoard of springing sand fleas. As they tried to leap back to her body, they bounced and ricocheted, finally giving up and disappearing. Ao Rue's head lowered to his forelegs until he was almost level with his little princess. Momentarily, his lids lowered.

"Ah, that's much better. You dragons are such great flea chasers."

"It seems much more than that."

"So you always say. It's just good to be pest free. And it's part of The Way of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur."

"The Way?" Are we going to get into that again." Obviously, it was one of the dragon's favorite subjects only when it was to his advantage or when he was being perverse.

"What wrong with The Way? Every creature has a way, even dragons. That's why you lost. You couldn't follow your own kind. Always making your own rules. Always questioning. Always thinking, brooding. Dragons aren't creatures of real feeling." She knew well, though, that he was.

"Venom! All scorpion venom!" Ao Rue was warning. "Do you cats think your *Tu-suan Way* is so exalting. Always making such a fuss about completion, exact calculations. You plan everything out as if you were going to remake the world. Everything arranged, organized; that's why you can't stand to gamble or have anything moved. If I shifted a pebble in here, you'd be a wreck for a week! I swear you think the fate of the cosmos hangs on your every consideration."

"Nonsense, *Tu-suan* is only a method or a technique to be twisted or exulted by the minds that use it. Dragons proved that. And do you think your comrades were better than cats? Always lording yourself around in your natural sorcery. Look at the old bitch, Chih-nil, the Eternal Spinster; stunning on the outside, dried up on the inside. No one was good enough for her. And look what you did to this place. Once there were oceans and islands here, open water; now it's probably the only place in the world locked away from the sea. Dry salt everywhere, all death-head white. 'Wall of Spears,' indeed! 'Dry Sea' is better. You locked yourselves up in your own pompous dryness. No wonder you're almost extinct. Look what came of your world shaping, the idiotic Grand Plan. My eyes burned for months with

the flashes of dragons on their Last Flights. Stupid, tragic suicides. Glitter sand everywhere."

"It wasn't the Grand Plan that doomed us all. It was the battles with those hoards of shapeless and nameless Azghun Demons. They poisoned us. They were our bane. But I won!"

"Won? Won?" Mei-chou did disbelief well. "You kill the enemy. You kill yourselves. Terrific, a great victory. All Hail. Anyway, you were never part of the Grand Plan; you couldn't stand not being heard. No wonder you were alone. You were never poisoned by the Demons. You knew something no one else did. Nü-kua wasn't poisoned. You two"

"We don't discuss her, cat!" The great head began to rise.

"And you, the Great Poet, the Great Power. You with your words and your love. You're *fengshui*, the fantasy of the water and the wind. You believe so much in what can't be seen, can't be touched, that you have nothing. Question that, worm; look at you hiding in this hole. And her, you deserved her."

"WE DO NOT DISCUSS HER." The head snapped up. The eyes began to open. Then, just as suddenly, the power passed. Something like a great sigh escaped the shuddering body. The head sank down.

Mei-chou knew talk was over for this day. Soon she could climb back to her place on his snout. She knew also that the stories would start again tomorrow. *Self-pitying worm, what else does he have?* He would sleep again now. As his great eyes began to close, she looked into them. They would never open wide again. Mei-chou believed that; the wisdom of her race had told her. He couldn't believe anymore. Without belief, there is no hope. Without hope, no future and no power. He would rise only once more.

Chapter 3

625 words

Mei-chou was proud. Her tail was erect as she moved toward the waking Ao Rue. A jerboa dangled from her mouth. *A good kill! Hot blood!* She set the rat down between the great claws. She knew full well that she'd carry the uneaten gift out that night yet again. Ao Rue woke slowly. *No moaning and groaning this morning. Is he healing?* Gold slid about as he stirred.

"So, Mei-chou, we greet another day of emptiness. Haven't you anything better to do than play claw sitter?" The swirling blue eyes passed indifferently over the jerboa.

"Aren't you going to play with your 'Anthology of Grief'? Not morose enough?" Mei-chou quickly returned his sarcasm.

"No, not today, you of small body and large mouth."

"I'll let that pass if you tell me what happened before I met you."

"Happened? It all fell to ashes. The center wouldn't hold; that's what happened."

"Spare me the self pity. I was there at the end." Mei-chou knew what would happen if she allowed him to wallow. "Can't you be sensible? Where did it begin?"

"The beginning. Most dragons knew little of their primitive origins. They were too smug, too militantly ignorant to learn." Ao Rue began what seemed to be memorized. "Perhaps, it's because we rejected our bestial stirrings?"

"Ok, Ok, not another scholarly lecture. Give me a break. Just tell me. How did you ruin it all?"

"Me? Ruin it all? Never, I never. . . ."

He's fading again, Mei-chou thought. "Hey, worm. Not you. The others. What happened with the dragons in the sea? In general. You know. As you saw it. You were there."

"I was there and I wasn't there."

"We both know you weren't much good at getting involved." Mei-chou ignored his defensiveness. "In fact, you ran off to Mud Pit Hollow because you were such a great warrior and lover."

"Tiger turds! Wretched fur ball! You're not going to be happy until you get it all."

"You got it."

"And I'll have no peace until you do."

"It's good for you."

"What's this? Cats know what's good for dragons?"

"Hey, at least we're not almost extinct. Unlikely to be. Are you going to tell me or not? I could go lie on a warm stone. At least it won't insult me."

"Go ahead. Go! I don't need you here."

"Fine. Rot in your memories for all I care!" Mei-chou stalked off to find her stone.

Ao Rue stared after her. *She'll probably get into that strange belly worship of the sun, Ao Rue thought. Do cats have religion? Never! They worship themselves.* Her final remarks ate at him. Most often he tried to ignore the past, avoiding it in sleep, in mindlessness. Still, it bound him. His memories stalked his mind like relentless predators. Now that she was gone, he thought for a moment to seek out the dragonettes in the sea. *No. I stink of death. Hunting the Demons fouled me. I'm not fit company. Too old anyway. They don't want me*

Life was bearable when Mei-chou was about; even empty banter was better than thinking, and there were times, many times, she was far more interesting than a lot of dragons he'd known. *Known? They were gone. Known! What did I know. I knew nothing. Dragonettes had answers, millions. Age brought memories and only questions. Answers died! Memories were inescapable.* Indeed, Ao Rue's memories were like the sand after a rain. The crust, the clumps, all looked solid, but when he tried to pull them to him, they crumbled. It was as if the stone betrayed him. All moments broke within him into grit and pain, always ever sharp, like the day the dragons decided to leave the soft sea for the damning land.

Chapter 4
2220 words

On that long-dead day, now buried under over a decade's sand and sea fossils, Ao Rue swam slowly. He was late. He didn't care. He was always late for Kaochang's meetings; meetings bored him. *Too many voices, going in too many directions. Too many causes, too few brains*, he thought. *Always foolishness -- no one prepared. Didn't anybody study anymore? Fools!* Besides, his place on the Council of Five was meaningless. It had been centuries since the Council had done little more than try to referee the arguments among the generals, the practicing sorcerers, the aging pedants, and the ever-smug young. Most decisions were made by others in weed-filled caverns and changed little if anything.

Ao Rue's long, silver body moved easily through his natural environment. He slid in lazy S's that disguised both power and speed. Occasionally he'd snap his broad wings out in contempt of the water's power and turn back somersaults and figure 8's. If he thought no one was looking, he'd practice some of the winged acrobatics of the mating ritual. He opened both wings fully, like large shimmering shells against the massive currents, and did the difficult Sphere of Utter Devotion, rotating slowly with his head thrown back and pointed to the surface. His face remained calm and beatific as his muscles cracked with the effort. *Style . . . show no strain!* Yet, despite being well into breeding age, he was still alone, but he thought often of a miraculous someone to whom he could give his life and transform his world. Other times, he sulked in the belief that there was no one, would never be anyone, and wondered why he bothered to do anything. As the Crystal Palace of the Kaochang came into view, glittering against the blue-black of the deep sea, he thought again of the same uninspiring females that would arouse neither his attention nor his glands. He twinged within his dignity-shrouded loneliness.

Today, he made a quiet entrance between two of the rear spires and cringed to hear, once again, the self-righteous, grinding tones of Yün-t'ung, Nurturer of the Young, assailing the Council. She was going on about more help for the dragonettes' educations. *Little fools, get everything done for them. No wonder they could do less and less for themselves each passing day.* As he settled among the four other members of the Council on the

terrace amid the circular tiers of reclining dragons, he tuned her out. Ao Rue did not share Yün-t'ung's infatuation with the young and had made himself markedly unpopular by saying so at every opportunity.

He glanced at his fellow Council members: Ao Kuang, visibly dozing, occasionally snapping awake and trying to look interested; Ao Ch'in, senile, preening her fading bronze scales with her tail and foolishly ogling every male in the place; Ao Jun, fascinated with everything and knowing nothing, nodding at Yün-t'ung's every other word; and Ao Shun, mumbling to himself as he stuffed his mind with yet another set of eternal minutes. *The ruling class!* Ao Rue thought contemptuously. *Has there ever in history been a better case for the decadence of bureaucratic rule?*

The Council gone from his mind as quickly as it came, Ao Rue scanned the audience. He was careful to avoid any eye contact with Chih-nil. He wanted to signal Feng-po, just about the only one he could call friend, but as usual he was trying to wrap his tail around yet another female. Feng-po was living proof that there were rare dragons who mated more than once. This time it was Ch'ang-o, Child of the Moon, stunning in her glowing white scales and lace wings. Ao Rue secretly envied Feng-po's success with the females, while continually teasing him about the numerous dragonettes that bore Feng-po's ebony blaze. In fact, when Ao Rue didn't see any, he invented them: "Ah yes, Feng-po, I saw a herd of them just awhile ago, a veritable gaggle, a swarm; they darkened the sun as they swam above me. All mentally defective, of course . . ."

Ao Rue chuckled inwardly at his own joke and lifted his claw to affirm some inane motion from Yün-t'ung that he hadn't even heard. Then, his wandering eyes froze on something ugly. Yolbas, Lei-kung, Heng-chiang, and that tail-kisser Han Chung-li had their heads together on one of the upper tiers. The water above them boiled with their whispering, and that eel Yolbas' tail quivered with excitement. As Ao Rue watched, the tight circle broke its haze of bubbles and Yolbas motioned to Ao Jun to speak.

Ao Jun was finishing the usual sonorous monotone that he thought passed for majesty, "And we all are most grateful for yet another contribution to the well-being of the young from Yün-t'ung. Her deep commitment to the future . . ." Yolbas began to bang his tail against the basalt floor. "Oh yes," said Ao Jun abruptly -- Yolbas' massive tail could get anyone's attention --

"The chair recognizes Yolbas, Slayer of Whales and Leader of the Games of Crab and Crayfish."

Yolbas rose, leaning back on his tail, flaunting the deep battle scars that marked his chest and neck. Mumbblings of praise rose from the male dragonettes. He led them in the elaborate, mental war games that sent crabs and crayfishes tearing at each other as the playing dragons forced their tiny bodies into elaborate tactics and their little minds into oblivion. Ao Rue viewed such cruelty with scorn. He thought those who saw it as a proper outlet for natural aggression confused the cure with the sickness. Death was death, even among the smallest creatures.

Yolbas paused a moment longer, obviously enjoying the adoration. He finally spoke. "Noble dragons, you know me. What you may not know is that I have been meeting in secret conclave with two of the greatest minds that our history has ever seen, and we have conceived a plan to bring dragonkind to its full fruition. All of you are familiar with and respect the works of Lei-kung, Lord of Thunder. Since almost time immemorial, we have prospered within the crystal palaces his architectural sorcery has created for us. He is a benefactor beyond reproach. So too, we have all marveled at the uncanny strategies of General Heng-chiang as he has gained us victory after victory over physical and magical foes."

Yolbas paused to allow Lei-kung and Heng-chiang to rise beside him. Heng-chiang slightly spread his brown wings to show the gold cables that stitched his old wounds together; he held his artificial gold foreleg to his chest. Phlegm rose constantly from his maimed snout. Lei-kung's small, unmarked, ecru body appeared insignificant beside the two warriors, but Ao Rue knew him to be cunning and shrewd. He was the actual source of any intelligence that hammer-head Yolbas might speak. Han Chung-li was trying to slide his jelly-fish of a body forward, but just a slight lift in Yolbas' tail sent him cowering back. A deep rumble filled the palace as the dragons thumped their tails in praise. Ao Rue's and Feng-po's remained still. They knew Yolbas and his followers as eels and sharks, always self-serving. While Ao Rue might jokingly contend that he was the last altruist in the world, he knew better and resented the three's popularity when better dragons went unappreciated. Ao Rue believed that heroes were rarely the best, only the most obvious.

"We have already consulted with Ao Kuang, Ao Jun, and Ao Ch'in about our plan and have been assured the majority support of the Council." Ao Rue was startled. Whatever it was, there was reason he had not been consulted. He looked at his fellow councilors in surprise and was stunned to see that Ao Kuang was awake, but not that Ao Ch'in's lustful stare had become focused on Yolbas and her tail had begun to curl obscenely.

"My noble friends, what we propose is nothing less than to change the face of our world," Yolbas bellowed over the numerous speculations that had sprung up. The noise stopped. His audience again in claw, Yolbas went on. "For too long, we dragons have ruled our seas unopposed, unchallenged. We have grown lazy and soft. Too long we have wallowed in effete poetry and dead history, composing symphonies and maudlin verse, reading and not acting." The last with a pointed look at Ao Rue. "What we propose, through the wise and mighty magic of Lei-kung, is to drain the sea into the deep core of the earth and raise us and the land to the sun!"

Sound exploded from everywhere. It ricocheted in madness from spire to spire, tier to tier. No one remained quiet. Super-heated water collided in clouds and whirlpools. Ao Rue caught fragments: "New, it's good," "Yolbas . . . great," "My scales, we'll bake," "Leave?" "Challenge?" Suddenly, one sound began to dominate. It was the young males, chanting: "THE SUN, THE SUN, WE WANT THE SUN." Over and over again it echoed. Ao Rue looked to Yolbas and saw Han Chung-li happily waving his forelegs, leading the obviously rehearsed chant. In an instant, Ao Rue saw his future in the hands of a half-witted cheerleader. His head dropped in despair, only to see a more immediate horror. Kuan-ti, Teller of the Future, Ao Rue's mentor, who had been old when Ao Rue was young, was writhing, babbling incoherently: "Dee . . . demns . . . mons . . . doom . . . mons . . . death" He was drowned out by the chant, and before Ao Rue could make his way to the twisting Kuan-ti, the wildly talking dragons had closed the way.

Ao Rue took a deep breath to try to speak, to seek order, but before he could, Yolbas had seized control again. With a quick sign to Han Chung-li, Yolbas stopped the chant as if he'd bitten off its head. "My friends, there are those who would say that wings are only for mating and fighting. Not true! We can be the gods of the air! The sky will be our playground. We are not doomed to the sea. Dragons should go wherever they please. Are we not

power? Are we not the greatest magic in creation? Are we not the highest of all creatures? Our destiny is to rule the land as we have conquered the sea. We must extend our might until the stars quake."

More and more, Yolbas' words were punctuated with cries of excitement, screamed yes'es, and still Ao Rue tried to speak, thinking that no one had seen him or cared to hear, but one did. Lei-kung had remained calm. He nudged Yolbas, smiled, and nodded toward Ao Rue. Yolbas slowed; he too smiled, signaled for quiet. "Ah, my friends, in my commitment and passion, I have failed to acknowledge a venerable member of the Council of Five. My pardon, Ao Rue, please share your wisdom."

Ao Rue was taken unawares despite his urgency and could only stammer, "I, I, was not, not consulted." Small laughter scattered among the tiers. He gritted his fangs in embarrassment.

Now Lei-kung spoke. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue, our friend, we tried, oh, we tried so to find you and Ao Shun." Ao Rue sickened at the false sweetness of his paternalistic tone. "But he could do little more than dredge up old minutes, hardly relevant. Poor old Shun. We are all so concerned with what age has done to his mind. And you, you were just nowhere to be found." Han Chung-li was nodding along and hardly concealing his scorn.

Chih-nil stepped forward and smiled down at Ao Rue. "We thought you were deep within the library caverns or perhaps practicing the mating ritual again to see if you could get it right."

Hoots of scorn and roaring laughter cascaded down on Ao Rue. He coiled in on himself. Feng-po glared in anger; his eyes beginning to glow. Little Ch'ang-o was pushing her foreleg against her snout to hold her giggling. Even the pathetic Han Chung-li roared his disdain. Ao Rue shrank in shame, dropping his head, seeking only escape. He suddenly knew they'd meant him to speak. In one master stroke, Lei-kung had rendered him impotent, meaningless. Ao Rue looked briefly at Feng-po, shook his head in despair, and managed to mouth a brief "Later." He turned and crawled his way out through a small tunnel, the cries of triumph and joy flushing him out.

■

It was later, when he found the courage to return to the empty palace to seek Feng-po, that Ao Rue discovered Kuan-ti's body. It was awash with the sand kicked up by many claws, carelessly abandoned amid the celebration of

the new world to come. At first, Ao Rue could not believe he was dead. For a dragon to die unexpectedly, without control, was an abomination, too insane to believe. His old teacher was twisted about himself, caught in a vision of madness and terror that had snapped his bones and exploded his blue eyes. Ao Rue moved quickly to him, gathered up the fragile body, and rocked it within the cradle of his own body. He shuddered uncontrollably with grief, totally sure the base of his world had crumbled, that his cowardly retreat had left his master helpless. Yet, amid the pain that scattered his mind to chaotic grains, he suddenly realized what specter Kuan-ti had seen, what he had been trying to shout: *DEMONS, THE AZGHUN DEMONS!*

Chapter 5
3140 words

"How could he be so frail in life and so heavy in death?" Feng-po grunted as he and Ao Rue carefully settled Kuan-ti's corpse into the deepest of the air-filled caverns.

"He'll be happy here among the tablets and wisdom he loved so much," Ao Rue, himself looked lovingly on the thin, rune-covered slabs of emerald that were stacked everywhere.

"Ao Rue, could he really read these?"

"Of course, he could; there are still a few of us who can read."

Feng-po was nonplused. "You can read? Why bother? Dragons remember everything!"

"Dragons remember far less than you'd think, my tail-chasing friend. What they recall, they reshape to suit themselves. Dragons are incredible egotists; they think all creation radiates out from them. You've seen all those pictures of the world -- superimposed male and female dragons stretching their pinions to the very edges of the circle. They think everything's theirs. That's how they can hunt, kill, and manipulate other creatures without caring. After all, it's tough to share a whole world!" Ao Rue couldn't resist the last bit of sarcasm. "Now we could finish this if you'd stop asking questions. I'll explain things to you after."

"What do we do now?" Feng-po seemed to be having trouble accepting what was happening. "Never thought I'd see a dragon buried. Never imagined a dragon could die unexpectedly."

"It's a terrible, fell omen, but let me finish this. Soon, soon, I'll explain soon."

They backed out into the antechamber of the basalt cavern. Their talons clicked against the cold stone. Ao Rue gestured to Feng-po to move back and rose until his head was even with the top of the opening. He opened and cupped his wings until Feng-po couldn't see in. Gradually, a silver orb began to take shape within Ao Rue's wings; sparks slowly began to leap from pinion to pinion. Defying the end-all black of the basalt, the pulsing light of his eyes colored and broke the darkness. The sparks came quicker and thicker. They began to twine into bolts. Feng-po sensed the energies and marveled at his friend's unsuspected power. Slowly,

unbelievably, the basalt started to flow; it was streaked with silver within Ao Rue's orb. The black stone began to whirlpool as the glow from his eyes spun faster. Blue lightning moved about the surface of the orb. It cracked and snapped in the cavern's dry air. The spinning basalt began to close the cave. Feng-po retreated into the water and still he could feel lightning's booms against his body. Ao Rue's unfathomed sorcery pounded on the stone. Suddenly, there was a great thump that seemed to smack the world shut. It punched Feng-po's ears and threw him tumbling backward. Stunned, he turned back to see Ao Rue facing a wall where none had been before, a strange, slick sheet of black swirled with blue and silver. Ao Rue was still standing casually. It was as if his creation had only been the currents of a minnow's fins.

Feng-po spoke haltingly, "How . . . how . . . could you . . . do that? I . . . I didn't know you could do that." His words were touched with awe and some fear.

"I can't," Ao Rue said wearily, softly.

"You can't; you just did! I never knew you were a spellweaver."

"I'm not." Ao Rue seemed confused himself. He was speaking words he'd never thought to say. "I mean I can't do it for myself. It comes only in great need, great anger. I must control it. It's only evil when I do it for myself."

"You mean like what you did to Chang-Lao when we were young?"

"Yes . . . yes." Feng-po suddenly realized Ao Rue was trembling and sobbing.

"Oh, my friend, your spell made me forget. You and Kuan-ti were very close."

"He was my father," Ao Rue managed to say as he turned slowly and stiffly. Feng-po could see the simple, deep grief in his friend's face now that magic and purpose had fallen away.

"Your father? No dragon knows his or her father. We're all chased off to do the stupid things that dragonettes do, to return to adult company when we're finally civilized."

"Feng-po, sometimes I think the only thing you ever notice are females." Ao Rue was still in deep pain, but Feng-po was serving as a

healthy, if irrelevant, distraction. "Hadn't you ever noticed we were the only two with the scholar's eyes?"

"Blue eyes are scholar's eyes?"

"Yes, there was a time when everything meant something, a time before dragons became so bloated with their own selfish majesty."

"So, now you're the only one. The only scholar?" Feng-po didn't quite understand.

"True. Now I'm the only freak, but there must be other scholars somewhere, somewhere someone who believes there's more to life than blundering around controlling things. Someone who still takes time to think."

"Lei-kung thinks." Feng-po knew that was the wrong thing to say the moment the words fell from his snout.

"THINKS! THINKS!" Ao Rue raged, the glow in his eyes brightening. "That sack of rancid cod oil never had a thought in his slimy life. He connives, conspires; all he cares about is exploitation! He and his walrus-brained thugs just left Kuan-ti to lie there like shark vomit!"

"Easy, easy," Feng-po tried to calm his distraught friend. Despite Ao Rue's usual stoic control, he could be so quick sometimes. Feng-po still shuddered when he thought of Chang-Lao's body exploding from within on the day he called Kuan-ti a freak to Ao Rue's face. Feng-po spoke quickly, knowing he had to make Ao Rue forget his anger. "Is Kuan-ti the one who first took you to the deep caverns?"

"Yes, that and so much more." Ao Rue softened. "He taught me to read the old runes. He showed me long-forgotten poetry, so exquisite it makes filigree crude. In these tablets is magic so potent that in the wrong claws could shatter the very cosmos into shell shards. Even if he hadn't been my blood father, he was the sire of my soul. He made me rich when the world wanted me poor."

"But these caverns. Aren't they haunted. Voices echo through the stone. No one comes there. I never would have come here alone. They say anyone returns who shakes with nightmares for months after."

"Ghosts?" Ao Rue chuckled sadly. "That's only Yülü, although calling him an 'only' is like calling a palace a mussel."

"You mean there's a dragon who lives down there? Lives in the darkness?" Feng-po said in disbelief.

"Lives' isn't quite the right word. His body isn't there, but his spirit sure is, and a massively powerful one at that. That was his comrade's spell I used to close the cave mouth, Shen-t'u's Spell of Eternal Closure. Let Lei-kung and that oaf Heng-chiang try to unseal that gate to drain the sea. I often wondered why anyone would want anything sealed forever; now I know. I know far too well." Again, Ao Rue slipped into twisting grief. "Oh, Feng-po, our world is done. You see, I now think I know what Kuan-ti was trying to say to that unthinking school of bottom-feeding flounders at the Kaochang."

"Yülü? Gate? Closure? I don't understand."

"Settle yourself. I'll tell you what I know. Besides I'm not quite ready to leave Kuan-ti yet, and in awhile we have one more thing to do that I'll need your help with."

"All right. If you think I can do it."

"I hope so; I'm very tired. I could tap more power but that's only for emergencies. Let me rest while I tell you what I think is going to happen. To give you an idea of what's on those tablets and how bad dragons' memories are, tell me where you think we began."

"Everyone knows that!" Feng-po spoke with a shade of condescension. His courage was creeping back as Ao Rue's magic faded. "Dragons were spawned in the sea. The sea is our mother; the sun that lights the water is our father. Together they loved to produce the crown of creation, and"

"Enough," said Ao Rue impatiently. "Heng-chiang, Lei-kung, and Yolbas are going to rip us all from the sea, and you prattle with catechism. Dragons were originally land creatures; we evolved from something stupid, like iguanas. We only reached our current state after we made the sea our home. Since then, we've been back on the land one more time. After that mess, there's good reason why we shouldn't go back again."

"What's an iguana?"

"A moray eel with legs, I think. Stop interrupting and try to concentrate. The tablets tell of a time when dragons ruled the air, not the sea. The tablets themselves have to be kept in the air; they deteriorate quickly in water. When Lei-kung breaks the magical seals and gates on these caverns

and the sea drains through, they'll crumble. And they are our oldest records. There are a few other remnants of those days, but few bother to know them. Your name, for example, means 'Earl of the Wind' in the old high tongue, 'Quick Stepper' in the vernacular."

"Wow, maybe the air will be good for me," Feng-po said hopefully.

"I fear the air will be good for none of us. Chaos and fear took us the last time we were land creatures. We fled to the sea. Don't interrupt me. I know what you're thinking; 'what could possibly chase dragons?' That's not too clear. Age has dulled the runes, and Kuan-ti, after a lifetime of study, couldn't decipher all of the most ancient ones. What is clear is that we ran from dread beings that had evolved after we left the first time. We could kill them, but simple destruction wasn't enough. Somehow killing them was unclean."

"What were they?"

"I was getting to that!" Feng-po should have known better than to disturb Ao Rue in lecture mode; he got petulant. "They were called the Azghun Demons." Both dragons shivered at some ancestral memory that brought irrational dread. "In color, they matched Lei-kung, although of a more sickening yellowish hue, if that's possible. Somehow they poisoned everything, but they couldn't speak or think; didn't have individual names. They infected dragons. I can't figure out how, but it wasn't noble or heroic or anything like that. It was just pathetically ugly. So, the dragons tried to get away from them, but there was nowhere to go, so they caused the seas to rise and cover most of the land. Many creatures were killed by the rushing waters. There's one elegy, a perfection of tragedy, devoted to the loss of a particular furred mammal, but it's not clear if it was an ally or a beloved friend."

"So we saved ourselves in the sea? Retreated in shame!"

"Yes and no; something still had to be done with the Demons. Their existence was too much of an utter abomination. They were too much of an affront to pride and natural law. Before the land was flooded, somehow they were lured or forced by a cadre of sorcerers into the deep tunnels below. I think our caverns are the upper levels. Then, they were sealed in with water. Atop that, magical barriers were created around these caverns to keep the tablets dry. Thus, these cave are like air pockets with water above and water

below. At the deepest levels, in a vacuous place called Hell, the Demons may still prowl in yet more dry caves. If they live, they lie beneath our talons right now. When Lei-kung drains the sea, I think he'll free the Demons. That's why Shen-t'u and Yülu were and are so important. Since neither the water nor the basalt was enough, they had to guard the gates and the spells. Their obligation was so great that, when their bodies could no longer endure life, their spirits stayed."

"But you said that only Yülu remains."

"Shen-t'u is gone. I don't know where. Perhaps spirit has an end. Maybe he was just too tired. Yülu has grown weaker in my short life, and he's been down there for eons. I wonder if the demons grow in strength; I wonder if their infection has leaked into Lei-kung?"

"Please, Ao Rue, you tell tales to frighten the young." Feng-po recovered his composure and his courage. "Dragons fear nothing. We are the masters of all!"

"So, don't believe me." Ao Rue wondered how he could be so close to someone who could be so silly and superficial. There were times he thought Feng-po's mind had as much content as a blowfish. He seemed to have completely forgotten the solemn and painful mission that had brought them to the depths. "Doubt me if you want, but I will tell you this. Throughout history, unexplained deaths, like Kuan-ti's, have always been harbingers of great suffering and strife. Mark my words: many more will die unnaturally before we see the end of this . . . if we live to see the end. Unnatural deaths are the darkest of omens. Our world is going to be turned inside out. We'll end up wearing our tender guts on the outside."

"This is silly. You're just trying to scare me." Any impact Ao Rue had hoped to have was now lost in Feng-po's bravado. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Not yet, my empty-headed friend. We need to finish here. I need you to write something for Kuan-ti in the basalt seal."

"How am I supposed to do that? You might as well ask me to chew diamonds."

Ao Rue had forgotten that his friend knew nothing of the time when dragons actually wrote and composed. "Here, I'll show you. Once I start it, you'll have to hold it. I'm deep tired. Give me the first talon on your right

claw." As Feng-po extended it, Ao Rue's eyes began to pulse softly. Suddenly, Feng-po's talon began to glow. "There, do you feel it."

"Yes, yes, I do. It's as easy as cracking a clam." His talon began to glow very brightly, and the water began to boil around it.

"Easy; it doesn't have to be that hot," Ao Rue warned. Feng-po was turning his talon about, looking at it as if, like a dragonling, he'd just realized it was there. "Now all you have to do is cut what I tell you into the basalt."

"Err, Ao Rue, haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"I can't write. Never bothered to learn. I didn't think it was important."

"Not important? Not important! Oh, never mind. How are we going to do this? I can't leave Kuan-ti unmarked. All right, we'll have to do it this way. Twine the end of your tail in mine."

"Not on your life. That's weird."

"Feng-po, try to forget your sense of propriety for a moment. I need the energy to do this."

"All right, but this isn't natural."

Feng-po watched as Ao Rue's talon began to glow, and he wondered how severely weary the sorcerer's energy was because the drain down his tail was hardly anything. Painstakingly, Ao Rue drew four lines of runes into the basalt cap.

"What does it say?" Feng-po asked as he gratefully untwined his tail and looked over his shoulder to check if anyone had seen.

"I'll read it to you later. Right now, I think I'll go into one of the caverns. I need some time alone, and the desolation down here calms me."

"Not yet, before you go and play hermit again, now I need you to do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"There is a friend of Ch'ang-o's I'd like you to get out of my tendrils."

"Feng-po, is this the time to discuss this!"

"This is important. Besides, you've never seen anyone this shy and insecure. She's a little thing, name's Nü-kua, a copper with green eyes -- cute, a real tail sweller. Trails around after Ch'ang-o like a remora."

"I'd have thought you'd be interested if she's that exciting."

"Not my type, too timid, but she'd be perfect for you. She even likes poetry. And I would like some time to cultivate Chang-o's tail without an audience."

"I bet you would! There are times I think that if you had your way, you'd spend all your time crunching oysters and drinking that effervescent, bubbly stuff you suck out of those bulbous vines."

"You're probably right. I love oysters -- crunchy on the outside, soft on the inside. But, hey, we were talking about Nü-kua; don't sidetrack me. She likes you. She was mortified by what Chih-nil and Yolbas did to you at the Kaochang."

"Wonderful. Along with scorn, now I'm getting pity."

"She seemed sincere."

"They all start out that way! You know her name means 'Tamer of Beasts.'"

"Will you stop thinking for a minute. You think too much! Why not just give her a chance to tame your beast?"

Ao Rue ignored Feng-po's ribaldry. "How can anyone think too much? Lei-kung's name means 'Lord of Thunder.'"

"'Lord of Thunder,' that little sponge?"

"You may have reason to remember that once he gets his plan into action," Ao Rue cautioned. "Then, you can forget all about the oysters and the bubbly and a whole lot of other things!"

"Stop the doom and gloom. Will you help me out with this?"

"Do you know ancient writings tell of telepathic links between lovers."

"Right. I've been with more females than you've ever seen, and I've never felt a mental twinge. Besides, I could care about their minds."

"Once dragons did it all the time."

"You're evading the issue. Are you going to help me or not?"

"I'll think about it. Now I need some time alone." Ao Rue turned and began to snake his way toward the deepest of the air-filled vaults. Feng-po watched his friend go and shrugged. As he turned to swim up, he thought he'd snag a few vines of bubbly and see what Ch'ang-o was doing. His mind started to caress that slender white tail. Ao Rue's astonishing magic had already faded from Feng-po's memory as he turned his back on the depths.

■

It was some time later that Ao Rue abandoned his solitude. The usual serenity that isolation usually brought him hadn't come. Too much ate at him: Feng-po's oblivion, Chih-nil's smugness, Lei-kung's insanity, Heng-chiang's brutality, Yolbas' belligerence, and if truth be known, some envy and bitterness at their popularity. He did have enough sense of self left to stop and reread the unrhymed eulogy he'd written on Kuan-ti's tomb:

Father, Great Mentor, Give Me Strength in My Desolation

Give Me the Will and the Power to Confront What is to Come.

Ever and Always You Will Remain in My Heart.

May the Peace That Transcends All Understanding Be With You!

He wished he were a better poet.

Chapter 6
2580 words

Deep in the underground recesses of Lei-kung's palace, General Heng-chiang bent over a strangely shifting table. Beneath the magical gaze of his glowing brown eyes, its surface curled and humped with abuse. It was scarred by hues, angles offensive to the eye, all overcast by his muddy eyes. In his one real claw, Heng-chiang formed balls of void. As he muttered, he flipped them at the map. Crying black rents appeared where they hit. Black bubbles rushed and burst into the water. Blue swirled and gathered to the hole, was greedily sucked in and muddied over by brown silt. Then, it would quiet until another gesture broke the map again. As he limped to a new place and gestured, Han Chung-li scuttled after him. With a silver sieve, he caught the phlegm as it rose from the concentrating General's twisted snout. Han's swinging gestures formed a silver halo above their demented dance over the map that is the world.

From behind them, Lei-kung and Chih-nil watched their caperings. When their jerking movements hesitated, Lei-kung leaned intently forward, as if to launch himself into some void, and their movements quickened. Chih-nil ignored him; she was much more concerned with the ooze that crept up between her talons. It would take hours with a piece of lava to scour the slimy stuff from her pink talons. The floor wouldn't yield to any amount of cleaning -- scrape it down to the bedrock and the filth only seeped up again. She hated the room; it made her feel dirty. She wondered why they had ever made the great effort to get it open. Lei-kung had said it took the combined flame of six dragons to melt the seals on the two enormous adamantine doors; four of the dragons would never flame again. Whatever ancients had sealed this door had wanted it closed for eternity. The spells welding it shut had made the metal seals look like jellyfish. Until Lei-kung had discovered the power of the Northern Lights, they hadn't been able to budge them. Sickness and plague filled the crypt; the oily water caked at everyone's nostrils. The room was lit by tall crystal spikes in the walls. The crystals had taken on the oily slime of the floor; they were a smoky gray. As the feeble light from the deep ocean fought its way through, it took on twisting patterns that made phantoms in the air. Any natural light -- luminous algae and eels -- died quickly. And no matter how much sorcerous light they created, those

skulking shadow creatures still lurked and moved in the cragged corners and preyed on each other in the upper reaches of the uneven ceiling. When they had first entered, the table had gleamed like a beacon seen by someone lost in a maze. Now their machinations had made it yet another call to some wasting disease that crept and rotted its way into the mind.

Lei-kung's whisper broke her grim survey, "The conjuring goes well. The fools actually believe this shaping is their own will." He leaned closer, caressed her creme tail, shuddered to look upon the beauty that every male wanted.

Chih-nil barely tolerated his touch and whispered back, "Remember your promise."

"Of course, of course." Lei-kung leaned forward as his minions hesitated again. Carefully he cracked his sorcerous whip delicately enough so they didn't know, sharply enough that they maintained his purpose. He smiled crookedly as he made their wills so much broken air, then frowned as his concentration was weakened by noise behind him.

Chih-nil turned to see the swaggering form of Yolbas entering, calling loudly, "Yo, all. Looked all over for you. What are you"

"Quiet, fool, can't you see the draining is in progress; can't you see they're deep in the *Tu-suan*," she hissed. Yolbas instantly froze; he had no desire to earn Lei-kung's wrath or irritate Chih-nil's beauty.

Yolbas turned to see Lei-kung straining so far forward that his fangs were inches from the floor. Heng-chiang's and Han Chung-li's bodies had begun to jerk and snap as a portion of the world resisted the rending. Heng-chiang's golden claw began to thump hollowly again and again against his shrunken chest. Cracking sparks began to arc forward as the straining Lei-kung extended his wings, forcing Yolbas and Chih-nil to slip and slide aside like scrambling crabs. Han Chung-li's claw began to jerk up and down; the sieve tore at the water. Phlegm and spit scattered and clouded the water. Foul grace gave way to futile grunts. A portion of the map was a shiny, polished black. Heng-chiang's projectiles bounced off it. The silt was repelled. The one spot remained clean, the water over it crystal-blue. Foam began to roll from Heng-chiang's snout. Lei-kung's entire body vibrated like a stretched whip. Han Chung-li whimpered over and over. Yolbas and Chih-

nil cowered from the twisting forces, bravado and beauty forgotten in quaking fear.

"Argh," Lei-kung cried as his fangs cracked against the floor, the spell broken. His two tools simply folded, limp snakes with neither will nor purpose. Yolbas rushed forward and peered into the fallen sorcerer's sickly-green face. He couldn't bring himself to touch the body.

Lei-kung moaned; some life returned to his color. He inched his forelegs beneath himself and slowly forced his body back to life. "By the Twelve Sleepers, no one will ever break that."

"Break what? Did it work? Did it fail?" Chih-nil's reedy voice rose shrill and panicked. Her lovely face twisted ugly in its greed.

"No, no, it's all right, just that one spot. We don't need it all." Lei-kung calmed her.

Yolbas was nudging Heng-chiang's and Han Chung-li's still forms. "Are they dead?" He was more curious than concerned.

"No, they're all right. Leave them. They'll come around in awhile. They took most of the shock when the spell broke." Lei-kung began to smile again. *My two lovely little insulators*, he thought to himself.

"What were you doing here? What is this thing?" Yolbas said as he left the map. Lei-kung and Chih-nil looked at each other, sharing a common thought: *Can any being with blood in it be so stupid?* Lei-kung was too weary to resist Yolbas' question.

"We've begun the terraforming, started to drain the water. The map is the world. Whatever I, we, do to it happens outside."

"Oh, it's sympathetic magic, like sticking pins in a sim, simula, simulacrum," Yolbas was inordinately proud he remembered some of his schooling though he did stumble over the big word. "How did you make it?"

No, it's not a symbol; it is the world, and we didn't make it. It's the ancients' work. We barely can use it as it is. Without the power of the Lights, it mocks us with its indifference. We still don't exactly how it works."

Chih-nil interrupted, "But what about that one spot?" Lei-kung started to glare at her for the interruption, thought better of it even though he felt oddly uncomfortable discussing the spot.

"It's a seal. We're draining the water through the old air-filled caverns. It goes somewhere down deep in the earth beneath them. The spell on that one cavern won't yield."

"Why not? Heng-chiang and Han Chung-li broke the others, didn't they?" At times, even Yolbas had an insight, but he ruined it with his dim wit, as usual. Lei-kung resisted his own ego; he really wanted to tell Yolbas that the two unconscious dragons had done nothing.

"There's one spell down there that isn't old. It's as new and as bright as a minnow, more powerful than even the ancient ones were when they were first made. Shen-t'u knows what creature shaped it. It has to be some natural phenomenon beyond even our understanding. Omens and blood, nothing alive could have called up that much power!"

"Should we go look at it?" Chih-nil offered.

Lei-kung shuddered at the thought. There was a force down there that made him far more than just uneasy. He doubted he could even look at that seal. There was an independent quality to it that mocked his very nature. It was anathema. "No, it's of no consequence."

"So it's done. Soon we'll be on the land and in the air."

"No, Yolbas, terraforming is just not that easy." Lei-kung sighed inwardly. *I'd like to turn him inside out. All it would take is a word with the power still lingering in me. No, I need him to inspire the dragons. But one day . . . !* The thought of Yolbas inside out, his organs dangling from his spine, made Lei-kung feel warm, creamy. "This isn't like making a crab fight a lobster. The Rosary of the Dancing Northern Lights has given us enough power this dusk to start the water draining, but we must still raise the land. Otherwise, we'll spend half our time popping from island to island. The magnetic forces are new; they have odd effects on us. I can feel sight alterations within me. No real harm is occurring, but we can't do it all ourselves. The power's too great for a few of us to control. That's why we're getting all the other dragons together to tap it. You do remember tomorrow's Kaochang? You've memorized the speech I gave you?"

"Not all of it."

"You better, Yolbas. We need you. You are our leader. The dragons will follow you anywhere!" Yolbas preened within Lei-kung's false praise.

"We're going to share this power with all the other dragons?" Chih-nil snapped.

"Always out for yourself, Chih-nil."

"Aren't we all? Isn't everyone? Who does anything except for themselves?" The dragons nodded in agreement. Even Han Chung-li, having finally regained consciousness and making a few futile swipes to try to clear the phlegm, agreed. Chih-nil was no fool.

"You needn't worry. We will control the Spell of Changing. They will only shape and funnel it for us." Lei-kung neglected to mention that he, not his comrades, would really control it.

Yolbas rose to the moment. "My fellow dragons, this new energy that has gleamed and rippled for eternity in the northern sky will make us like gods. By willingly giving us the control over the master spell to raise the land, no dragon will ever again be able to deny us the power of the Lights."

"Save the speech until the Kaochang. But you're right. We must maintain their enthusiasm and excitement for the terraforming. You've got to keep them thrilled, Yolbas. We don't want anyone thinking about what they're actually giving us."

"What about Ao Rue; he frightens me," Han Chung-li had found the courage to join in.

"Ao Rue's nothing!" Yolbas answered. "I'll rip his lungs out."

"Don't speak too quickly. He'd probably rip yours out. And remember what his magic did to my only friend, Chang-Lao." Yolbas rose indignantly at Lei-kung's seeming insult although the memory of Ao Rue's rage on that long passed day daunted him. Lei-kung stifled him. "Don't be a precipitous fool, Yolbas. There's more to that dragon than meets the eye. The aura of magic is so strong about him at times that I think he could melt my brain. Force isn't the answer; keeping him insecure and off balance is. As long as his self-esteem is shark vomit, he's easy to discredit. You saw what we did to him at the last Kaochang." They all laughed. Lei-kung didn't. The memory of Chang-Lao was still bitter even after so many years. "Besides, he believes so firmly in his arcane knowledge that he has no tact, no political sense. Without that and with an ambition so pathetic that it does nothing more than glue his snout to a bunch of unreadable tablets, he'll gain no support. Anyway, if he gets out of hand, I'll sic Chih-nil on him again." They all

snickered, remembering how she had almost run him into the sand. "He never did figure out what hit him."

"If he's so smart and so powerful, what if he is right? What if this is the wrong thing to do?" Chih-nil had the prudence of a born conniver.

"Right? Wrong? It's all meaningless. We will control all dragonkind. Truth is only worthwhile when someone pays attention, when it pays off." Lei-kung knew exactly what he was doing.

"Yea, what about the earthquakes? I can feel them starting already."

Chih-nil was starting to irritate Lei-kung. *Just wait until I have you sucking at my tail like a lamprey. Then, we'll see what a masterful seductress you are!* "Yes, my dear, certainly, Lui-ing, the God of the Shaking Earth, will be busier than ever before, but the water has the advantage of being a great shock absorber. Later, with our new power in full glory, we can quiet him."

"Yes, yes, and when we rule dragons and all the world, we'll have a Chorten, our own pyramid, to live in," Han Chung-li's enthusiasm had overcome his fear. "We can all live in the sacred pyramid and have all the females we want." His only motivation, lust, was clear; no female thought him worthy of a look.

Yolbas embraced the vision, "Wow, that's really a great idea. A place for dragons to come to thank us."

"Yes, all us specials can be together." Han Chung-li was overjoyed. Lei-kung's and Chih-nil's stomachs soured at the thought of living with the pathetic sycophant. "Once we have the Lights' power, dragons will build it, just like Heng-chiang's little corals built the palaces. Oh, I want Nü-kua first; please, can I have her?"

"No, she's mine." The dragons turned to find Heng-chiang's humped form standing again in a cloud of his own mucus. For a moment, his shape was so vague that they thought one of the crypt's tormented phantoms had spoken.

Yolbas was shocked. They all knew Heng-chiang's injuries had long made him impotent. Then, he saw the sniffing general's glowing expression as he emerged from the fog of his own drool. Repugnance flashed through Yolbas as he remembered what Heng-chiang did with the young, both male and female. It had nothing to do with sex.

"Yes, absolutely, she's mine. Contend with me, Han Chung-li, and I'll eat your feeble brain right out of your skull!"



In a less manipulative part of the world, a group of small, furred mammals sat on one of the tips of the Barkul Range. Islands now, they would soon be snow-covered mountains again.

"The water's receding."

"Yes, the dragons are coming back."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Don't know. If they haven't solved the Azghun Demons, it sure is a big mistake." A kitten in the back yowled at the mention of the dread name. The adults looked over their shoulders in disdain.

"Do you think they did?"

"Not likely. They're not exactly the smartest group around, and the sea will have made them lazy and overconfident. It's been too easy for them. Extreme power and control breed stupidity."

"That's true; size doesn't equal brains. Still, it will be fun to talk to the blue-eyed ones again. At least, they were interesting."

"Don't hold your breath. I don't imagine they needed many thinkers down in that womb."

The group turned, the gradually emerging land of no further interest for awhile. There was no point worrying about anything until it was real. Some would wander off by themselves to hunt jerboas, others to nap or groom. A few might get together and murder a few pit vipers . . . a poor excuse for sport.

Chapter 7
2620 words

Feng-po and Ao Rue squinted a bit against the light. As the water had continued to fall through the deep caverns, the sunlight struck deeper. Feng-po's palace had never gleamed so brightly.

"Have some more bubbly," Feng-po slung one end of the long, dark vine toward Ao Rue. As he did, he lifted the other end and crunched one of its bubbles between his teeth. Clear, sparkling liquor ran out at the corners of his mouth. Feng-po licked at it, savoring each drop. "By the Keepers of the Gates, that's good! Can't beat the old stuff you found down by the caverns."

Ao Rue was only hoping to get this first meeting with Nü-kua out of the way, appease Feng-po, and get back to his tablets with a clear head. "I don't think I'll have any more until they get here. You know how I get when I've chewed too many vines."

"Yea, you get a bit aggressive, bit forthright, little careless. That won't hurt you, you and your vaulted poise. You know you're timid around females."

"Not true."

"Of course it's true. You're an inhibited oaf." Feng-po absently flipped a few oysters up and leisurely snapped them out of the water before they could fall to the floor. *Crunch. Crunch.* He ate them so avidly that they punctuated his speech.

"I could be a real dreamweaver!" Ao Rue was getting impatient with Feng-po's teasing. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

Crunch "Sure, you *Crunch* could be." Feng-po wearied at times of Ao Rue's claims of what he could be. "Why aren't you then?"

"Ninety-nine times flamed and at least twice shy, that's why!"

"Well, your most recent escapade *Crunch* with Chih-nil certainly made you look like a lummo. She had you running all over the place."

"She is beautiful."

"Sure, she is. *Crunch* Thinks she's better than anyone else too. You think they call her the 'Eternal Virgin' for nothing? Tightest tail in the sea. *Crunch*" As usual, Feng-po was right up to date on all the latest gossip. "You ought to hear what they call you! *Crunch.*"

"I'll pass. Who cares about the blitherings of dragonettes!"

It was obvious to Feng-po that Ao Rue was going to start to sulk. His silver friend called it "dignity." Feng-po wisely changed the subject; he wanted Ao Rue in a good mood when the females arrived. How else was he going to be alone with Ch'ang-o? He even concentrated enough to stop eating oysters. "I can't believe how good my palace looks in this new light."

"Enjoy it. You won't have it much longer." Ao Rue was happy to have the upper hand again and to be away from a discussion of his amorous failures. Feng-po could and would recite them all.

"What do you mean 'won't have it.' Who's going to take it away from me?" Feng-po's body began to rise with his anger and his eyes to brighten even with the thought of such an affront.

"The air will take it."

"The air?"

"Yes, the air. How do you think Lei-kung and Heng-chiang made these things. Do you think they created them out of nothing?"

"Never thought about it."

"You know how Yolbas and his super soldiers force the crayfish and crabs to fight?"

"Of course, they control their minds."

"Well, the palaces are made the same way. There are little creatures, called corals, I think, that build them."

"Little creatures built all this? Where are they?" Feng-po was obviously puzzled.

"You can't see them; they're too small. There are billions. If you listen very carefully with your mind, you can hear them. Piteous little things. Heng-chiang's got them under a self-sustaining spell to work constantly. In the beginning, they were dying too quickly; the spell ravages them. He had to add another spell so they'd constantly breed."

"Constantly breed?" Feng-po's favorite subject.

"Calm down. Even you'd be anguished if you had to twist tails constantly. Wait until the air hits the palaces. Their death cries will fill your mind, if you'd care to listen. Our precious palaces will rot. And the corals are only one of many creatures that will die to fulfill the great dragon destiny."

"They're coming!" Any serious thought left Feng-po's mind as the two females swam up into view. Ao Rue could only faintly make out their shapes as his eyes tried to adjust to the deeper blue of the sea. He picked up the vine and popped another bulb. There'll be time enough to look at them once they got inside the palace. He wasn't too excited about a tedious time with Nü-kua while Feng-po got his tail straightened.

Ch'ang-o entered first and immediately was drawn to the welcoming Feng-po. Ao Rue saw that the new light wasn't too flattering. Her white scales, which had glowed in the depths, were now garish, almost harsh. Shadows had given her highlights; now she seemed stark. She was made for a softer time. Her charm now seemed to be coquettishness. She looked old and worn. It was clear that she was completely infatuated with Feng-po. Her eyes swept his lime-green body, lingering on his brass talons and pinions, obviously enjoying the ebony streaks through his wings and the lightning-shaped ebony blaze that marked his broad chest. *Have I ever seen such blatant lust before? Ao Rue wondered. That's what Feng picks 'em for.*

Nothing, however, could have prepared him for Nü-kua. She entered coyly, staying partially behind Ch'ang-o. Ao Rue was so stunned he actually rose to see her better. If the new sunlight was cruel to Feng-po's paramour, then, it worshipped Nü-kua. *Feng-po had been wrong, Ao Rue thought. She's not copper; she's spun rose-gold . . . a creature of the sun . . . she catches all the light . . . it dances on her like gossamer.* He suddenly realized Feng-po was talking to him.

"Ao Rue, what's the matter with you. Off in one of your intellectual hazes again? I'm trying to introduce you."

"My pardon" was the best Ao Rue could manage.

"Well, anyway, you know Ch'ang-o. This is her ward, Nü-kua." Nü-kua seemed to be peeking around Ch'ang-o's greater bulk.

"Hello, Ao Rue." In his ears, at least, her voice was an effervescent melody that stirred the water warm.

"Well, dragons, who can I interest in some prime bubbly that Ao Rue found down by the deep caverns?" Feng-po enjoyed playing the host.

"You go down there?" Nü-kua began, only to be interrupted by Ch'ang-o.

"Only a small one for her." Ch'ang-o's maternalism was fading into form as she moved closer to Feng-po.

"Yes, I'll have another," said Ao Rue absently. He was having a lot of trouble getting his eyes off Nü-kua.

"Well, what did everyone think of the Kaochang the other day?" Ch'ang-o didn't wait for an answer. "I thought it was splendid. What a dragon that Yolbas is! Don't you think so, my dear?" Nü-kua had no chance to speak. "I just think the pride it brings is so positive. Dragons go off by themselves far too much. We need something to bring us together."

"So true, Ch'ang-o, so true," Feng-po had managed to break in when no one else could. "You always see such things so clearly." Ch'ang-o glowed. "We must discuss it further, but I fear it will only bore Nü-kua, and we know Ao Rue could care less about politics." Feng-po was already moving Ch'ang-o toward the door. Ao Rue had no chance to release his complaint that it had nothing to do with politics. "Come, my dear, let us leave Nü-kua in the capable company of our resident scholar. I'm sure he will have much to enrich her mind." Before either Nü-kua or Ao Rue could say anything, the two lovers swept each other away.

By all the tablets, this is awkward, thought Ao Rue. *Now what do I do?*

Nü-kua saved him his embarrassment. "She can be such a squid! How could you have enjoyed the Kaochang after what they did to you!" Ao Rue was surprised by her vehemence. "No wonder a shadow crossed your eyes when she brought it up. She's as tactful as a tentacle."

"You noticed me?"

"Of course, I noticed. Your pain was obvious."

"You're the first to ever say I was obvious. Most claim I'm opaque." Ao Rue marveled at what seemed magical insight. "Still what Lei-kung and company are preparing to do may doom us all." *Her eyes are green, green flecked with gold. The green of the tablets.* Her beauty dulled his shame and anger and made even the demons insignificant.

"You make it sound threatening, evil."

"It was; it is." Ao Rue's mind returned. "Didn't you see what happened to Kuan-ti?"

"I hardly saw anything. Ch'ang-o was so excited she practically pushed me into the parade. She's always pushing or pulling me somewhere! What happened to Kuan-ti? He's a seer, isn't he? Aren't you very close?"

"Closer than dreams. He made me. He died, died from a vision too terrible to hold."

"Oh, Ao Rue, I'm so sorry."

"Sorrow won't save us."

"Save us from what? What did he see?"

"He saw the Azghun Demons. He saw dragon after dragon exploding into death. The death of our race."

"Die? All dragons die? You scare me, Ao Rue."

He suddenly felt ashamed. "Oh, Nü-kua, forgive me. This is no talk for you." *You who are so soft, so tender.*

"But if there's such terror, such agony, in what's going to happen, we, you, should do something. Ao Rue, why don't you go talk to Yolbas. Certainly, he's a fine leader and thinks only of the greater glories of Dragonkind. I know Lei-kung is a bottom feeder. What he did to you at the Kaochang (Ao Rue duded in shame) proved that, as if there was ever any doubt! But Yolbas will listen to reason; the young dragonettes worship him. Everyone thinks he's so wonderfully forceful and right! He'd be glad to have the fruits of your learning and wisdom. Feng-po and Chang-o have told me so much about how smart you are."

"Nü-kua, Feng-po exaggerates, and I fear you don't see all that's going on here." *By the Spirits of the Four Immortals, she's astonishingly naive, thought Ao Rue. But sweet as an oyster, and generous. Can it be that everyone believes this horror so easily, so deeply? Go easy; she's lovely. She makes me ache to be myself. Don't be stupid. Go softly!* "Nü-kua, I don't think you quite understand. Yolbas is nothing more than a loud voice, charisma from snout to tail tip, but his noise far exceeds his brain. He's Lei-kung's tool. Lei-kung tells him what to say, winds him up, wheels him out, and reaps the benefits. That snout-leaker Heng-chiang does most of the real work, all the day-to-day sorcery. Han Chung-li scrubs them all under the tails" -- *Argh, I've embarrassed her.* He went on quickly, trying to slide over his crudity, "By himself, Yolbas is capable of little more than loud, if occasionally dangerous, ruckuses."

"No, that can't be right. How can so many be wrong?"

"It's the fallacy of numbers."

"What's that?"

Ao Rue warmed to the task of being impressive. "The fallacy of numbers means that just because the count is high doesn't mean that something's true. In fact, if you see a lot of dragons doing something, it's a good idea to be very cautious."

"Feng-po did say you were something of a elitist."

"He probably said I was a snob or conceited. That would be more like him."

"Actually, it was more like that."

"Oh, he has a good heart beneath all that tail thumping." They both smiled.

"I really do wish you'd go see them. At least talk to Yolbas," Nü-kua became serious again. "After all, what could they have to gain?"

"I don't know, but you can be sure it's not for the betterment of all."

"You're not afraid of them?"

Ao Rue tried to crawl inside himself. "If you want me to . . ."

"Are you sure you're not afraid?" Nü-kua pressed her insight.

"Yes and no. Fear is healthy as long as it doesn't take control. Despite our power, many a dragon has prospered from warning. That's from the Emerald Tablets."

"I can read a little. Perhaps one day I could see the tablets?"

"They're there for anyone to see."

"I'd be afraid; there are terrible things down there, voices."

"Now who's giving serious warning? You needn't worry. I'll protect you." Ao Rue enjoyed that thought a lot.

"I guess even a cliché has value."

"Little in the tablets are clichés. They hold the greatest wisdom of our race. I could show them to you; I wouldn't let anything hurt you."

"I'd like that. I don't expect you're going to be at the gathering to finish the project? Chang-o says it will be a lot of fun. She says every dragon in the vast sea will join in to summon the power of the Northern Lights, but now I'm frightened. I don't want to go. I wish I could avoid going," Nü-kua appealed.

"That kaochang may be the bane of us all. Perhaps, we could take the time to get to know each other better. I'm not much for these group things myself. They make me feel normal."

"What's wrong with being normal?" Nü-kua seemed miffed.

"Well, no one ever did anything worthwhile by being like everyone else."

"You are an elitist!"

"I'm trying to be special."

"Look, Feng-po and Ch'ang-o are coming back." For once, Ao Rue wished Feng-po's legendary staying powers were even greater. The time had flashed by like a dolphin. *She's become so close so fast! She makes it all so easy!*

"Well, did you two get along?" Ch'ang-o quickly resumed her maternal duties.

"Oh yes, Ao Rue's going to show me the tablets tomorrow." Ao Rue was inordinately pleased with Nü-kua's quick decision.

"But you'll miss the gathering. I don't think you going off like that is a very good idea," said Ch'ang-o. Feng-po leered secretly at Ao Rue, who tried to ignore him.

"So? Anyone can herd along like a school of dumb fish. Ao Rue and I are going to do something different. I'm going to help him read the tablets." Ao Rue rolled his eyes at her presumption but found himself feeling very good about himself.

"Well, we'll discuss it later." Ch'ang-o was clearly disturbed that her once-worshipful ward was going off on her own. "Now, we must go. Come on, Nü-kua; I find myself much interested in a nap. Must have my beauty sleep, you know." She looked longingly at Feng-po.

"Must we go," Nü-kua said as she looked at Ao Rue. He found himself squaring his wings and pulling in his abdomen under her gaze.

"Yes, yes, I must rest for the gathering. They'll need everyone's magic at its best," the last with a slight look of scorn at Ao Rue. Ch'ang-o didn't like dragons being different. It unnerved her. "Feng-po, you'll be by early?"

"If you wish," said Feng-po, bowing and playing the gallant.

"Come along, Nü-kua."

"If we must. I'll see you tomorrow, Ao Rue," Nü-kua managed to get out as Ch'ang-o dragged her away.

The two males were quiet as they vanished into the distance.

Feng-po broke their silence. "Well, well, well, into a little tail twisting of your own."

"What?" Ao Rue pulled his gaze from Nü-kua's golden tail.

"I said that you're going to lure that poor child down into your learned lair."

"It's nothing like that; she's lovely."

"We'll see. You've got a look in your eye I haven't seen in some time."

"It's nothing like that, like nothing before." Ao Rue was so sure this time.

Chapter 8
2490 words

Feng-po and Ch'ang-o swam slowly toward what Yolbas had promised far and wide would be the majestic step toward dragonkind's ultimate future. Feng-po wanted to be somewhere else; anywhere he could nap. "How is it, Ch'ang-o, that sex is so good for females and so exhausting for males?" She giggled as she made lazy spirals around him while they made their way through the vines that leaned toward the draining water. They lifted up to let the occasional schools of tuna pass beneath their talons. Obviously, he wasn't going to get any answer from her. She was simply too pleased with herself to do more than bask in their company. In fact, she obviously and continually turned her belly toward him and made small caresses with her tail. Her blantant love made him uneasy. *What if someone saw them?* Feng-po never had quite understood what it was that transported dragons in love. Ao Rue said it was because he was too vain. Feng-po did wonder sometimes if he wasn't missing something and thought about the mental intimacy his friend had mentioned. He blotted those feelings out by remembering what a slobbering seal Ao Rue had made of himself in the past. That last episode with Chih-nil

"Feng-po! Feng-po!" He suddenly realized that Ch'ang-o was talking to him.

"I'm sorry, my dear, I was thinking of our coming responsibility at the Kaochang."

"I'm worried about Nü-kua. Are you sure she's going to be all right with Ao Rue? I wish I'd talked to her before she'd left. It's not like her to go swimming off without me and without saying anything. Before she talked to him, she seemed so committed to Yolbas' call for unity."

"I'm sure she's safe. No one is safer than a friend of Ao Rue's. You should see his magic! Soon, she'll be off whale and male hunting? She isn't a dragonette anymore, you know."

"Oh no, not her, never that. She doesn't approve. She says whales are too gentle, too smart to kill. That's why she never got interested in Erh-lang, Yolbas' friend. He certainly is fascinated with her. He'd come back from one of those hunts, a whale in his talons for her, and she'd hide. Said it made her sick. If anything, she'd rather listen to the whales sing."

"That sounds like something Ao Rue would say and do. He was always going on about not eating or killing things that are probably smarter than we are. He's crazy about porpoises and whales."

"Nothing is smarter than a dragon! How could Ao Rue believe any such idea. I thought you told me he was so intelligent." Ch'ang-o was indignant.

"You never can tell when Ao Rue's just saying something for effect, but he has taken a lot of the thrill out of the hunts for me."

"That just goes to show you what too much thinking can do. Ao Rue's too smug, too arrogant. He acts like he's the last noble beast among a tribe of stupid scavengers!"

"I wouldn't say that." Feng-po reluctantly rose to his friend's defense, but before he could say more, General Heng-chiang's enormous castle came into view, and Ch'ang-o's mind had skipped to another topic, both Ao Rue and Nü-kua forgotten.

"Oh look, look at all the dragons." The crystal walls of the palace were a kaleidoscope of shifting colors as it filled. Still more dragons were coming. They were like jewels on invisible filaments being pulled down into the palace. Feng-po had never seen so many gathered in one place.

"Oh, this is so wonderful," Ch'ang-o bubbled. Feng-po half wondered how Ch'ang-o could criticize anyone's thinking. About the only time she could concentrate on one thing was when he was sliding his tendrils up and down her tail. And although he had to admit that the strings of dragons were an amazing sight, he was angry how quickly Ch'ang-o was distracted and had stopped caressing him. "Hurry Feng-po so we can get a place. You're so slow, even after lying around all day." She giggled again. He had to move quickly to keep up with her as she took the lure of dragon destiny and joined one of the descending strings.

Once they were inside, any discomfort Feng-po might have felt with the solemnity of the moment quickly vanished. It was just another party! Many of the dragons had brought wine vines and snacks that were freely passed around. Both he and Ch'ang-o were immediately involved in numerous conversations, not too surprisingly invariably with the opposite sex. It seemed everyone would be content to just suck vines and talk, but their attention was soon caught by the rising, guttural chant of the male

dragonettes. "YOLBAS, YOLBAS, YOLBAS, YOLBAS." Yolbas, followed by his retinue, had come out onto the central terrace and was standing with his wings and claws raised. Turning, so all could see him, he acknowledged the tribute. No one seemed to notice that the Council of Five was missing.

"Look, look, Feng-po, how seriously Lei-kung and Chih-nil are talking. It must be about some critical part of the great spell."

Chih-nil was very impassioned: "What do you mean our scales will fall off! My beautiful scales! I'm not going up there. This is crazy."

"Calm yourself, fool. Do you want someone to hear you. You'll ruin everything." Lei-kung was beyond tact; he was too tense to care.

"If you think I'm going to run around naked, like some slick-skinned squid, you're mad! I didn't bargain for being ugly. I'm not going to be ugly! A life of scratching and shedding. Do I look like a crab, dumping husks all over the place!"

"Will you shut up. Let's get this done. We can worry about cosmetics later. Our biggest worry right now is if shark chum can remember the speech."

As if Lei-kung's insult was a cue, Han Chung-li signaled silence to the dragonettes who had begun to bounce up and down in their mindless enthusiasm. Yolbas' majestic voice filled the palace, stilling even Chih-nil's near hysterical complaint.

"Fellow dragons! My friends! Are you ready?"

A scattered "Yes" moved among the encircling dragons.

Yolbas turned to face another part of his audience. "Are You Ready."

"YES," louder this time.

He turned again. "I said 'Are You Ready.'"

"YES," and the walls thundered.

Even Lei-kung had to marvel how quickly Yolbas reeled the dragons in. His voice softened and the silence grew intense. "Today, this stunning morning, we gather in solemn conclave to fulfill our manifest destiny. Look, even now mother sun calls to our wings and hearts." He gestured upward. Every head turned to see the setting sun shining brighter than at any dusk before. The Dancing Northern Lights of Power had begun to shimmer behind it like an undulating curtain; sparks exploded sharply within their folds. The merest dragonette could sense its rising, pulsating power. Like flitting

electric eels, dragon eyes began to brighten around the tiers. "Can you feel it? Can you feel the power?"

"YES" thundered again.

"Is it our power?"

"YES!"

"Is it our power to take?"

"YES!"

"Can anyone deny us our birthright?"

"NO!"

Yolbas' body began to gleam from the reflected light of so many aroused dragons. "Easy, easy, my friends, soon it will be time; save your noble magic." The sorcerous glare ebbed, but it was on a tight leader. "Soon, we will be kings and queens of the air. Our great wings will no longer be hindered by the weight of the water. Our matings will move with a grace never before achieved." Now Yolbas had even Feng-po's undivided attention. Tails thumped everywhere. "Imagine our freedom! We will soar with the wind, dance among the stars. The planets will bow in their paths to our greatness. No longer need we weary ourselves chasing mere fish. The universe will fall to our pinions. We will catch the Great Northern Lights in our wings. We will shatter moons with our fangs; melt mountains with our fire." Mutterings rose with his mention of fire. "Yes, fire. The true dragon fire that is at our core. Our bondage in the sea has made us forget. Are we to blow bubbles to the end of our days. Well, are we?"

"NO!"

"Finally we can spit the foul oceans from our mouths! We will melt stone! We will flame our names across the very center of the cosmos. Can we do it!"

"YES!"

"Will we do it!"

"YES!"

"Han Chung-li and our great General, Heng-chiang, have begun it for us. Now Lei-kung will give of himself to focus our power. My friends, hearts of my heart, he will call upon you now. Will you hold anything back?"

"NO!"

"Will you give him your all?"

"YES!"

"Call upon the Lights. Center it on Lei-kung. Do you accept him as the vessel of your destiny?"

"YES!"

"DO YOU?"

"YES!"

The entire palace burned like its own sun with the light of the dragons' eyes. Lei-kung shuffled forward. His head almost buried beneath his wings in concentration. His ecru hide had turned almost gold beneath the spinning eyes of the multitude. Slowly he rose. His body stretched. It elongated until his entire length was suspended. Only the tip of his tail touched the sand. He closed his eyes, threw his head back. His wings extended fully until he was like a huge net.

"Now, dragons, now! Take from the Lights and give to Lei-kung! Give to Lei-kung!"

Slowly the water came to dark life. Waves of blackness began to descend from the surface. Currents, never felt before, thrashed the deep sea. Dark lightning struck down from the Lights. Lei-kung became radiant with an emptiness, a void that mocked light. The dark energy struck his wings. He began to rotate. His eyes remained closed. He was doing no magic. He was a receptacle. He harvested; he sucked away at his fellows. The dragons drew the Lights over the setting sun like a shroud. As the magic grew, Lei-kung spun faster and faster. Vast alien energies tore through the dragons. Many screamed. Pillars shattered as bodies whipped in ecstasy. Yün-t'ung, Nurturer of the Young, rended three dragonettes that had curled by her for security. Lei-kung was spinning so fast that he was a sphere of basalt, a black pearl of evil. More and more dragons collapsed under the strain. Still he spun; still he reaped. The Lights had pierced the water like great knives of blinding silt. Feng-po threw Ch'ang-o from him and tried to break free from the draining power. He cried dread at the darkness. He screamed until he thought his bones would break. Power kept ripping through him, giving nothing, taking everything. He could not break free. Just when he thought he would be ripped apart, blessed unconsciousness came.

Feng-po awoke in time to see Lei-kung gracefully snake down until his rear talons touched the sand. Feng-po's head swayed, a weight too great for

his body. Dragons passed before his aching eyes. Everyone was duller. They all looked like they had been dragged through soot. Some were retching. They looked like they were collapsing into themselves. Many were still; some were dead. Others were surrounded by the haze of their own blood. Feng-po and Ch'ang-o looked at each other with indifference. Yün-t'ung absently walked over her tiny charges. The dragons who could move just wandered off. The Great Summoning had dissolved into a fatigue so great, so puzzling, that no one knew or cared who they were. Having freely given, many wondered why. Having been given something, many regretted having opened themselves. Feng-po sought an exit, never thinking where he might go.

Yolbas hadn't lost consciousness although he wished he had. He dragged himself up, looked at Lei-kung, only to wish he hadn't. Revulsion and fear filled him. He felt like his soul had turned to bile. He cowered from Lei-kung's power. The little sorcerer was still the same ordinary color, but his eyes had become dead-black stone. They were lusterless, like twin pits. Yolbas wanted nothing of what those eyes promised. If Yolbas had looked carefully, if he could have endured it, he might have seen that every so often a ripples of dark and yellow lights flashed across Lei-kung's eyes. He'd draw the Northern Lights into his skull.

"Well, Yolbas, as soon as you can get your carcass operating again, you'll need to get some spirit back into them. But that won't be for awhile. First, let them adjust to the greatness of the new order. You will do that, won't you?"

Yolbas could only moan, but he knew that from this moment forward the only choices he'd have again would be about things Lei-kung didn't care about.

"For now, we need to start planning for the exodus." Lei-kung was filled with vitality and confidence. He glanced over at Han Chung-li, Heng-chiang, and Chih-nil and gestured. The three snapped awake. "All of you, listen!" His voice was a whip. "Han Chung-li, get out there among the dragonettes. Get 'em fired up again. Heng-chiang, get that carrion spell working; there will be a lot of dead fish up there. We'll want the black vultures, roaches, scorpions, fleas, and golden eagles cleaning up as soon as

possible. It will be enough of a mess as it is. Yolbas, what's the mindless acrobat's name? You know, your athletic friend."

Yolbas managed to grind out "Erh-lang."

"Oh yes, Erh-lang, the Bane of Demons. That's what his name means, you know." Lei-kung chuckled mockingly. Yolbas could do nothing more than nod. "I want him in the air turning cartwheels as soon as possible. We want everyone's eyes watching him, not looking at the clay and sand, especially with it littered with rotting flesh."

Even in her exhaustion, Chih-nil was still most concerned with her beauty, "Is anyone going to tell me what we are going to do when my scales start falling off?"

Lei-kung looked sharply at her; she shrank back. "Yes, yes, we must preserve our little temptress, mustn't we. I will have use for your beauty for awhile more. The General seems immune. All we have to do is figure out why. You will continue to work on that, won't you, General?" Not even Heng-chiang could stand before Lei-kung. The master of a thousand campaigns, the one dragon whose courage no one had ever questioned, he who was savage beyond imagining, could mutter nothing more than a servile "of course."

"And now, Chih-nil, we will begin to teach you your new, special duties. Come with me!" She rose and followed obediently. She suddenly wished she already had fire, cleansing fire. His look made her feel filthy.

Just before Lei-kung left with Chih-nil in thrall, he turned and asked his slaves, "Did anyone see Ao Rue?" All of them shook their snouts no. Lei-kung paused; his control halted for a moment. "That's not good," he muttered to himself.

Chapter 9
3505 words

"I never would have gotten away if Ch'ang-o and Feng-po hadn't been asleep. They must have spent the whole night fawning all over each other. I knew if we had talked she'd have forbidden me to come. I doubt they'll have too much energy left for the Great Spell of Terraforming." Ao Rue was a little shocked by Nü-kua's awareness of her guardian's lustiness. "I swear she spends most of her time telling me what I can't do. 'No, Nü-kua, that wouldn't be seemly.' 'No, Nü-kua, you shouldn't go there alone.' 'No, Nü-kua, that's too dangerous.' You'd think I just crawled out of the egg! I swear she'll never see me as anything other than an irresponsible dragonette! All the way home last night, she kept asking me why I wanted to see a bunch of rotting tablets. I tried to explain that you said it would probably be my last chance. She just couldn't understand why you take them so seriously."

Ao Rue had been spending most of the time they had been riding the draining currents down to the deep caverns admiring her, listening, and occasionally showing off by executing various maneuvers. He didn't think Nü-kua noticed. He was trying very hard to be dignified and not to frolic. She was certainly different today from the shy, demure ward of Feng-po's little party. He did a loop to swim backwards in front of her and said, "I'm sure Ch'ang-o wants the best for you." Actually he was delighted Nü-kua had escaped. He was enjoying her company more than he had anything in a long time. "She's just playing the parent. Kuan-ti treated me like an empty-headed child. Of course, compared to him, I was. Ch'ang-o just takes her guardianship very seriously. Maternalism and paternalism go hand in hand with freezing us at certain ages. Even if we were in our dotage, they'd still see us as little more than dragonettes."

"Well, I'm not a dragonette anymore!"

"No, you certainly aren't." Ao Rue was taking deep pleasure in admiring her body. She was no dragonette. She swelled with her adulthood. Her body was taut, athletic. She moved with an unpretentious grace. He thought she must have been blessed by some benevolent spirit at birth. He noticed now that she wasn't a uniform rose-gold. She was patterned in small spots, especially on her snout, sort of like freckles. *They were freckles. By the Seven Sleepers, the sun is good to her! The water sings as she moves!*

The new sun, brightening as the water lowered, bleached Ch'ang-o, but it lit Nü-kua. She shimmered in his eyes, trembled at his heart.

"Was Kuan-ti really smarter than you are?"

Ao Rue started out of his rhapsody and laughed. "Oh yes, I don't think there's been a better scholar since the ancients. He'd been studying for many of my lifetimes. I don't think I ever would have caught him. He was always learning something new. He called himself 'the Eternal Student,' and that's what he was. Whenever I said that he made me feel dumb, he'd say that it was a good state of mind. He kept reminding me how dangerous it was to feel smart."

"What's wrong with feeling smart?"

"It stops learning."

Nü-kua paused to consider that. "I think he was right. I guess it's good to feel dumb, if uncomfortable. Then you keep working, and you don't surrender to stupidity. I think that's what Ch'ang-o has done."

Ao Rue was a bit surprised by her insight. *Bright as well as beautiful.* "You mean Ch'ang-o's an anti-intellectual?"

"Does a conch live in a shell? Has a squid got ten tentacles? Are oysters tasty?"

"That bad."

"I don't think Ch'ang-o has managed to string two coherent thoughts together in her entire life. She thinks reasoning is free association."

Ao Rue was surprised to find Nü-kua so vehement. "Well, that doesn't make her that unusual."

"True; most of the dragons I've met haven't escaped the 'me, me, mine, mine' of their infancies."

"I wish you weren't right, but you probably are." Ao Rue tended toward being too forgiving despite what he knew to be true. "It makes them all victims."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you don't understand something, you're at the mercy of it. I fear that's what's happening at the terraforming today."

"Ch'ang-o would tell me that was trust."

"Blind faith is a better description."

"Maybe, but I am a little uncomfortable about missing today's Kaochang. Everyone seemed so committed and enthusiastic. I think it's the first time I haven't been with Ch'ang-o or my friends."

"Ao Rue's law: if a lot of dragons are doing something, at least be skeptical. No one ever did anything worthwhile by being like everyone else. Look at egg laying. Everyone makes such a big fuss about it. Yet it's the commonest thing there is. All organisms reproduce. That's not what makes dragons special. Thinking is supposed to. Besides, I think you'd be a whole lot more uncomfortable if you were there. There's something very disquieting about the terraforming and using the Northern Lights. It's not natural. We have our own magic. Drawing upon those Lights will probably disturb the balance of things. Lei-kung will maim the order."

"What makes you believe that?" Nü-kua was having trouble accepting Ao Rue's radical views, especially his comments about eggs. He was saying odd things and challenging ideas she'd never thought to question. After all, the fulfillment of all females is giving birth; everyone said that.

"It's in the oldest of the tablets. I can't show you those. I sealed them in with Kuan-ti. Not even he could translate all of them, but he thought there were dire prohibitions about the use of the Lights' power. Those are the tablets that relate the story of the Azghun Demons and the dragons' retreat from the land. There's also reference to a great horror, called the Dragons' Bane. He was never sure whether it was the Lights or the Demons."

"Perhaps it was both."

"Could be. Kuan-ti said that he never found anything else in the Tablets that was so surrounded by such dreadful warnings. He kept saying that one of the prices that dragons paid for the sea's security was that they've forgotten what fear is. But enough talk of fear and horror between us. We're getting to the caverns, and I have wonderful things to show you and tell you about." Ao Rue was grateful they'd reached the Cavern of Literature. He was starting to feel preachy, and he certainly didn't want to bore her.

After they'd gotten settled in the newly flooded cavern, Nü-kua had done nothing but wait and wait some more. Sitting in the half light, all Ao Rue had done was hang his head and pick flakes off the tablets with his talons. She was getting irritated. She wasn't used to being ignored. *Is he just going to sit, forever flipping shards to the floor, cutting scars into the black*

stains that ate the tablets? Erh-lang always gave me his complete attention, and he was an great athlete, even with his filthy whale-hunting habit. Everyone admired Erh-lang. That thought also reminded her that everyone thought Ao Rue more than a little weird. She was beginning to think that ignoring Ch'ang-o's obvious disapproval of him had been a big mistake. She hadn't expected to spend the day twiddling her talons in some dark hole. She decided she'd had enough: "Ao Rue, AO RUE," she had to yell before he turned his head.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Nü-kua." She took a step backward; she had never seen such grief. His eyes were scarred with it. His body was humped beneath it. "They're dissolving, like bird droppings hitting the water. They're disappearing, rotting. Look at them."

"But they're emerald. Water can't hurt them?"

"Who knows what they're made of. All of Kuan-ti's work, silt, scum, green sand."

"But won't the water drain through and leave them dry? They'll be in the air again. Some of them could be saved." Nü-kua was desperately trying to comfort him. His pain made her uncomfortable. It embarrassed her.

"Never. These are the lowest spots. They'll turn into salt marshes, brackish puddles of death, stone white. Nothing will grow around them or in them. No creatures will ever come to drink; none will breed near their shores. As the sun beats on the water, it'll just become more and more salt, more and more barren. The glory of dragonkind turned into death soup!"

"How could the ancients have been so stupid!" Nü-kua used her anger to cover how ill at ease she'd become. "I thought you said they were so smart, so clever!"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a punishment? A curse? Perhaps they thought if we were foolish enough to leave the sea, that we didn't deserve a past, that we didn't merit knowledge. Certainly we've forgotten far too much, too much. We've become so powerful that we've actively denied knowledge. So many dragons don't know anything and are proud not to -- militantly ignorant! So stupid! So ignorant! Chase whales, kill dolphins for sport, barbarians, barbarians"

As Ao Rue's voice trailed off into grief, Nü-kua saw herself being neglected again. She couldn't stand being ignored. She called him back.

There was more cunning in this little dragon than anyone realized. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue," she softly touched his wing, their first contact. "What's written on these tablets?"

"These? These are stories, wonderful stories: poems, epics, tales of love, heroes, greatness." He reached out and caressed the crumbling tablets as if they were the tenderest of females. Nü-kua was irritated that he hadn't even noticed she'd touched him. "These are the distillations of dragon imagination. They are our greatest flowers, our most bountiful fruits, our greatest eggs."

"Stories." *Stories, is that all*, Nü-kua thought to herself. "How can stories be so important. They're not real. Ch'ang-o always says they addle the brain. They turn dragons into silly dreamers who don't know what's going on, who have no common sense!" She was smart enough not to say that Ch'ang-o had said that about Ao Rue.

"Nü-kua, I thought we'd decided that Ch'ang-o doesn't know her own tail from a moray eel. Common sense isn't the goal. Uncommon sense is." Nü-kua didn't care what he said about Ch'ang-o; she was smugly pleased she had his undivided attention again. "I bet Ch'ang-o says things like 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'"

"She does say that." Nü-kua wondered how he knew.

"Next time she says that you might suggest that some eyes are better than others. No, don't say that. It will only get you in trouble. She'll think you're trying to be a smart tail. What I'm trying to say is that she and others like her just don't know enough to talk."

"Well, stories are just make-believe, made-up stuff! Aren't they?" Nü-kua wasn't happy about losing this one, but she was beginning to feel reassured, superior, in control again.

"Yes, yes, in a way they are. But they're more than that. Make-believe is the bedrock of our lives. Dragons are off today changing the face of a planet. Their belief makes them think they're supreme. They're so full of their particular make-believe that they think they're subject to nothing but themselves, free to claw over anything they like."

"Well, we are special; Yolbas says we are!"

"We could be. But it takes a lot of work to be special, to be unique. It's not genetic. How would we know if we were anyway? And I wouldn't

put too much faith in Yolbas; I think he swims at the end of Lei-kung's line. Besides, everything's perfect, special, until something better arises or until something terrible happens. We just don't really know, not in the same way we know that dead fish float to the surface, that sand under our scales is a pain in the tail. Dragon's teeth! Some of us don't even believe whales sing and compose. We hunt and butcher them and leave the carcasses to float. Most of us can't read and write; those who can, don't. Barbarians! We're too busy in our own complacent visions of the world. Are they real? No way! Even if we were all-powerful, that doesn't mean we can rend anything weaker or smaller! We aren't automatically smart, naturally worthy of respect."

"All right, if make-believe is so ugly, what makes these tablets so important?"

"It's not that some of them aren't dark, filled with fear and terror. Ah, but others, they're another kind of fantasy. The dark side of our minds makes us ugly; the bright side makes us noble. We are both. The dark is here for us to understand ourselves, the bright to glory in ourselves. These tablets are great visions, the magic words of our nature. Bright, dark, the tablets are filled with art and grace, the essence of the dragonheart brought to its finest moments. The history of our souls is stacked here, captured with skill and talent, pain and passion. These are the visions of the magic makers, the spellbinders, the star trippers, the poets, the singers. Once read, once heard, they haunt, dreams in the mist. Their echoes shape our minds and our lives. They live in my grief for Kuan-ti, for dragonkind's foolishness, in my joy as the beauty of you falls upon my eyes. There's a special one, a young refrain by a great poet; it's echoed in my mind since this terraforming madness started. I wish I could recite it for you. Kuan-ti would beat me silly if he knew I couldn't remember it word for word." His voice grew soft. "It's about a call to a lonely dragonette. It promises a better place than this weeping world, a haven for the tempest tossed, the alienated, the misunderstood and wounded. It's always been one of my favorites. I always liked to think it had been written just for me."

"Ao Rue, you can't swim away from the world."

"Swim away!" Ao Rue's head snapped around, his eyes spinning cobalt anger. "How can you be so shallow! I will not be mocked again!" Nü-kua took a quick step back, turned to flee; he was instantly ashamed.

"Please, please, Nü-kua, don't go." He reached out and took her claw. She had never had a male get angry with her. They were usually too busy trying to ingratiate themselves, trying to wrap their tails around her, something she'd never allowed any of them. She suddenly felt vulnerable to this great male who moments before had been so easy to manipulate. They stayed, talon in talon, for a time: he feeling his anger drain into a weak calm, she feeling soft and secure as she realized that, perhaps, she alone was safe from his great fury. When they both realized how long they had been touching, the claws slipped apart, but intimacy remained.

She spoke first. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean you were a coward. It's just that facing things seems best."

"It's all right. I'm just too quick these days. The once-familiar sea is suddenly filled with wrongness, polluted with evil. Everywhere I swim, there are stupid misconceptions, twisted half truths. Besides, Nü-kua, there are no brave heroes anymore. How can there be when no one knows what's good or worthy, when selfishness is admirable and self-sacrifice silly. Heroes must give themselves. They can't exist when no one wants what they offer. I fear we will see no more heroes in our time."

"I think you could be a hero, Ao Rue, if you wanted to."

He looked at her and started to laugh, but he was frozen by her green eyes, by her glowing innocence and faith. He suddenly knew how lesser creatures felt beneath a dragon's hypnotic gaze. He didn't mind being mesmerized at all. "Nü-kua," his voice had grown husky and soft, "no one is ever a hero for himself. It has to be for someone else."

"Would you be a hero for me?" They both chuckled at her obvious flirtatiousness, comfortable together. "Will you be a hero when I call?"

"Ah, fair maiden," he mirroring her teasing, "for you, I will be the greatest hero this tired planet has ever seen. When you call, I will bring the lightning to your rescue. I will gladly sacrifice my all to your beauty." They both laughed and began to move out of the cavern, but as they did, a strange and wondrous something took shape within Ao Rue. A fantasy formed, was fired and tempered. It became inviolate, indestructible. As he looked at her again, a vow was in him. It would stand against all else, beyond all pain and all terror, beyond the limits of time, forever more than himself, ever and always hers.

"Could I see where you and Feng-po put Kuan-ti? I've heard so much about him."

"Sure, it's not far. Just a little deeper." As she moved toward the tomb, he gazed at her from a place he didn't quite understand. He marveled at how she moved like dancing gold threads, so supple, so sensual.

"You did this?" She was clearly amazed at the glass-smooth basalt. She touched the deep-cut verse very tentatively.

"I guess so."

"And wrote this?"

"It's not a very good poem, Nü-kua."

"It's a great poem. Your heart speaks in it. Kuan-ti would be very pleased."

Just as Ao Rue was about to say something, his head snapped up; his eyes blazed. "WHAT, WHAT, DO YOU FEEL THAT?"

"Feel what, Ao Rue? What is it? What's wrong. I don't feel anything."

"DRAGONS IN PAIN; DRAGONS DYING. AGONY, HORROR! CAN'T YOU SENSE IT?" His head thrashed the water as he frantically tried to look everywhere at once.

"Look, Ao Rue, look! What in eternity's name is that?"

He looked where she pointed. Rolling toward them from the Kaochang were great, oily clouds of darkness. They were held together by webs of flaccid strikes and globs of moiling, putrid yellow. All Ao Rue could think of was broken teeth biting into rotten fruit. Blackness bulged from the yellow webs. It was grainy, sliding, barely under control. Most of all, it was greedy. Fear struck Ao Rue's heart cold. He opened his wings to flee a horror that would burst his mind and rot his flesh. He knew absolutely that his soul alone would survive the foul bondage that the yellow offal offered.

As he gathered the water in his wings for his mad rush away, Nü-kua's call cut like pure truth through his terror. "Ao Rue, Ao Rue, Ao Rue, Ao Rue," over and over again. His fear vanished as quickly as it had come. Calmly, he turned to face the bane that would soon boil over them. She was helpless, paralyzed. She felt him gather her within one great wing, felt the power that vibrated within him. He easily moved them until the tomb was at

his back. She sensed, rather than heard, the words that he threw out against the foulness that wanted them. She could see the blaze of his eyes through the membrane of his wing, saw it play like glowing puppets against the dead darkness. Suddenly, all she could see was a warm azure glow. Peace descended upon her, a calm beyond understanding. Slowing, she brought her head out of the curve of his wing, sliding her cheek against his snout, only to snap it back in. They were enclosed in a glowing nimbus the color of his eyes. Slime, clinging silt, crawled over it and slid away from the surface. Yellow fangs tried to rip away the nimbus. The mindless web hungered for them. Oddly, Nü-kua felt no fear. She felt the heat of Ao Rue's silver scales, smelled his strength as he mocked evil in her name. She coiled closer into him and wrapped her tail around his. She could have stayed welded to the curve of Ao Rue's strength for all eternity.

"It's over; you can come out. We're safe, though I dread to think what that did to everyone else." Actually, the cloud had passed some time before. Ao Rue had been enjoying holding her, reveling in the feel of her in their own small world. He could have held her forever against anything. As he opened his wing, she stayed close. Her tail was still locked around his. He looked down and was completely taken by the adoration in her eyes. She was fully his. For an instant he understood the godhood that Lei-kung sought so mightily, at such great price. But this was giving, not taking. She would do anything for him; he all for her. He spoke and instantly regretted breaking the moment. "Thank all-that's-sacred you called to me. I was so panicked I would have left if you hadn't."

"Called? I never spoke. I was too frightened."

He looked at her in puzzlement and felt a strange and wonderful touch upon his mind.

Chapter 10
4395 words

As he swam toward Yolbas' palace, Ao Rue was feeling odd. He felt happy but didn't really think he should, not with what had happened to Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. What he and Nü-kua had found on their return just couldn't quite overcome their meandering and very amorous trip up from the caverns last night. His creamy contentment was marred with flashes of Feng-po and Ch'ang-o twisted in clouds of their own vomit and excrement. *Is the world ever a clean place?* he wondered. *Am I ever to have a full triumph, a pure joy? Time with Nü-kua had been so sweet. After the horror of Chih-nil, I didn't believe I had the emotional courage for another female. Nü-kua has proved me wrong, so wrong. Made me feel so good to be myself.* Still that fussy little voice in the back of his head, like a cat whispering in the wind, proclaimed fear and caution. He shoved it aside, wondering where that odd, popular expression had come from. *Shark entrails! That broke it. Doubt spoils all. Now, I can't push the images of my twisted friends from my mind. Lei-kung and his terraforming had flayed Feng-po's and Ch'ang-o's guts and minds. They had been wearily twisting about themselves, snapping at their own limbs. So little noise, whimpering, grunting mostly, like they'd lost speech, turned into dumb beasts. Ch'ang-o had flung Nü-kua into the wall before I could calm her manic torment. Nü-kua made the magic come so easily. But trying to heal them, that wasn't easy even with her help.*

When Ao Rue had taken Nü-kua's tail in his own, such a mocking contrast to their earlier bondings, after he had so reluctantly used some of her power and strength, his eyes spinning until he'd thought they'd burn from his head, even then, all he could do was bring them to a life that reeked of death. Both Ch'ang-o and Feng-po had immediately begun talking as if nothing odd had occurred. Nü-kua had hugged Ao Rue. She kept saying he'd saved the pair from certain death. But he couldn't share her joy. Feng-po was babbling about building a great pyramid for the "Leaders," as he now so reverently referred to Yolbas, Lei-kung, Heng-chiang, and even that remora Han Chung-li. He went on at great lengths about the glory of labor: crazy talk about gold for beds; how he would join Lu-hsing, a minor functionary, now with the glorious title of Finder of Gold, rooting out the soft metal for some yet-to-be-announced major function. While scolding Nü-kua about wandering off,

Ch'ang-o was babbling on about great labors and destinies. Ao Rue had been revolted: *Dragons digging in the earth like clams? Dragons serving dragons? How can they think of this as noble?* Even Nü-kua was stunned. Ao Rue realized that there was no magical poultice for what ate at Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. As he looked at the two dragons, now apparently well, if repugnantly deranged, he did not see the health Nü-kua had lauded him for creating. His eyes revealed an odd hue to their scales, as if the edges were tinged with soot, and if he squinted and strained, they seemed bound to black threads that vanished into a ugly web that stained the sea.

As thoughts of Feng-po and Ch'ang-o blanked his mind of Nü-kua, the old weariness began to cling to him again. *Will I ever be free from pain?* Thoughts of isolation, beyond the hooks of involvement, beyond the problems of the mere company of others, rose in his mind. That he had promised Nü-kua that he'd talk to Yolbas about this unnatural terraforming and the desertion of the sea did nothing for his deteriorating mood. Now as he approached Yolbas' castle, stained dark by the sea's torment as it was dragged down into the caverns, his stomach began to curdle. He wanted to go back to the serenity of his tablets, the oblivion of Nü-kua, but a promise was a promise. He could no more turn from what Nü-kua wanted than he could murder a whale.

He found Yolbas curled about the convoluted crystal rack that most dragons choose for comfort. He was picking at his teeth with the tip of his tail. Off to his left Heng-chiang, surrounded by his usual cloud of mucus, was talking with Erh-lang. Their animated gestures cut clean lines through the cloud, lines that quickly blurred as Han Chung-li capered about with his silver sieve. They looked like characters in a fever dream, potent but vague. Like Feng-po and Ch'ang-o, their scales were tinged with that strange sooty stain that had resisted his magic. One good thing about the land; Heng-chiang's sniffing would only soil himself and the ground, not the entire atmosphere.

"Ao Rue, we missed you at the Great Terraforming." Yolbas interrupted Ao Rue's observations. "Lei-kung asked for you. It's a great day for dragonkind. Fulfilling our destiny, we are. Yes, yes, everyone's very excited. Heng-chiang is planning the Celebration of the Return right now. Never before have we embarked upon"

"Hail, Yolbas, the Tiger Prince." Ao Rue had to interrupt him quickly. He knew all too well that, if he didn't, he'd have to hear yet another empty-headed political speech. Yolbas did love to listen to himself.

"Oh, sorry, hail to Ao Rue, member of the Council of Five. Didn't mean to skip the amenities but everyone's so excited. I'm thrilled. You know we're going to live in a chorten, Lei-kung and I and the others. What's a tiger?"

Despite how long Ao Rue had known Yolbas, he was always surprised that anyone could sound so good and be so stupid. If he'd ever doubted that Lei-kung was feeding this oaf his lines, he didn't anymore. Yolbas was obviously the wrong one to talk to about this abomination, and he certainly didn't want to talk to Lei-kung. His promise to Nü-kua forced him on. "A tiger's a mammal, a hunter; it's got stripes like you."

"You mean there's something up there just like me?"

"No, no," Ao Rue held his patience. "It's much smaller than you and covered with fur. Four-legged, and it doesn't have wings. But that's beside the point." Ao Rue realized that, if he continued, he'd have to explain fur. "Yolbas, dragons are sick. I couldn't heal my friends Feng-po and Ch'ang-o. There's something deeply wrong with this terraforming. I don't think we should continue."

"I haven't felt exactly super serpentine myself, but Lei-kung says that's just the strain of such great magic. There's nothing to worry about. Can't move mountains without breaking a few eggs." Ao Rue winced at Yolbas' callousness. "We'll all feel wonderful once we're on dry land. Lei-kung's told us so much about how great flying will be. You'll love it. Let's get Erh-lang over here. You know him, wonderful fellow, great athlete. He's been up there practicing for the Great Return. It's going to be a tail-twister of a celebration. Erh-lang, come on over here and tell Ao Rue about how great the sky is."

Erh-lang swaggered over. He had the rolling movements of someone who wanted to be sure that everyone noticed his muscles as they rippled beneath his crimson scales. He kept glancing at himself. Ao Rue doubted if anyone had ever seen Erh-lang pass a mirror without looking at himself. As he got closer, Ao Rue noticed that he was marked with smears of what looked like gold, like the rubbings Heng-chiang's artificial arm left all over his chest.

Ao Rue thought to greet him too by his hereditary title, "Bane of Demons," but he wasn't quite ready to explain what a demon was to these squid heads.

"Hail, Ao Rue; it's super, just super. What a terrific feeling. Just hanging up there on a thermal, checking things out. Swooping around. I never knew wings could feel so good. Really great for the chest muscles." Erh-lang flexed to demonstrate. "Then, diving down so fast. The wind drowns out everything. I had a great time spooking herds of some four-legged things; Lei-kung says they're camels or gazelles, asses, wolves or something. Tasty by the clawful. We won't starve up there; that's for sure. Only pesky stuff up there are these funny little fuzzy things. I had to practically land on them to get them to move. Contemptuous little bastards. Threw some fire at them. Did you know our steam is fire on the land? Terrific fun. There were some small birds up there. Cooked 'em on the wing and ate 'em without loosing a beat." He paused his non-stop prattle for a moment. "Where was I? Oh yea, those fuzzy things. Quick as eels. Couldn't get many of them with the fire. Just the old ones I guess. They'd duck and then jump back out again. They'd leap all over the place in the smoke. Almost as if they liked it. I don't think I'll burn anymore though. I'd swear some of them yelled at me. Silly, musta been 'rapture of the sky,' flying too high." He smiled at the cleverness of his own phrase. Ao Rue almost missed what Erh-lang said next. The mention of small furred mammals had struck a memory: an old poem in the tablets, something about a comrade, great beyond size, a warm friend. He suddenly found himself angry, irrationally protective, that Erh-lang would kill any of them.

"But let me tell you, Ao Rue; it wasn't easy at first. Oh no, it took a real dragon before we got the problems solved. You know why I've got this stuff smeared all over me?" He answered himself before Ao Rue could say anything. "It's gold, a soft, mushy metal. There's oodles of it up there. You gotta smear it all over yourself or your scales fall off. Something about being out of the water; the air dries you out. But the gold protects you. Your friend Feng-po is going to help mine it; Lu-hsing is supervising. He's got all sorts of plans -- foremen, assembly lines, delivery dragons. General Heng-chiang figured the gold thing out. We'd all be bald as fish tongues if he hadn't noticed that his chest was the only place that stayed normal. Makes up for losing that arm, doesn't it, General?" Heng-chiang glowered at the babbling

youngster, mumbled in his own gravel-throated, nasal way. As usual, no one could understand him, except maybe Han Chung-li.

"And that spell. You know the one, Ao Rue, the one that changes weight, lets us breath air. I can't tell you how long it took me to memorize that. I thought Lei-kung was going to strangle me with my own tail he had to repeat it so many times. Lei-kung's wonderful." Ao Rue was startled to see a beatific glaze come over everyone's faces at the mention of the little yellow dragon's name. His power was obviously even more than Ao Rue had suspected.

After a reverent pause, Erh-lang went on. "But he can get impatient. I thought he was going to boil me when I told him he'd have to tell me and show me. I've been too busy to learn to read those silly tablets. Mussel guts, Yolbas and Han Chung-li can't read, and look who they are."

Ao Rue tried to conceal his contempt. Holding Yolbas' and Han Chung-li's ignorance up as an ideal shocked him more than he thought he could be. And to have trouble with the metamorphosis spell? Why that used to be one of the basics taught to the youngest dragonlings. It was one of the first he'd learned. Even as he thought of it, he could feel his cells getting ready to slide easily into air breathing. It was that easy.

"But after I've sat in the shallows for an hour or so to get the spell working, then, I can leap into"

"Erh-lang, pardon my interruption, but I've come to discuss something very important."

"More important than flying? What could be more important than flying?" Han Chung-li chimed in. "I can't wait to fly. Erh-lang's going to teach me all sorts of tricks that he says the females will love."

"I know about flying. I've done it, done it off and on for years." They all seemed surprised that Ao Rue took for granted something they thought was a major effort and revelation. "We've got to talk about this terraforming and the danger of those black lights."

"By the way, Ao Rue, wasn't that Nü-kua I saw you with last night, coming up from the caverns." Ao Rue couldn't believe Erh-lang was going to change the subject. The tip of his tail began to twitch in frustration. But he did. "She's a nifty piece of tail! Isn't she, Han Chung-li?" Han Chung-li's tongue began to play over his fangs. "Wow, I'd like to get her tail wrapped

around me. All I have to do is look at her and mine starts swelling. How was she, Ao Rue? I betcha she makes all sorts of great noises." Erh-lang stopped abruptly. Ao Rue's eyes had begun to glow and spin. Erh-lang suddenly realized this wasn't one of his whale-hunting cronies. He knew absolutely that all his trophies, all his fame, would do him no good in a contest with this strange silver beast. "Ah, ah, err, you were saying, Ao Rue; you were saying something about the terraforming."

Ao Rue's anger eased a bit as he remembered his purpose. He repeated again and again in his mind, *I am not an animal, I must try to save us from the land, from the Demons, I am not an animal, I will not yield to rage, I am not an animal.* Still, the idea of smashing Erh-lang's and Han Chung-li's heads together and watching their brains and blood explode into the water gave him a shiver of delight. He repeated his litany, breathed deep, and tried again. "Fellow dragons." At least he now had their undivided attention. "This terraforming is evil. It will destroy us all. The magic of those dark Northern Lights, the ones you call the 'Dancing Lights,' will eat our flesh, our minds, our souls. In ancient times, when dragonkind fled the land to return to the sea, it was because a dread enemy had been summoned by the Lights from some foul place. This enemy was the Azghun Demons. They could be killed, but they multiplied faster than they died. Destroying them had an obscene effect on us. As they died, they struck deep into us and ..." Ao Rue realized they were no longer listening to him. Their heads had turned in unison as if someone had gathered the strings of their minds and pulled. From behind him, he heard Lei-kung's thin, slithering voice.

"Fled? Fled? Ao Rue, dragons don't flee from anything. Where did you get this strange idea about demons? That's the stuff of dragonlings' and dragonettes' nightmares. Are we going to talk about imps next?"

Despite the odd chill he felt, Ao Rue turned confidently to tell Lei-kung the truth, but as he looked, he was struck speechless. If anything, Lei-kung was more shrunken than before. His eyes were lusterless, black stones. They were streaked with crawling mustard patterns that shifted like the tracks of maggots and snakes shifting across his eyes and made pilgrimages to and from his brain. His body looked as if it was retreating, shrinking back, from those corrupt stones. Bones strained his scales to breaking. His tail was kinked upon itself. His ecru hide, never attractive, now was drained into the

color of something that had been too long in a broken shell. Yet as ugly as he looked, nothing could prepare Ao Rue for the sight of the once-beautiful Chih-nil. She peeked out from behind Lei-kung. Her body was so weary that her legs were bowed. Her wonderful flat and tight belly now hung within inches of the floor. She had been gleaming white; now she was blanched, boiled bloodless. Her wings dangled lank. Had it not been for the expression on her face, Ao Rue would have been most sickened by the purple bruises and welts that bulged like hungry parasites about her snout and tail. All her haughtiness, her arrogance, was gone. She looked as if someone had just smacked her across the snout with his tail as hard as he could. She was eternally on the edge of tears; hysteria haunted her failed eyes. But Ao Rue knew there were no tears underwater. They would wait for the land.

"Now, Ao Rue what is all this hysterical, senseless talk of demons?" The scorn was thick in Lei-kung's reedy voice.

Somehow recovering his composure and realizing that the others were too entranced to listen, Ao Rue began what he knew was an appeal to the void. "In the Emerald Tablets, in the oldest ones, there are dark tales and dire warnings of a race of mindless, malignant demons, the Azghun Demons. Shapeless, amorphous -- destruction and poison are their only purposes. They're yellow, and they spawn and spread quicker than imagination." Ao Rue realized that the tablets were describing Lei-kung's color.

"Well, dragons need fear nothing. We'll just destroy them. Gather up an army." As Lei-kung casually spoke, Ao Rue realized that the little slug was extending a thin, black thread toward him. It curled its way through the water. "Most dragons could use the discipline, the regimentation. Yes, our Sniffing General and Tiger Prince will enjoy giving orders. Dragons are just too independent for their own good as it is." Lei-kung's voice was fading into a lulling monotone. Ao Rue noticed that many threads extended from him. He was a growth, a centipede. Chih-nil had a thread; others went beyond him to Yolbas, Heng-chiang, Erh-lang, and Han Chung-li. "But, how is it you think there are demons lurking in ambush for us innocent, helpless dragons?"

"Ah," Ao Rue's own voice sounded like it was faraway as he tried to think and speak. That little thread fascinated him. "The oldest tablets. The story's there." Some small part of Ao Rue knew that if that thread touched

him, it would pierce him from brain to tip of tail, impale his spine. His soul would hang quivering upon it. Yet he couldn't muster the strength to move.

"Well then, we can see them then. Certainly the water hasn't completely destroyed them?"

"No, no, they're safe. Sealed them in with Kuan-ti." Ao Rue was having more and more trouble concentrating. *That thread, I will be suspended, gibbering, from Lei-kung's will!*

"Oh yes," Lei-kung sneered in his smugness and power, "that must be that one cavern on the map we couldn't open. That was mighty magic, Ao Rue, mighty magic indeed. We'll never get that open. Can you open it?"

"Don't think so." *It's closer, so close. It's at the tip of my tail,* Ao Rue's soul wailed; his body and will remained frozen.

"Too bad. You know I'd like to believe you. I really would. Wouldn't we boys?" Lei-kung looked over at them. Their snouts bobbed like apples. "Yes, indeed, we would, but without proof, we couldn't expect dragons to abandon so great a dream as the great terraforming, give up their manifest destiny, could we? Are you all right, Ao Rue; you look a bit stressed." A high-pitched giggle snuck from Lei-kung's snout.

The thread had touched Ao Rue's tail. He couldn't move; he screeched soundlessly. A sharp spike was driving its way up through him. He could do nothing.

"Ao Rue, there you are. Aren't you important types done conferring yet?" Ao Rue's heart froze; Nü-kua had followed him.

Lei-kung's claws came together; they caressed each other. "This is wonderful. The young and tender Nü-kua! I hadn't expected your pleasure quite so soon." He extended another black thread toward her. "But Chih-nil is growing a bit used and boring." One thread moved closer to the little golden dragon; the other moved deeper into the helpless Ao Rue. "Say something to Nü-kua, darling." All Chih-nil could manage was a whimper.

Nü-kua was frightened; she wasn't quite sure what Lei-kung was talking about but she didn't like it. She looked again at Ao Rue and from her mind she called, called to his love.

The palace shook! Yolbas and Erh-lang fell as Ao Rue slammed his tail upon the floor. The thread shriveled away, scurried back. He moved so fast his body snapped between Nü-kua and Lei-kung. He swept his left wing

out and gathered her to him. His eyes burned and spun like blue suns. He came to full majesty, a master sorcerer the like of which the world had not seen in eons. A beloved dragon in full arousal. Lei-kung cowered. What seconds before had almost been his slave now burned with a godlike power that lit the palace like a beacon. For leagues dragons turned to marvel and wonder at the light that banished all darkness. A gleaming silver-blue sword formed in Ao Rue's right claw. As he whipped it in circles, the water seethed and boiled. He slashed the thread that threatened Nü-kua. Blue fire shot back along it and struck Lei-kung full. He cried out, screamed blind fear. Ao Rue raised the sword to banish the yellow snake forever from the world, to strike this abominable worm from Nü-kua's sight.

"No! Don't! I'll kill them!" Lei-kung screamed as he began to twist and knot the black threads. Ao Rue saw the life begin to go out of everyone there. Yolbas' and Erh-lang's struggles to stand grew weak. Han Chung-li simply slumped against the failing Heng-chiang. Chih-nil's eyes pleaded for at least her life, all she had left. Ao Rue felt dragons everywhere cry out in pain as Lei-kung frayed the cords of their lives. Only Ao Rue and Nü-kua were without pain.

He lowered the sword, and it vanished as quickly as it had come. The light from his eyes dulled a shade. They still glowed with harnessed power and protection. He glared defiantly at Lei-kung, daring him to make one move toward Nü-kua.

"Ao Rue, why are you holding me so tight? Everyone's watching us." He eased his grip and was surprised to see everyone standing and talking as if nothing had happened.

"Well, Ao Rue, we must recognize your contribution to dragonkind even if you've decided not to participate in the great terraforming." Astonishment filled Ao Rue. Lei-kung was talking as if nothing had happened. "As you know, once we leave the sea, dragons will have to drink. We won't be able to just absorb water as we do here." Ao Rue was struck dumb. Nü-kua, everyone, was listening to Lei-kung as if he'd just dropped by to eat a few oysters. "We've decided to make you Guardian of the Spring Halt, Protector of the Gate of Sand. It's going to be one of our important sources of fresh water. It is a little out of the way, but I know you scholars need your isolation and solitude."

Ao Rue was mystified. *How could no one know?* He began to pull Nü-kua toward the open sea.

She strained against him. "What's the matter with you? Lei-kung's offering you a great honor. Say something! Thank him! Don't you want to serve dragonkind. Lei-kung, I'm so sorry. I just don't know what's wrong with him. I'm sure he's delighted. Both of us are. He'll do it." She was now calling over her shoulder as Ao Rue pulled her away.

Even after they were out of the palace, she continued to carp at him, "What is the matter with you? How could you be so rude? What a generous kind offer!" He had been mute since he'd dragged her out.

Finally he turned to her. He was obviously shaken. "Didn't you see what was going on in there? He was going to use you like he does Chih-nil. Didn't you see those black threads? Didn't you see how terrible everyone looked?"

"Ao Rue, I think you've been sucking too many vines. I saw nothing of the sort. Everyone was very nice to me, to you too. They looked fine. Chih-nil is as stunning as ever, Lei-kung very dignified, and Erh-lang handsome and fit as usual. Why are you acting so strange?"

"You think Erh-lang is handsome?"

"Yes, I guess so, in a common, popular sort of way. But you're changing the subject. I'm going to go back and accept that offer for you. You'll love a place like Spring Halt although it sounds awfully isolated."

"You'll do nothing!" Nü-kua was shocked by Ao Rue's vehemence. "I don't want you anywhere near Lei-kung ever again! That goes for the muscle-bound lout Erh-lang too! You'll stay with me. And if you want Spring Halt, I'll tell Yolbas myself." Ao Rue didn't plan on getting anywhere near Lei-kung again himself. And he now understood that only he and Lei-kung knew anything of their duel arcane. He yearned to confide in Nü-kua, to convince her, but as he looked at her and his love welled up within him, he knew he couldn't tell her of anything ugly despite his desire to spill his heart into her.

"Well, all right, but you have to promise to stop acting so strange, and I hope we're going to have a lot of my friends visit us and we can visit them. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life sitting out in some forsaken oases in the middle of nowhere!"

"I thought just the two of us would be nice. You know I'm not very comfortable around other dragons."

"We'll have plenty of time for ourselves. And that reminds me: I have something else I want to talk to you about." She lowered her eyelids and Ao Rue wondered why she was being coy. All this visiting and socializing didn't sound right to him, but he was beyond the point of choice. *Even if she's wrong*, he thought to himself, *she's right because I'm hers*.

The two lovers swam further away, Ao Rue thinking that he might drown in her eyes, Nü-kua talking away about their future. If they'd listened more carefully or weren't so fascinated with each other, they might have heard Chih-nil's cries and sobs as Lei-kung vented his fury and failure on her mouth and body.

Chapter 11
1920 words

"That's funny."

Erh-lang paused from shaking the alligators off his tail and trying to step on them at the same time. "Well, if I hadn't had to sit in the shallows for two hours getting that damn spell right." He stopped, realizing that he was talking to a voice that shouldn't exist. He was supposed to be alone, waiting for the great dragon exodus from the sea. "Who's laughing!" He lashed out with his tail, turned to see who he'd smacked. No one was there. All he could see was one of those small fuzzy things. It had easily hopped over his tail each time it swept by.

"I'm laughing. And watch that tail; you might hurt yourself."

Again, Erh-lang looked all around, stretching his neck, trying to find the dragon who'd dared laugh at him. Once he found him, there'd be a reckoning. Finally, in frustration, he called out, "All right, smart tail, show yourself. You afraid?"

"Afraid? Hardly! You're much too slow and clumsy to be afraid of."

"Oh yea, well come out from hiding and I'll show you who's slow!"

"I'm right here, on the ledge, next to your head. Are you blind?" Erh-lang turned to see the small spotted and orange-patched fuzzy looking at him. It laughed again. "You've been a real show. I thought you'd never get out of the water. You'd get the weight right, bob to the surface, and nearly suffocate. Then, you'd get the breathing right, get the weight wrong, sink, and nearly drown. Thought I'd break my ribs laughing."

"WHAT ARE YOU?"

"Hey, easy on the volume, lummoX. Think you're still muffled by the water."

Erh-lang wondered what a 'lummoX' was. Lei-kung hadn't prepared him for strange, talking beasts. He began to wonder if he should flame it before it confused him anymore. As the smoke began to leak from his nostrils, he was further confounded to find the animal liked it. It turned in circles, rolled on its back, made an odd rumbling noise. He was so surprised he swallowed his own smoke and gagged.

"Yo! LummoX! You didn't have to stop."

"What are you? Wait a minute, I know, something that misfit Ao Rue said. You're a tugger."

"That's tiger. And no, I'm not. Tigers are big and dumb, sorta like you."

"I'm not dumb!" Erh-lang thought about flame again, but stopped. The beast liked it, and he was getting a little frightened of this poised and obviously confident thing. "That's a hard spell! Took me weeks to learn it! It's whale guts trying to get all the parts together."

"You think transformation's hard? I guess you are as dumb as that alligator dance you were doing. Looked like you were trying to turn yourself inside out, like you'd forgotten which end your brain was. Look, if you want to kill things, how about knocking off a few of those eagles and kites up there. Death attracts 'em like crazy. They're cowards, but real problems if not watched."

"You mean those wonderful fliers. They're beautiful. Masters of the air!"

"Beautiful? Those carrion eaters. Only time they're beautiful is when they're dead. Swooping from all over the place. Kitten killers! Wouldn't dare take on an adult. Makes me wish I could fly. Kill a few of 'em, I would!"

"Oh, you're a kitten?"

"Look, now that the show's over, this is getting boring. You can forget about what we are. I don't think anyone's going to bother talking to you." It turned and gracefully slid among the rocks.

"Oh yea," Erh-lang yelled after it. "You think I'm dumb! Wait'll you and that blue-eyed freak see me fly. Wait'll that morsel Nü-kua sees me."

"Why did you call him a freak?" The cat had come back. It actually seemed interested.

"He's weird. Reading tablets. Off by himself. Talkin' strange. What Nü-kua sees in him I sure don't know."

"No, no, I know all that. What about the blue eyes?"

"Oh, those. He's the only one."

"The only one with blue eyes; may the gods preserve us! Are you sure?" The cat sounded much less arrogant, even frightened.

"Of course, I'm sure. What do you think I am? Stupid?" Erh-lang was enjoying his seeming triumph over this smug creature. He liked to see fear. "Why don't you get out of here. I've got important business!"

But the cat was already leaving. Absently, it called over its shoulder, "I think we'll call you Goofy; lummo is too dignified." Erh-lang was now the furthest thing from the cat's mind: *Must find Mei-chou; she must know. Only one with blue eyes. He'll be hers; she is the First of the First, the Guide. But only one. Could he save the dragons from the Azghun Demons? Would he care? Only one. How could the dragons be so mindless to leave themselves with only one?*

Erh-lang was beginning to wonder if he'd actually won that encounter. *Winning is everything.* He began to think he'd been insulted and thought about going after the thing, whatever it was. Then again, finding something that small among the crags was more than he cared to bother with. Besides, he had to get ready for his welcoming flight. He began to scan the cliffs for a proper place for his majestic entrance.

■

Ao Rue carefully guided Nü-kua up into the shallows. Working the spell for both of them had been far easier than he'd expected. He'd tried to teach her to do it herself, but she just wouldn't pay attention long enough. Under normal circumstances, he'd have found her lack of concentration infuriating, but she'd developed a little erotic trick of licking his tendrils and fangs. It drove him crazy! Then, he couldn't think too much either. *I wonder if she isn't making me think with my tail. I'm beginning to think it grew the rest of me to carry it around. All I can think of is making love, wrapping myself within her.* The fang licking had given birth to her pet name for him. She'd wanted to call him "Tooth," but he complained that it was too undignified. They'd compromised on Thoth. Even so, he'd made her promise that it had to be their secret. No one else must know. They'd both joked and laughed that it would be a name to echo throughout history, one to shape and mold all future minds.

He was actually excited about the exodus. He hadn't even been sure he wanted to leave what little sea remained. But her happiness was his. He was caught up. She was bubbling on and on. He was so enraptured that he wasn't quite prepared when their talons touched the bottom and their snouts broke

the water. *THE STENCH!* Instantaneously, he slapped filter spells over their nostrils, as every dragon was doing. But the smell, all Ao Rue could think of was distilled corruption, the essence of death.

"Oh look, it's Erh-lang; he's in the air," but he couldn't hear her. He couldn't hear the dragonettes' mindless chanting -- ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG, ERH-LANG. All the dragons looked up to see his flight; most had never seen their wings against the sky.

But Ao Rue couldn't hear anything except the battles of the sounds that touched him from land and sea. Before him rushed the microscopic cries of the corals as they died within the drying, tilting walls of the crystal palaces. They screamed out their betrayal as they were ripped from mother ocean. From behind him came the counterpoint. It was the crooning of the whales. Their Ode to Joy. Ever faithful, ever true to each other, they sang their freedom from fear. Now they were the benign lords of their domain. Ao Rue found solace from the corals' agony in the whales' celebration. No one would ever trouble the sweet creatures again.

"Oh, look, Ao Rue, look! We can fly!"

And Ao Rue looked and wished he hadn't. His eyes looked to the land, not the sky. What he saw was desiccation -- a land like a dried animal with tufts of fur still clinging to the cadaver, stirring in a cruel wind, the Breath of Fury. The terraforming had gone awry. Nature lay broken. It was as if the dragons had commissioned some mad mind to build them paradise. What they had gotten was a pit of agony. Great broken depressions marked the scarred landscape. Salt marshes were everywhere, stone-white pools of thirst. Spongy effervescent clay clung to the rocks. It was half-covered by wet, clinging sand. Dead sea life was strewn everywhere. Black vultures waved in celebration over it, their wings kowtowing in gratitude. Lizards, sand fleas, and roaches rose in clouds with every craving wing beat. Almost instantly, the insects descended to feed again and again. It was an orgy of scum, a feast of the moribund. Yet, as he looked over the running mockery of the loathsome yellow to yellow-gray clay and sand where they sucked at the rocks, he could see a pattern, a demented correctness. This horror was right for someone, but not for dragons.

"Oh, see, see the sun shine through his wings." Ao Rue realized he had been oblivious to Nü-kua's trembling excitement beside him. He felt a rush

of guilt as he realized he'd been ignoring the center of his life. "Isn't he wonderful," she cried.

"Well, it's a beginning."

"Thoth, how can you say that? A beginning? Look at that turn!"

Ao Rue looked with disdain at Erh-lang's amateur acrobatics. A small sneer crossed his lips and tendrils, but he was wise enough to keep still and he warmed to his pet name. "Let's get out of here, Nü-kua. Let's go look at our oasis." He was finding the pushing crowd, the screaming dragonettes, and the superficiality to be just too much. The death chants of the coral echoed from one side of his brain to another.

"How can you possibly think of leaving now. This is the greatest day in history. Look at him dive!"

"Terrific, the next thing he'll be doing is writing messages in the sky. Enormous smoke slogans: 'Lei-kung for Savior,' 'Han Chung-li is great,' 'All Kneel to Heng-chiang.'"

"What's wrong with that? We owe them all so much!"

"Please, couldn't we go?"

"If you're so dead set on seeing the silly oasis, go ahead! I'll get there later. I'm gonna stay and have fun!"

Ao Rue was hurt by her petulance and thought to speak until he realized she had her back to him. *She's forgotten I'm even here.* He gathered his wings in anger and struck the sky. If Erh-lang had looked to see him in the air, he wouldn't have imagined himself superior. Ao Rue gained altitude so quickly that no one saw his going. He looked back briefly. She still had her back to him, staring at Erh-lang's awkward dance. Ao Rue couldn't help but notice how clumsy dragons were on land. *Terraforming has turned us into waddlers. We could still go back to what little sea remains, but most of us are too lazy or dumb to work the magic. We'll take root in the sterile sand.* His wings took him quickly toward Spring Halt; pain gave him power. He wished he was a whale. Then cursed himself for self-pity. His only delay was to flame a vulture with a limp kitten in its talons. He did it without thinking, in sudden rage. And then wondered why such a natural event summoned such deep anger.

Chapter 12
1600 words

Lei-kung's kinked tail kept banging and dragging as he went down into the map cave. Regardless of what he did with the spell, he just didn't fit. If he decreased his weight to get it off the floor, his head hit the ceiling. As it was, he felt a bit weak and didn't want to bother too much with magic. More and more, he had to make this descent to revitalize himself.

The increased frequency of these trips puzzled him. He was so strong, yet each time he grew weaker faster. *Perhaps I overdid my last session with Chih-nil. Now that she's dead that won't be a problem anymore. She had the strangest look when I wrung the last bit of life out of her. Such a strange look. It hadn't been the rough sex. The fates know we'd had enough of that. She hadn't been much fun lately. Such a look. She'd hung limp just letting me. He felt a small twinge of arousal. It was as if all the spirit had gone out of her. I could have slowly roasted her and she wouldn't have cared. A look. I've never seen a dragon look like that. As if I'd beaten all the future out of her. Such a look. Almost gratitude at the end. Even after I'd drawn the thread of control out of her. Pathetic. No power in her. Glad she's gone. The black vultures and maggots could use her now. I only kept her for sport. Because others wanted her so much. Leave females to scum like Erh-lang and Ao Rue. Wretched pieces of tail!* He felt his gall rise at Ao Rue's name. *There's one worth strangling. I had him. I did! I did! Stupid Nü-kua. Had him, had him hanging. One more instant. Such a look. Thank the pit no one had seen Ao Rue leave during Erh-lang's show. By Chih-nil's rotting corpse, that silver eel could fly. Scary!* Now his mind shifted with the easy irrationality of the fanatic, and he smiled in deep satisfaction. *What can anyone say about Chih-nil; accountable to no one anyway. They're all mine. Let them live out the white silence of their lives; let them wallow in sand and brine.* He pulled at one bundle of threads. He felt the suffering and misery slide into him. He smiled more. *Such a wonderful look.*

Lei-kung forced Chih-nil's last fleeting look of thankfulness from his mind and let his euphoria rise. *It's better, so much better. All that individual stuff is gone. Dragons move across the land in regular lines, each with a purpose. The chorten rises above me in fitting tribute. Han Chung-li actually was keeping them at it even if the slime-trailing snail dragged some*

female dragonette off every time he thought no one was looking. Let Yolbas and Heng-chiang think the terraforming had something to do with them. Fools! He giggled to the dripping walls, My fools! Feng-po and Ch'ang-o had been the funniest. So glad to be groveling in the clay and rock for gold together. Didn't have the heart to tell them it was because they were next to each other in line. Lu-hsing's work details were doing so well. Would be a whole lot easier to use magic, but there's no value to that. The order, the regimentation, are too valuable. Besides I'm not going through anything like Erh-lang again. Trying to teach him the transmutation spell had been like trying to drive an octopus through a rock. Wonder if a seed would fit in his head? I must try some time when he's of no further use. Put a burr into his brain. There's an itch for him to scratch. Lei-kung laughed aloud at his own cleverness. How much longer am I going to keep that tool around. Until I don't need the air shows. Maybe I'll just slowly atrophy his muscles. Let him watch himself waste away. He laughed again. Life had never been so sweet for Lei-kung.

He slithered into the map cave. At the far end, the table still stood. One small spot still gleamed -- Kuan-ti's tomb. Otherwise, it looked as if some noxious spider had made a nest and spawned its young. The map was thick with the oily black threads, dripping, spreading. Lei-kung thought of it as the monument to his inspired and committed life. He didn't expect anyone to understand or appreciate it. He labored for his dream, nothing else. The cave did annoy him. Even though the tops of its crystal windows were open to the sun, the air was still stained by some sort of oily smoke. The cave still resisted all natural and supernatural attempts to light it. Phosphorescent lichens died as they were spread, leaving slimy ash all over the floor. Light spells shrunk into themselves as if the air sucked them into some dark maw. Even Lei-kung's fire rolled into some void. But he didn't care. He didn't have to see well for what he had to do.

"All right, where are you? Get out here! I'm tired. I need you." Only silence and the stillness of the grave greeted his command. "You hear me. Get your loathsome self out here!"

Slowly, from deep recess, a pus-yellow cloud began to roll up into the cave. Lei-kung was surprised: it seemed bigger than last time. It began to mushroom toward the ceiling -- an amorphous shape, never quite the same,

twisting, moving in and out of angles that tormented the eye. Lei-kung always had trouble keeping it in full focus. Some of it was never quite in the same place, like parts of it were bouncing in and out of existence. It was veined and scored with inky blots and lines. A thicker thread than all the others, a platted cable, snaked from it to Lei-kung.

"Well? Get to it. You think I've got time to spend with a foul abomination like you! A world waits!"

In reaction to Lei-kung's insults, the cloud threw out a second braided cable. It smacked against the side of Lei-kung's head and clung. His body arched and jerked in response; then, his movements settled to a steady trembling with occasional twitches. Globes began to move along the threads: black from Lei-kung, yellow from the Azghun Demon. The Demon leaned back and forth as it pulsed at and sucked on the dragon. Their antic shapes threw half shadows through the darkening air, two open wounds drinking at each other. The dragon's obsidian eyes crawled faster and faster with the yellow patterns. They swelled and surged like infected scabs until it appeared his sockets could no longer hold them. The Demon changed little. It just grew. As it did, small pieces elongated from it, snapped their yellow strands and vanished into the deeper recesses of the caverns. Lei-kung's eyes grew large enough that a quick glance made him seem some magnified insect, all eyes and wings. The Demon drew back its cable, drawing the other taut to keep the slumping dragon from falling.

Slowly, Lei-kung regained his senses. The Demon waited passively. The small dragon's head snapped up; the Demon eased its control. Lei-kung's shrunken body glowed with dark vitality.

"Aaahhh," his long cry of pleasure filled the cavern. "That's much better." If anyone had seen his pleasure, they might understand why he no longer missed Chih-nil's body and mouth. "Oh, that's so good." He turned to leave, ignoring the Demon. Something called him back. "You want what?" Communicating with the Demon was always hard for Lei-kung. Its mental images were so primitive, so alien, so fragmented, like trying to listen to a coral. He often wondered how something so big could think like one cell.

"Feed!"

"All right, go ahead and feed. Nothing's stopping you."

"Feed dragon!"

"You want to eat a dragon?" Lei-kung was astounded. Not because of the cannibalism, that didn't bother him. He'd just never thought of dragons as food. "Can you eat something that big?"

"No eat, feed! Feed must feed! FEED!"

Lei-kung was impatient. This was almost as bad as talking to Erh-lang or Yolbas. However, even the Demon's nagging and his new exhilaration didn't fog his native cunning. "Yes, yes, but find an isolated dragon or two on the gold crew." The Demon began to billow and boil toward the outside. "Stop, stop, STOP." It slowed. For a moment, Lei-kung had the odd feeling that it could have ignored his commands. "Don't let anyone see you. You're my secret until I decide otherwise." Lei-kung felt a little foolish. He really had no idea if it understood him. "Hold, HOLD, I say!" The Demon quivered before him. He could feel the feral lust burn against him. Lei-kung had a delicious thought, one that made him feel very good. "See if you can find Feng-po and Ch'ang-o alone." He threw strong mental images of Ao Rue's two friends at the thing. "Now you may go." It surged up the tunnel, burst away as if it had been straining against some great restraint. Lei-kung felt a deep chill in his marrow as it flashed by. He was deeply glad, no, relieved that he had complete control. He didn't want to imagine what that thing could do to a dragon.

Once the Demon was gone, Lei-kung bathed in his latest infusion of power. *I am the superior being. Oh yes, it is me. Let the ancients babble about blue eyes. It is me! I am the one! Let's see how insolent that silver worm is when that thing gets done with his friends!*

Chapter 13
3335 words

Ao Rue admired his handiwork and hoped that Nü-kua would like it. He had labored long cleaning and planting the oasis. Even with magic, the sand didn't yield well to flowers. Some things he'd done by claw and muscle, feeling good to stretch and test himself against barrenness for her. Now he was dusted with gold. He was finally comfortable after bathing in the clear waters and washing the sand from his body and the remains of all the dead fish from his talons. He was waiting for her. Extracting the gold for them from the nearby cliffs had been so easy; the magic had bounced among his talons as he called to it. Then, he powdered it until it was as soft as talc. *What's the sense of dragons dulling their talons in dark caves to get it?* he wondered. *Despite all of Kuan-ti's teaching, all my reading, I'm still mystified by the world. Let it rot and die! Nü-kua and I will live here in our little world!* He reached out again to her from the deep warmth of his mind. *My love?*

My Thoth. Wonderful here. Exciting!

My Bright Eyes, come when ready. All is prepared. I hope you like.

I will. Soon! As she faded, he felt her deep affirmation of him, what he was. He felt so essentially good not to be alone anymore.

With his snout resting on his arms, he drank in the exquisite scent of the sand-jujube. He thought of it as his flower, their flower. Hidden among its silver leaves were small golden blossoms that made the air sparkle with their perfume. He had planted them so carefully among the poplars. *She moves in me so softly. My Bright Eyes!* The golden scent mingled and enhanced the smells of fennel, coriander, and poppies. *Here the Breath of Fury cannot blow!* Even as he walked around their oasis, his weight released the aromas of the ginger and licorice. The janüsta offered a celebration with its cherry-flavored fruit and its coral-colored sprays of flowers, a coral that matched the faint shadows of skin beneath Nü-kua's scales. The pink of the tamarisk shaded so well into the coral. He'd planted a bunch of those and had great hopes for the contrast with the blue flax seedlings once they were grown. Ao Rue had been enjoying various tastes, so much he wondered why he bothered with meat at all. Currants, plums, figs, nectarines, and pears could have been a steady diet, but it would take orchards to fill his appetite.

Of course, he'd made mistakes: mugwort was not a treat; no one would like that. And while someone might like the cucumbers, he much preferred the asparagus. In fact, he liked it so much he'd decided to call it "dragon's beard"; it was shaped so much like dragon tendrils. *Tendrils, such tail-quivering touches from Nü-kua! Will she like asparagus? Will she taste some of these new things? Ah well, I can always go back for oysters, tuna, kelp, and sturgeon if she likes. She won't learn the spell of transformation anyway, and it's good to serve her happiness! My Bright Eyes!*

He gazed out across the still water of the oasis as it curled in and out of the poplars and fig trees. It was so different from the sea's ceaseless movements and caresses. The ducks that now lounged their way about the pool's surface would have to be much stronger to dance the movements of the waves and rollers. As still as the oasis was, its sounds were sharper than the whales' crooning. Waytags cried as they skimmed the water to catch mosquitoes and cicadas. Their small sounds were frequently marked by the sharper calls of the geese and crows who circled above, still unsure of his alien presence. Ao Rue wished he could shut out the too-dominant shouts of greed from the carrion-loving black eagles and vultures as they continued to feed upon the death that circled the oasis like an army at siege. For a bit, he had watched the timid groups of camels, asses, sheep, and gazelles. The water called to their thirst, but they too were still afraid of this new, silver beast. *I will have to make a point to leave often enough so they can drink. I would not harm them, but if they come to be comfortable with dragonkind, they will be even easier prey for Erh-lang and his killers, those who murdered more than they could eat. Soon the herds will have enough to contend with -- wolves and mastiffs are moving in those hills. The air is so clear I might even see the snow leopards in the mountains if I tried.*

For some time, though, his eyes had stayed within the oasis. He had laughed at the scorpions' strange pride as they stalked around with their stingers raised in arrogance and threat. The rabbits nibbled their soft, fluffy way around. They too enjoyed asparagus. The jerboas, far nimbler than other rats, leaped and bounced among the flowers and scrubs. Occasionally one fell to the cats that moved like sliding silk. So far, it seemed the cats hadn't even noticed him. They varied their routines only so much as his bulk took up space.

So if the cats wanted to ignore him, he would them too. Obviously, that business in the tablets about talking cats had been a myth. As it was, he'd been fascinated for some time by the pair of gray herons that so carefully kept themselves on the opposite side of the water. He toyed with them a little. Two paces to the right, they'd prance to the left; three to the left and they'd mirror him to the right, keeping their distance with almost mathematical precision, with Tu-suan. Now, as he rested, he regretted his intrusion. Love should never be troubled. He knew herons mated only once, and he cringed within himself over his wasted time with Chih-nil. *I was better than that. Nü-kua has taught me that. If only I could have come to her clean!* The herons paused often from their fishing to share a choice morsel, to intertwine their necks, as if to polish each other's feathers. In their grayness, they seemed suspended above the land and water. When they faced him, they were like slate slivers, almost too thin to see. From the side, their bodies were all curve, stiffening to their long, slender beaks. Their bodies snaked and waved as their long legs seemed to march over unseen obstacles. No sounds came from them; they made the geese seem crazed in their constant announcements of comings and goings. *Dignity and Grace! Are there two better virtues?* In the air, the herons were effortless; they floated above the land, long legs trailing behind, pointed beaks cutting the way. Any dragon, any bird would envy them, but Ao Rue feared for them now that death had drawn so many winged predators. His eyes narrowed as he watched the kites and eagles beyond and above the oasis. *There is no prey here!* He threw thoughts of anger toward the sky. The space above cleared abruptly. The predators had discovered better tasks. *There will be no prey here! No death! No pain! Not in Bright Eyes' place!* He sent thoughts of love and safety across the water to the herons.

Ao Rue began to doze amid the stillness and beauty. He was awakened by a thump and a small weight on his snout. At first he thought a piece of fruit had dropped on him. He reached up to brush it off.

"Hey, watch that talon!" The command was strong enough that Ao Rue immediately lowered his claw. "Are you going to sleep forever or do you want to talk?"

"I really can't see you." Ao Rue gave up trying to cross his eyes. "So you can talk."

"Sure, when we want to. Is this any better? Though I don't know why anyone needs to see to listen." The cat had jumped down from between Ao Rue's eyes and now sat on his outstretched talon. "So, you're Thoth, the Last of the Blue-Eyed." The cat licked a paw and did a quick jowl wash.

This cat moves around as if it owned the place. As if it owned me! And how can it know my secret name? "No, I am Ao Rue, Member of the Council of Five, Last Student of Kuan-ti, Comrade to Feng-po, Beloved of Nü-kua, Keeper of Spring Halt and the Gate of Sand. And I will be addressed properly! Who are you?"

"Fine, call yourself whatever you like. 'Ao Rue' it is. We've got more important things to talk about than names."

"OK, but what's your name? It would hardly be polite if I just called you 'cat.'"

"You have some manners. Excellent! I am Mei-chou the golden-eyes, She Who is First of the First, Teller and Recorder of the Past, She Who Sits Upon the Lotus, Guide to All, Prime Silver-Mackerel Tabby. Let's skip the rest of it; it goes on for hours." She had left his talon and was now walking around and over him. "You are some piece of dragon. The most ancient Tellers of Tales were right about you blue-eyed ones. Sorcery practically runs from under your scales. Never felt anything this powerful." Ao Rue tried to interrupt her. However, her tour and commentary gave him no chance to speak. She acted like she was buying a used camel. "Look at those wings. Bet you're a screamer in the air. Terrific tail. Split a rock with it!"

Ao Rue was wondering if he should be flattered. The cat had returned to his talon and was admiring it. He managed to get a "thank you" in.

"Wasn't complimenting you. Just observing. I'd say the same things about a good mountain or a well-formed alligator. Spin your eyes for me once!" Without thinking, Ao Rue roused his magic. "Yo, enough! Wow, it's all there all right, magnitude prime! You're going to need every ounce of it if there's going to be even a remote chance against the Azghun Demons."

"The Demons are real?"

"Does a cat purr? Is a jerboa tasty? Believe it. They're breeding like maggots in the caves right now. They'll be tens of thousands of them just to start. Soon enough they'll boil like spiders out of their holes. The dunes are going to be spitting dragon spirits all over the sky. And you're going to have

to lead the fight against them alone. Not an exciting task. They're about as boring as the pit vipers. The last time the dragons fought them, there were over fifty blue-eyed dragons, master sorcerers all. And the best they could do was drive the Demons back into the deep caverns and seal them with the sea. Still fifty or not, you're certainly something special. You may be alone, but the world has never seen a sorcerer dragon like you!"

Ao Rue was puzzled. "But I can only work my magic for someone else. Most of the time, I don't even do it deliberately. It just comes."

"Of course. You think nature is going to let something as powerful as you remain unchecked? All life is balanced. That's another thing the Demons spoil. If you could be omnipotent, you'd go power mad! There are no real gods in the universe, only beings who think they are and those who worship them."

Ao Rue doubted he could even approach Lei-kung's cruelty, be power mad, but he was gaining increasing respect for this small creature's knowledge and wisdom. *Could a dragon be a cat's student?* "What do the Demons do? Are they immune to magic? Flame?"

"Most magic doesn't bother them at all. Yours will if you're aroused enough, committed enough. You have to believe in sorcery for it to work. The Demons are magic nulls. They're nulls in most ways. Don't think much. Just urges, very ugly urges! Flame gets 'em though. They're easy to burn. Speaking of which, blow a little smoke over me."

"Then, it's easy. All dragons have flame." Ao Rue was startled to see her go into what appeared to be a small fit of ecstasy as the smoke flowed over her. "What was that?"

"Nothing, just some flea removal. Do try to stay on the subject at hand. Killing Demons isn't that easy. First of all, the Azghun breed as fast as they burn. Some sort of splitting. A small thread appears, bulbs, and breaks away. I don't even expect they enjoy it. Strange. But killing them isn't the problem. All they have to do is touch a dragon; the slightest brush and it's all over."

"They can kill dragons?"

"No, it's not that simple, not that clean. They feed on something in the dragons' minds. Don't you know this?"

"The tablets weren't clear. Even Kuan-ti couldn't read some of them."

Mei-chou let out a long, sad sigh. "You know you were once very noble beasts. Now only one blue-eyed, and you can't read all your own history. No wonder you were stupid enough to come back here. At least you're free of those filthy black threads."

Ao Rue thought to tell Mei-chou about how close he and Nü-kua had come to being enslaved like all the rest. Pride stopped him. "Now who's off the subject?"

"Sorry, it's just very painful to see smug ignorance."

Ao Rue felt a bit insulted, but he knew she was right. Sadness and a small fear came to him. *My Nü-kua, sucked upon by some mindless, hive creature!* Just the thought made the magic spin in his eyes.

"Easy, there'll be time enough for that. Save it; you'll need it. Let me finish. The Demons' power is psychic devastation. They bring emptiness, desolation. They feed on the future, on hope. Dragons despair."

"How does that kill?"

"It doesn't. That's the worst part. Without any shred of hope, the dragons kill themselves. They commit suicide. Wait 'til you see the glitter sand. You won't believe anything so beautiful can be so repugnant."

Ao Rue was speechless. The horror was too much. *Dragons suicide? Never! A dragon couldn't take its own life, Or could it? How I felt after Chih-nil scorned me. I thought then to die. If not for Feng-po and Nü-kua. My Bright Eyes.* Both cat and dragon were silent. Ao Rue recovered, "But why do you care what happens to dragons?"

"Because, thick-head, once the Demons finish off the dragons, they'll start on us. They're drawn to intelligence. Once we're gone, they'll move down the chain until there's nothing left."

"I don't know if there's anything I can do. I'm only one dragon despite what you say."

"Don't you mean 'won't do.' Aren't you even going to try?"

"Well, it's not as if you could know, but I'm not exactly a popular dragon."

"You'd be surprised what I know."

"I'm an outcast. I wasn't fooled for a second that this remote post wasn't Lei-kung and Yolbas' way of getting rid of me. No one even talks to me anymore. They all think I'm weird, a freak. Why should I help them? All

Feng-po does is dig. He's not a dragon anymore; he's a shrew, a mole." Ao Rue felt a little guilty. It wasn't as if Feng-po could control his betrayal. "Nü-kua's all I've got."

"Well, I'm here now." Ao Rue's scorn rose at Mei-chou's offer of comfort -- *This tiny creature, a friend?* -- but then he stopped. *I do feel a kinship, a belonging, with this wise fur ball.* Mei-chou continued, "You're supposed to be strange, be alone, a hermit. You'll never belong; you'll never have a home although it's clear you're trying with this oasis. Little too opulent, don't you think?" She didn't wait for an answer. Cats have absolute faith in their aesthetic judgments. "Anyway, if you could belong somewhere, could be a social being, you wouldn't be special. Nü-kua probably isn't a very good idea, especially if you take her too seriously. You and your magic work behind the veil of illusions, behind appearances, in places general dragonkind can't even imagine. You're supposed to shape the elements: causes, understandings, truths, wisdom, and insights. Forget your hurt; your destiny is as an empath. Non-blue-eyed dragons see only the effects and appearances. That's why they take so quickly to conformity and control. They suffer with awe, belief, reverence, and slavish obedience to incomprehensible rituals. Most of the time, they don't even know why they do things. That's why they need a mentor and you a guide. Forget about being a hero! Sure you need to disengage; otherwise, you couldn't function. But you have to care! You must care! And you will suffer. Count on that!"

Now Ao Rue was really confused. *This cat is making me feel stupid. Still she sounds so much like Kuan-ti.* As he tried to think of a question, stop acting like a dumb lizard, he felt Nü-kua's touch upon his mind, *My Thoth.* Mei-chou jumped down from his claw and began to leave. He called after her, "Aren't you going to stay and talk to Nü-kua?"

"Talk to her? You're kidding." Mei-chou vanished into undergrowth, leaving Ao Rue wondering why she didn't want to talk to someone as wonderful as Nü-kua. He never even thought how the cat also knew she was coming.

Nü-kua landed softly, like a jujube petal floating to the ground.

Oh, my Bright Eyes.

My Thoth!

As she moved toward him, his tail began to curl in anticipation, all thoughts of Demons, cats, and death vanished. *My love, I will keep you safe in my heart. Let the Demons kill all the dragons. You are my salvation! I will make a haven of our love!* Her walk melted him. Other dragons lurched and rolled. She moved with a slow, swaying sensuality. Ao Rue would have called it a soft slink, but the words were wrong. No, she moved as breeze-swayed flowers, like the poppy's deep-rose gossamer that bursts forth in the spring. *She covers me with herself -- gold and silver, the bonding of all time!* Nü-kua lowered her eyelids as she heard his thoughts. Gently, she stretched her head forward, caressed him with her tendrils. Serenely, they touched for a time.

Reluctantly, Ao Rue spoke first. He could have touched her forever. "My Bright Eyes, I had the strangest conversation with a cat. A very disconcerting talk. Let me tell you about it. There is great danger! The Demons"

"You talked to a cat?" She interrupted him. "I have something much more important to talk to you about than any silly cat, and I'm not worried about any danger. You'll protect me."

Ao Rue yielded to her faith. *There's that strange coy look again.* "Yes, my love, what is it?"

"I love you, Thoth."

"And I you. Yes, very yes." He never imagined his heart could open so wide.

"Well, then, don't you think we should"

"WHAT'S THAT. FENG-PO?" Now he interrupted her.

"What's the matter with you?"

Ao Rue was instantly erect, his eyes spinning madly. "Don't you hear it. A great wail of terror and despair! It's Feng-po."

"I don't hear anything! Will you stop and listen to me!"

"Have to go. Need me."

He was in the air so fast that Nü-kua hardly saw him leave. She stood as his blur vanished toward the cliffs. *I wonder if Erh-lang can fly that fast? Ao Rue is majestic, but so strange. I wonder if what I want with him is right? Why must he always run off. Aren't I important enough!* She stamped her claw in anger, frightening the herons into flight.

Mei-chou had been watching with disdain. *Petulant little bitch! If he gives her what she wants, he'll be wasted. Nothing I can do. Must be his choice.* She turned, flipped her tail straight up in the air, and went to find saner company.

Chapter 14
1655 words

"Now children, stay together! Don't malingering. Let's get those blocks in careful rows. Each exactly the same distance from each other. Quickly now!" Yün-t'ung had carefully led her charges to a flat plain just outside Lei-kung's nearly completed chorten. Her pride was obvious. *Of course, Lei-kung would appoint me to bring these rambunctious dragonettes into line. Am I not the Nurturer of the Young! About time too! I was so proud to receive the leader's instructions. So grateful to be the first to share The Teachings of Lei-kung. If only they weren't so hard to remember. So delighted to receive his wisdom:*

"Yün-t'ung, you know the great burdens of leadership that have been thrust upon me. I do try to bear them gracefully, but it is so wearisome. Dragons are not a very purposeful, organized lot. Always going off by themselves. Too much independence to build the Great Society. I try; oh, I do try. But even with Heng-chiang's, Yolbas', and Han Chung-li's help, dragons require constant supervision, especially the young ones. Despite all my desires, I can't maintain my stewardship at these exhausting levels forever. We must have a better system. Dragons must believe in discipline without being told. I have thought long and hard on this, and my colleagues and I believe that the only solution is the dragonettes. For eons they have run wild. Little unruly thugs! We must have a program, an educational program. Teach the dragonettes proper behavior. What is expected in a civilized society. What their jobs will be. To be on time. Always to be where they're supposed to be. To show proper respect for their betters. Put aside childish games and antics. We must all contribute! We must conform! Complete social integration is our goal. Everyone marching to the same tune. After long consideration, I have decided that you will be dragonkind's first great teacher. I will get Heng-chiang to help you round up as many as we can. Han Chung-li will gladly help. I am putting our future in your hands. It will be

your grave duty to instruct our dragonettes to be all that they can be!"

"Little thugs," I couldn't have agreed more. Yün-t'ung bared her teeth at two that were talking in the back. They were instantly silent. Yesterday's punishment had been very effective. How dare they question me! The field trip to the Flaming Cliffs had been absolutely necessary. A good lesson in discipline. So a few scrapped wings got scraped climbing the buttes. "No, you can't fly! Lazy slugs! Make those seats. We must have a proper classroom." Told them, I did. So their dainty little claws bled a little while they were carving out the limestone blocks. That was no reason to cry and complain. Can't be running off for a drink every two seconds. Held those two down and beat them silly with my tail! Senseless louts! Who do they think they are! And that little gray! Those grays are always a problem. No one likes grays, congenitally slothful, fit for nothing but games and songs. Heng-chiang taught him to run away. Smacked him senseless with his golden fist. I will have order!

"Mistress Yün-t'ung, Mistress Yün-t'ung, Mistress Yün-t'ung."

"Now raise your claw when you have a question, Green 2." Yün-t'ung's mood softened. Green 2 was such a sweet child. The little dragon waved her claw in the air. "Yes, my dear."

"Mistress Yün-t'ung, Gray 3 and Gray 1 were talking in the back."

"Name's not Gray 3. It's Wen Ch'ang." He glared at the little Green who the other dragonettes had already named "Teacher's Tail Wiper."

"Now stop that bullying, Gray 3. Stop this instant! You don't want me to call Heng-chiang again, do you?"

"No, no."

"No, no' what?"

"No, no, Mistress Yün-t'ung."

"That's much better. Now let's all take our seats. Yes, Brown 4, I know they're scratchy. Just find your place. Don't squirm, Gray 1! Sit up straight, Black 3! Let's not take all day. Find your places." *Having the dragonettes sit according to color had been a stroke of genius. Painting numbers on them helped even more. Sitting in numerical order helped them with their figures. And I can keep those grays where I can watch them! Now they all know who they are and where they belong. Plus I don't have to*

remember their silly names. "All right, children, now that everyone's in place, it's time. Wait just a moment. Where is Blue 4?" Yün-t'ung could have sworn the pretty little dragonette had been primly sitting on her stone just a moment before.

Green 2 immediately began waving her claw. "Ooo, ooo, Mistress Yün-t'ung, I know, I know."

"Yes, child."

"Han Chung-li came and got her. He took her into the chorten."

"Well, that's fine. He's so generous with his special instruction."

"I'll bet he is!" Wen Ch'ang leered.

"That will be enough of that filth. Anymore and I'll wash your mouth out with salt and sand. And sit up straight. No respectable dragon slouches! Han Chung-li is one of the founders of the Great Society. You should all hope one day to be as great as he is. Now children, back to business. We were just about to recite the laws." She stared down those few who groaned. "All together now. What is the first law?"

"The greatest good is the community."

"Some of you aren't speaking up! Especially you grays. You don't want to stay after school, do you? Let's try again!"

"THE GREATEST GOOD IS THE COMMUNITY."

"That's much better. Now the second law."

"THE BEST DRAGON IS A WORKING DRAGON."

"The third."

"GOOD DRAGONS ARE ALWAYS ON TIME."

As Yün-t'ung proceeded mechanically through the recitation, her mind began to wander: *I'm a much better teacher than that old fogy Kuan-ti. Look what a mess he made out of Ao Rue. He never should have been a member of the Council of Five. Why bother with reading? Stupid tablets! He couldn't even behave properly. Always off by himself. Just plain anti-social. Everyone knows it isn't good to be alone. Why Ch'ang-o and I talked of that often!* Thinking of Ch'ang-o reminded her of Nü-kua. *Just goes to show you that even the best can go bad. Off somewhere, doing who knows what, with that outcast Ao Rue. I'll have to talk to Lei-kung about getting her back. She has such good breeding. Shame to waste it. With the right guidance, my*

help, she'd be a fine citizen. Just perfect for that splendid Erh-lang. Yes, I'll have to see to that.

Yün-t'ung's daydream was broken by a waving claw. "Now, Black 2, it isn't polite to interrupt."

"But look, look, Mistress Yün-t'ung; look at the yellow cloud. Why is it moving so fast?"

In spite of herself, Yün-t'ung looked. Coming at them, snaking in and out of the dunes, was indeed something that looked like a very solid cloud, an odd yellow shape. She saw strange black, twitching patterns on its surface and wondered if it was the beginning of another of those awful sand storms, a Buran that left everyone and everything covered with talc. *Something about the charged atmosphere; never did understand that. Who cares. Most important, if the dragonettes get dirty, I'll have to repaint all the numbers after they wash. There's no chance to get them inside the chorten before it hits.* Yün-t'ung sighed under the weight of another unexpected task. She was too surprised to move when the cloud abruptly changed course, swept by, and brushed her wing.

The dragonettes watched it pass in amazement. When they looked back at Yün-t'ung, they were astonished to find her crying uncontrollably. Between great gasping sobs, she cried out: "Not worth it. Useless. Void. Waste." They tried to repeat after her, not understanding, but she'd never asked them for that. Then, with a great shriek, she took to the air. Being dutiful, well-trained, and trusting students, they followed their teacher into the sky. In her despair, Yün-t'ung pulled as many as she could to her. The dragonettes thought this was a new game and gathered around her, reveling in following her erratic flight. *Why it was Follow the Tail! School could be fun!*

One didn't go. Gray 3 stayed on his block sulking and muttering. "Name's Wen Ch'ang." He ignored the great explosion and ducked his head as colored pebbles began to rain down on him. After awhile, he got down and kicked his stone over. He threw a few clawfuls of the funny stones at the chorten and was pleased when some rattled off the walls. The adult dragons working to finish it didn't even look up. *Gonna find some water. Wash this stupid number off. Find some friends.* He happily took to the air, thinking about a game of Find the Tail or Silly Rhyme. "Rum, tum, cum, bum, gum,

jum, plum, flum, lum, dumb-dumb," he hummed to himself. He was the best at Silly Rhyme.



Lei-kung had heard Yün-t'ung's cries. He rushed to the peak of the chorten. He was just in time to see the chain of bursts that took her and the dragonettes into oblivion. *Shark guts, what a waste! Teach me to put someone as stupid as Yün-t'ung in charge of anything. Do I have to do everything? Still, who better to teach my way. That damn yellow blob! Didn't tell it to feed. Weren't Feng-po and Ch'ang-o enough? Dumb thing! No sense of destiny at all! Acts as if the future didn't exist. About time I taught it who's in charge!* His rage drove him down into the chorten and toward the cavern. Halfway, he stopped. *Easy, clever tail, there's something to be made of this. Use this to make the creature work the lights with me. Maybe get that final spell to put that irritation Ao Rue away? Yes! Yes! Use this. After all, they were only dragonettes.*

Chapter 15
1220 words

Panic and fear gave Ao Rue a speed he'd never suspected. As he banked toward the gold mine, Ch'ang-o shot into the sky. Her flight was erratic, broken. She snapped at her own tail. She careened first one way, then another. She cried emptiness. Before he could get to her, she exploded into a brightly-colored cloud. He cringed from the blast. She was gone. All that remained was a cascade of jewels. The cats yowled along the ridge, a choir of agony. A small one skittered away from the falling gems; its wildly flailing legs threw a wake of sand, gouged ruts and furrows. Ao Rue's eyes blazed with useless magic. He reached out for Feng-po. Insanely, his friend was still in the mine. Blue fire crinkled over Ao Rue's wings. He snapped them out to stop his hysterical flight. They chipped and scored the stone as he plunged into the mine. The rock yielded easily to his scales and magic. He madly raced down the winding tunnels following the mind scent.

He finally found Feng-po in a dark grotto of his friend's own making. The hellish scene stopped Ao Rue's rush. Feng-po was mining the gold in a whirlpool of Azghun Demons. Wave after wave spun around him. Ao Rue could barely see him through the whirling hive. Feng-po was whimpering, but not for a moment did he stop digging, cease clawing at the wall. Over and over again, he scraped the gold ore out, pushed it beneath his belly, caught it with his hind legs, and threw it into a waiting pile. His head swung wildly from side to side, spit flew from his slack mouth as the Demons closed on his life. Terror ripped the lids back from his eyes. He stared wildly at the circling Demons. Still he dug and clawed, a terrified puppet. In that instant, Ao Rue had a vision of Feng-po's body packed with vermin, eating him from the inside out, pus-covered grubs spilling from his nostrils, mouth.

NO! Ao Rue screamed fire. Yellow spheres burst like polyps; ichor bubbled across the floor, etched the walls. As one, the Demons streaked for a dark tunnel. Ao Rue threw a sun-struck blue sphere. Their hole sealed; stone melted into itself. They turned; sensed their new enemy. In mindless hunger, they dove for his eyes. He burned them all. Fanned his flame about the cave until the walls shone white. Burned until nothing remained. Still deep in the blood rage, he splashed through their remains to Feng-po, grabbed the black

thread that bound him to Lei-kung, and ripped it to shreds in his claws. Feng-po collapsed in a sobbing heap.

"Easy, old friend, easy." Ao Rue slid Feng-po's wing over his shoulder, lifted him easily, carried him up the tunnel into the sun. Ao Rue's eyes still burned brightly; he sent wave after wave of healing into his friend's scales.

"Nothing . . . Ao Rue . . . nothing; I could do nothing." Feng-po's voice jerked and wracked with sobs. "Ch'ang-o, is she all right? They touched her, lightly, almost lovingly. She ran. Screamed and screamed. I couldn't follow. Couldn't call. Just dig, dig, dig. Scrape, claw, scrape. As if all the world were in that vein. Ch'ang-o. Ch'ang-o." His voice rose in hysteria. "Ch'ang-o! Ch'ang-o!"

Ao Rue held him. Grasp'd his struggles in his arms; curled his talons around the heaving body. Pulled Feng-po to his chest. Rocked him. Poured healing into him. Slowly, his friend yielded to his own deep fatigue and Ao Rue's magic. His struggles eased. Ao Rue still held him.

Finally, Feng-po gently pushed himself away. He looked up into the blue of Ao Rue's eyes and whispered plaintively, "Ch'ang-o?"

"She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"No, Feng-po, dead. The Demons poisoned her. She took her life with her own fires. She's beyond pain now. She's free of Lei-kung's tyranny. We should be so lucky."

"Dead? How can that be? I could have loved her, Ao Rue. I could have! She stayed so close. Always at my side. No matter how horrible, she never abandoned me. I could have loved her. I could have." His voice began to fade to failure.

"Listen to me!" Ao Rue jerked him up. "Go to Mud-Pit Hollow. No one will think to look there. It's got water, fruit. Do you know where it is?" Feng-po shook his head a defeated no. It hung like an overripe fruit from his neck. "All right, all right, it's that way." Ao Rue pointed, not even trusting to tell him a direction. "Bury yourself in the mud. Keep your mind closed. I'll find you when need requires. Avoid Lei-kung and his slime at all costs. Do you understand? Do you understand!"

Feng-po finally acknowledged. "Water, you say. I'm so tired. Maybe I can wash. I've felt so filthy for so long."

"Now you're just dirty, my friend. Go, go, I'll cover your back until you're safely away." Feng-po had little will; little fight left in him. He finally responded to Ao Rue's pleas, gathered what meager strength remained, and took to the air. Ao Rue watched him fly off; his friend looked so tired. His wings trembled against the air. A rush of deep sadness descended on Ao Rue: *I wonder if we'll ever have another party? Any more oysters and bubbly? The time, the mood, for parties is done! Slain by mindless creatures who know neither pleasure nor pain!*

As he turned to the strange glitter that now marked the yellow sand and clay in front of the cave, he felt no triumph in his first victory. Mei-chou had been right; the glitter sand was beautiful. He scooped some of it up. It sickened him. *Touching it. Is this a violation, a desecration?* He let it run reverently from his claw back on to the sand. Its colors caught the fading sun. *Is this all a dragon is? Rose-pink for compassion, pistachio-green for growth, tender peach for love.* Large tears formed and welled down his snout. They smacked and pushed the sand. He let them mingle with the jewels: *glowing lilac for contemplation, ruby red for passion, pearl black for perseverance, warm rust for tenderness. Is there no one who will speak for Ch'ang-o? Porphyry white for purity, orange-tinted carnelian for energy.* He let his tears give the colors luster.

The moment gave him voice: "Ch'ang-o, no one would call you a great dragon. You nurtured Nü-kua with a purpose bordering on obsession. You may rest easy that I will protect her as the sun guards the sky! You loved my friend, Feng-po, with an energy that he probably didn't deserve but that gave him pleasure. Your purity remained in your soul, in your intentions. Of all of us, you may have been the least soiled. We are diminished by your passing. Wherever it is you go, whatever place of wonder only the cats can see, may it be soft and warm and free from the world's pain. Your death is the first; you have escaped the dread that now haunts us all. Go in peace. Travel in safety. Be well. We will miss you."

He left her remains scattered where they were. That felt wrong. But he knew that the vast sea would never hold all the jewels that would soon fall like hail.

Chapter 16
2125 words

Ao Rue was slow getting back to Spring Halt. He had wanted to return to Nü-kua as quickly as possible; she hadn't been pleased with his abrupt departure. However, his first encounter with the Azghun Demons and healing Feng-po had exhausted him more than he'd thought. *Magic is so curious. When it rises, I feel as if I have the strength to split the world. When it passes, I'm no stronger than a kitten. Kuan-ti, you should be here! I have so many questions, so few answers.* The sea called to him: her comforting depths, her effortless existence. *To return, to rest in her lull. The land is not a good place.* He landed at the edge of Spring Halt. Walking was much slower than flying. *I need the time to think. Wouldn't do to have Nü-kua see me weak and confused! Heroes don't get this way.*

"Well, if it isn't the late-night bird." Mei-chou was sitting in a small clearing. It was like she had been waiting, had known where he'd pass.

"Ch'ang-o's dead. Demons nearly got Feng-po too. You were right. There is an ugly beauty in dragon death. It's something I hope I'll never see again."

"Guess again. The Demons struck again shortly after you saved Feng-po. They got Yün-t'ung and a bunch of dragonettes."

"Not dragonettes! What lives did they have? All they ever got to do was play and run wild. Shame about Yün-t'ung; she always cared so much about the young ones."

"That old battle-ax. All she cared about was her own power. Wanted to remake every dragonette into some crystal image of perfection. The problem was that she thought they should be small adults. Took a whole bunch of them with her. The Demons hadn't even touched them. She called them to her."

"Mei-chou, it's not good to speak ill of the dead. Show some respect!"

"Respect? Camel dung! Save me the clichés. Respect is earned, not given. What are you trying to tell me? You think that bad livers turn into good corpses? Do you?"

"I'm not sure what I think. Right now I'm wondering how I'm going to save dragonkind if I've got to be in two places at once. I'm going to be leaving torn, bloody hunks of myself all over the place."

"You've got to get rid of this adolescent melodrama for one thing. Of course, you can't be everywhere. You also can't be all things to all dragons. Leave that to entertainers and politicians. They're useless anyway. Well, a good entertainer's worth something," Mei-chou muttered under her breath. "You need to get organized. Free some more dragons from Lei-kung's control. Raise an army. Teach them to flame the Demons without being touched. You can name yourselves the Shin-tien Yen-wang, after the Yama Kings, the Kings of the Ten Law Courts if you insist on being dramatic. Appropriate name, ancient enough to have mythic value, and you will be restoring proper law to this tortured world."

"How can I do that? You yourself said I was a dreamweaver, at my best when I'm alone. Who's going to listen to me? All Lei-kung has to do is trot out Chih-nil, and I'll be a clown again. They wouldn't listen to me anyway. I have the charisma of a hedgehog."

"That's not completely true. You could have charisma to burn. You've just never tried. Understandable -- it's not one of the great traits. Motivating a lot of superficial minds for ephemeral reasons isn't admirable. It reeks too much of propaganda and brainwashing! Anyway, you don't have to worry about Chih-nil; she's dead."

"Dead? The Demons got her too?" Despite the way she had used him, Ao Rue felt grief. *She was so beautiful!*

"You love far too well, my large friend. Your loyalty, your quickness to be vulnerable, will be your downfall if you're not careful. One day you'll be faithful when you should be wise and prudent. You have no reason to mourn her. She was slain by her greed, by her own selfishness. Lei-kung killed her; you can't blame the Demons for her."

"Lei-kung again!" Ao Rue's eyes began to spin in rage. "I'll tear his heart out and feed it to him while it's beating!"

"Easy; take it easy. There'll be time enough for that. And you mustn't go after him in anger. He's too clever. This is a time for intelligence, not emotion."

Ao Rue cooled. "What do you propose then? Lei-kung's got almost every dragon dancing on the end of a black leash. Yolbas, Heng-chiang, Erh-lang, and that scum Han Chung-li are all over the place doing his bidding. Lu-hsing has got most of the stronger dragons groveling at veins of gold.

You didn't see how helpless Feng-po was. Lei-kung could raise an army against us with a tug of his claw. The odds are too great. I just don't know; I don't know."

"This is a bad time to be negative. You can hardly expect this to be easy." *He's so emotional, so mercuric. But he's all we've got!*

"All right, how about this? Tomorrow I'll go to Mud-Pit and get Feng-po. Then, he and Nü-kua can sit down with you and me and try to figure something out."

"Me and Nü-kua, me and Feng-po?" Mei-chou obviously thought the idea was completely outlandish.

"Of course, what's the matter with you? You say a world hangs in the balance, and you've got a problem talking to my friends? You know Feng-po's name means 'Quick Stepper, Earl of the Wind.' Sure he drinks. Sure he used to chase tails more than ideas, but that's all over. He's a good dragon."

"Ao Rue, those meanings are very, very old. They don't mean much anymore."

The dragon went on as if he hadn't even heard. Indignation had taken over. "And Nü-kua, she'll always be at my side! She'd die for me!"

"You don't understand. You talk to them for me. Cats just can't talk to anyone. They can't hold our attention. And you've got to be careful of Nü-kua. She's barely an adult. She believes in things that aren't good for you, may destroy you. She's like the others."

"Mei-chou! How can you say that. She'll never betray me! She knows me, believes in me! How dare you believe that the most meager dragon isn't better than the greatest cat. How can you be so stupid!" Ao Rue turned abruptly and stalked off to talk to Nü-kua. *She'll understand my pain!*

The First of the First watched him go, *Oh, Ao Rue, greatest of the great, is your soul afraid?*

Ao Rue slowed his rush when he realized he was tearing up his own flowers. Carefully he patted some of them back into the sandy loam. *I'll have to apologize to Mei-chou. She means well; she just doesn't understand the pressure I'm under. Doesn't understand anything about dragons, especially Nü-kua.* With his rambunctiousness slowed and his mind closed upon itself, Nü-kua didn't notice his arrival. His first look drained all anger, all pain, from him. She was curled near the edge of the water. The

moonlight burnished her rose-gold scales. The landscape, the flowers, the moist air were blended around her. *Have I ever seen such beauty? She is beauty incarnate!* Gathered at her side were the wild sheep, the argali, that had avoided him the day before. A ewe and lamb slept against her haunch. Somewhere she'd found some dried grain and had it cupped in her claw. Crowd after crowd of gerbils and hamsters harvested the plenty and ran back to their burrows with the unexpected treasure. Red-leg partridges pecked at the bounty that spilled from their packed cheeks. Nearby, a family of hedgehogs were eating some grubs from a rotten log. All nature seemed to embrace her benign presence. Ao Rue opened his mind and called in a mental whisper, "My Bright Eyes."

Her head turned slowly toward him. She radiated caring. To Ao Rue, it seemed all the love in the world glowed in her face. "Come, my Thoth; see my babies. So helpless. I could lie here forever caring for them."

"I can't," he spoke as softly as he could, but already the animals were uneasy. "They're afraid of me. I'll wait 'til they go."

"I don't think I can wait for that." She slowly rose to her feet. The ewe and lamb bleated at the disturbance. She tossed the grain into the undergrowth; scurrying feet chased it. Gently, she tried to nudge the argali away, tried to shoo the partridges. "Oh, Ao Rue, they won't go. I can't hurt them. What should I do?"

"It's all right, my love. I'll take care of it." He rose to his full height and quietly cleared his throat. The animals just looked at him. He was doubly surprised since the light breeze was carrying his scent to them. He took one step into the clearing. Still no effect. *My Bright Eyes, she has overcome even their fear of me.* Since he didn't want to hurt them either, he projected a mental need, a welcome, to the other side of the water. Reluctantly, they began to leave. The ewe still needed to nudge her lamb with her nose. It bleated again as it moved away. Nü-kua's head tilted to the side in response and concern.

She turned as he came to her side, "Thoth, you've made me a paradise!"

"It is ever my hope and intention to do so always."

"You look so tired." She raised her claw to caress his snout.

He reached out and drew her within his wings. "I have something very painful to tell you."

"You're not hurt are you? No one said anything ugly to you?"

"I'm fine. It's Ch'ang-o. She's dead. The Demons took her."

Nü-kua leaned back within his wings until she could look at him. Her eyes began to fill with tears. "Was there much pain? I wouldn't have wanted her to suffer."

Ao Rue couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth, "No, it was quick."

"Well, I guess she had a full life. Now, at least, she won't be worrying about me all the time. The Demons are that terrible then?"

"Yes, that and more. Mei-chou told me they killed Yün-t'ung and some dragonettes today. The first among many."

"Yolbas and Erh-lang will stop them. Lei-kung can't allow dragons to die." She was so confident; Ch'ang-o seemed gone from her mind.

"It's not that simple. Somehow, Lei-kung doesn't care, and what he feels they all follow."

"I can't believe that!"

"Nü-kua, there's a web of evil that will strangle all life if it's not stopped. You must understand that. You must stay here. I don't know what I'll do if anything happens to you."

"Thoth, Thoth, you're overwrought. If no other dragon can stop these Demons, you will."

"You just don't understand. I can't be everywhere. Right now it's just us, Feng-po, and Mei-chou. By the gods, there are enough torn, bleeding pieces of me scattered all over. I don't know if I can do it; don't know if I want to do it."

"Oh, my poor baby." Nü-kua curled out of his wings, opened hers, and drew his head to her breast. "I will help you. You can do anything. You can't leave our friends in need. You mustn't abandon them." As she spoke, he knew that what choice he had was now gone. It was as if fate was real. He sighed his resignation as she continued. "And, my Thoth, there must be a future. We have something of the greatest importance to do." As he raised her head to look at her, he saw that same coy look, "Ao Rue, I want an egg, your egg, our egg. I want that more than anything!"

Ao Rue was absolutely disgusted with himself as he felt a weight descend on him not unlike Lei-kung's thread. "Oh, my Bright Eyes, I don't know. This just isn't the right time." Darkness moved briefly across her face.

He tried to justify himself, "Today, today, I've just had too much death to think of life. You must be patient. I don't know if this will be a world I would wish for any living thing. I just don't know. Let's talk more about it tomorrow after I make sure Feng-po's all right."

"You're right. We'll talk more later." He was grateful for her quick understanding. He didn't understand the raw, all-powerful urge that ran in her. "Come, my Thoth, it's time for us to sleep. We'll talk more tomorrow. I've prepared a bed of fragrant herbs. Let's forget the world; forget your Demons. Think only of me! Come, curl your tail in mine!"

Chapter 17
1470 words

As Lei-kung descended through the chorten to punish the Demon, Han Chung-li's grunts drew him into one of the many galleries. Han Chung-li's mottled body was twined about the still form of a petite, blue dragon. His breath came in gasps; his tail spasmed in sexual ecstasy around her tiny frame. General Heng-chiang watched and wheezed; his saliva ran frantically and formed a growing, opaque pool beneath his snout.

Lei-kung screamed impatiently, "She's dead, you fools! One after another! Won't you learn! Get rid of it!" He spun away, his great urgency spurning their perversions. He muttered to himself, "Must I keep everyone under my claw. Can't get anything done. Weak fools! Great help, great leaders: a necrophiliac and a voyeur!"

Circumstances refused to let Lei-kung move too quickly this evening. Yolbas caught him just as he was about to descend into the cavern, "Lei-kung, Lei-kung, what happened to Yün-t'ung and those dragonettes? You could see the blast for miles. They're gone. The sand's covered with weird glitter. The dragons are uneasy. There'd be panic if it wasn't for your control. You must do something."

"It's nothing; forget about it. You'll be seeing a lot more. Besides it was only one old maid and a bunch of useless rowdies. I've got important things to do. Go away!"

Despite Lei-kung's glare, Yolbas went on, "But the same thing happened to Ch'ang-o. We must do something."

"We'll do nothing! Thankfully, Ch'ang-o and Feng-po are out of our way. Now, let me be!"

"Not Feng-po. Whatever it was, it only got her. He was seen flying off. Ao Rue was there too."

"Feng-po still alive? Damn that Ao Rue. I'm going to take care of him right now! Get those two perverts, find Feng-po, and kill him! Take that idiot Erh-lang with you too if you can find him. About time he had a better use than those absurd air shows! Now get out of here!"

Yolbas hesitated, "But murder a fellow dragon? How?"

Lei-kung tightened the black threads in his claw; Yolbas stiffened as if a needle had been shoved through him. Han Chung-li howled in the distance.

Lei-kung's frustration broke: "YOU HEARD ME. DO IT! I DON'T CARE HOW!" Yolbas reeled away from his power. Lei-kung stormed down into the cavern.

"Where are you, you worthless sack of pus!" Lei-kung's eyes tried to pierce the ever-clotting darkness. His claws fashioned a braided whip from the threads. His magic embedded gleaming spikes in it.

The Demon bubbled out of a crevasse. "Hungry! Feed!" Lei-kung's arm came forward and lashed its oily yellow mass. The spikes caught. He dragged, ripped them back. Rents appeared and simply smoothed over. He might as well have been whipping pond scum. "Hungry! Feed!"

"Mindless beast! Malignant slime!" Lei-kung yelled as he dropped the whip in futility. The creature was completely unaffected. "How can you possibly be hungry? You just gulped down the life forces of Ch'ang-o, Yün-t'ung, and thirty dragonettes."

"Hungry! Feed!"

"You'll feed when and on whom I tell you! You failed. Feng-po's still alive."

"TERROR! BLUE TERROR!" Lei-kung recoiled from the thing's fear. "YOU KILL"

"Blue terror? A silver dragon? Blue eyes? That was Ao Rue."

"SPINNING BLUE, TERROR, BLUE FIRE, DEATH!"

"Yes, that's him. Do you want to help me destroy him for you? If you do, you'll have to stop yelling."

"Kill? Beg kill! Kill!"

Lei-kung smiled as the Demon responded to his control. "You'd like that, Wouldn't you? Rend him limb from limb? Spill his guts on the sand in front of you?" Lei-kung was relishing this.

"Beg kill! Kill!"

"Beg all you want. I won't kill him right away. I'll make an example of him that will guarantee the obedience of generations! Education wasn't the answer. It takes forever anyway. Humiliate him instead. Degrade him in front of everyone. It will be a good object lesson. Devastate him. I can do even better than Chih-nil. Yes! Yes! Brilliant. Oh, Lei-kung, sometimes we astonish even ourself with our cleverness. But you, you bag of filth, I need

your help to bind more power from the Northern Lights. I need the ultimate spells! I want it all!"

"Like Lights. Yes. Help kill blue terror!"

"We'll kill him only when I say so! You understand?" Lei-kung cringed from the blast of hate, but reveled in the begrudging yes that oozed from the creature. "All right, then, we understand each other. Now get to the top of the chorten and help me with the Lights!"

Lei-kung made his way up through the empty galleries. This time no one was foolish enough to slow his rage as he moved through the murky galleries. The Demon moved by some route known only to it. It was waiting for him at the top.

"All right, get the power down here. You know I can't do it by myself."

The Demon stretched; it became a giant sail, ragged at the edges. The swirling black patterns within it knotted and squirmed. They became more obvious as it thinned. It slowly rotated to the north to face the Lights and cupped itself to catch a great drought of poison. When it was at full expansion, it called. It was the only noise the creature had ever made. Lei-kung had heard it before, during the terraforming and when he had first discovered it, but it never failed to grate in the marrow of his bones. Each time, it stung deeper, each time more painfully. It was a shrill, thin cry of some heinously-alive stillbirth for its dead mother. It was the mindless babblings of a monstrosity that clawed its way free from her womb. The Demon was death in life!

If Lei-kung had thought to look over his shoulder, he would have seen thousands of smaller Demons mirroring the larger. They stained the night sky, blotted out the stars. Yet, they were no danger to Lei-kung. They were indifferent to his empty husk. As their cry increased in intensity, the Northern Lights began to lose their horizontal symmetry. They wavered and bellied toward the calling Demons.

Lei-kung waited in anticipation for the onrush of the dark magic. The Lights bulged like a pregnant dragon's belly. He spread his wings wide to receive the egg of death. Suddenly, the stress broke. The universe burst into his eyes. The blackness of the force made the night seem blindingly bright. He reeled and fell. It thundered over him. He felt his insides mutate. He

cried in agony as his very cells fed upon each other. The Demon humped over him and absorbed the few, small gems that popped free of his altering body. Quickly, it snapped back as Lei-kung regained his senses. Some primal cunning made it pretend to cower. Lei-kung cried out in exultation, "Ahhhh, so good! So strong!" From where he had fallen, a demented, twisted shape uncoiled itself. A new bane stood at the point of the chorten. In absolute contempt, Lei-kung turned to face the Demon. "You've done well. Go feed. But carefully. Don't let anyone see you and live. Our mystery is our hidden strength."

He wanted no one near while he explored his new self. *Never have I felt so whole, so powerful!* He looked down. The remains of his scales were a fine, inky powder at his feet. Already the harsh Breath of Fury had begun to scatter it. He'd turned almost completely black. It was as if the bulging globules of his eyes had burst and drenched him. He ran his claws over his oily chest, down toward his sagging belly. He traced the protruding angles of his bones. *No scales! I'm a mollusk,* he giggled in spite of himself. *Like the inside of a clam.* His claws crawled further. His touch slid without interruption. *No penis! No gonads! I am beyond the flesh!* His wings had been drained to nubs. Their pinions were bone-yellow, as brittle and as bleached of life as his talons. He tried his fire; not even a puff escaped his nostrils. *I have evolved beyond dragonkind! Mine is the superior form! Mine is the superior intellect!*

He raised his claws. A small, undulating, yellow ulcer weighed in each palm. Elaborate black webs crawled inside them. They sloshed and writhed in anticipation. The globes were connected to his wrists by pulsating veins. Power surged from them. *THE ULTIMATE SPELLS!* He gazed lovingly upon them, *Oh, my beauties! Give them their couplings, their flights, their fires. I have you! You are all I live for; all I'll ever need! Come, Ao Rue, come. I'll take your genitals in one claw, your brain in the other. If only you could watch me mash them together. Watch me eat them. Nectar of the gods! What a lovely show it will be for the succulent Nü-kua!*

Chapter 18
1725 words

Ao Rue loafed along on the warm currents that rose from the sand. He flew toward the peaks of the Barkul Range. Snow was now beginning to form high up. Once these mountains had been no more than islands, craggy resting points punching out of the sea. The terraforming had changed so much. If he looked carefully, he could still see the faint-green dusting of dead algae that marked the slopes and enormous jagged stone slabs. They looked as if they had been thrown upward by some great magic. They hadn't; the ocean had simply dropped away, took her warmth, and left them to the desert air. The great streaks of salt exposed their origins. Dawn might have thrown great colors on them. Now they were simply dull. *I wonder how many freezing nights and blazing days will crack enough stone into soil for anything to grow?*

He felt comfortable having the mountains between himself and Lei-kung's chorten. So far, not even Erh-lang had been able to top the summit of the Bogdo-ola, the Barkul Range's highest peak. *I wonder if I could? Not this morning! Not after a night with Nü-kua! Air's too thin at the summit to fly anyway.* They had laughed to discover that her bed of herbs had made them both a cacophony of scents. Love turned even smells into music. The licorice had dominated with subtle hints of saffron and ginger. It made a good excuse for a bath and a gold dusting. Which, of course, had led to more love play. *I could spend my life being this kind of weary!* She hadn't even mentioned the egg in the morning and had readily shared his offering of currants and figs. He hadn't been sure if she'd liked them, but their future held more than enough time to taste all the varieties of the world. *My Bright Eyes, I have so much to show you. So many dreams to create for us both. The egg can wait! If an egg at all. This is our time!* He was firm in his uncertainty. *Now all I have to do is figure out how to tell her. It's so hard to say no to her.*

He glanced again at the heights. For now, Ao Rue wasn't too interested in climbing the clouds that tipped and ringed the summits. *There are enough passes to cut through before and beyond Lei-kung's salted plain. I wonder if he is actually clever enough to have put his chorten where there's*

no direct route between it and Spring Halt? I must say I'm grateful not to have to look at his brine pools and lines of grunting dragons!

As he began to bank through the Ravine of Baboons toward Mud-Pit Hollow, he was becoming increasingly anxious to see Feng-po. Now that he was closer, he saw a small group of dragonettes playing Find the Tail amid the crevasses and outcroppings. He had to laugh. Not only were those strange screeching, indignant baboons giving away every hiding place, but the little ones were so excited that small puffs of smoke rose from each haven. That, of course, drew the inevitable cats to bask in it. So where the cats were and the baboons weren't, there were dragonettes. Ao Rue dropped a little lower. He could now see the little gray who was IT. Hiding places fanned out above him. His snout was buried beneath his wing; he was counting so hard that his tail thumped the cadence. *Leave it to the young to find games in the midst of disaster. At least, for the time being, they're safe from Lei-kung on this side of the Range.*

Knowing that Feng-po would have reached his mind if he wasn't safe, Ao Rue lingered on the thermals, spinning about and waiting for the little gray to finish his count and the game to begin in earnest. Suddenly, the cats scattered; even the baboons disappeared into silence. Ao Rue was puzzled. He scanned the mountain for the cause. *THERE! THERE! DEMONS! THIRTY OR MORE. COMING UP THE MOUNTAIN. AFTER THE DRAGONETTES!* Ao Rue's reaction was instantaneous, thoughtless. His eyes lit; his wings snapped back; he streaked for the space between the dragonettes and the speeding Demons. Blue fire streamed from his wings as he closed the distance. The little gray counted on, oblivious to his certain doom.

Gravity not enough! Too slow! Won't make it! Just he thought he wouldn't be in time, Ao Rue felt the magic rise higher in him. Now he pushed the air. It screamed through his scales, turning their edges red with heat. His claws gouged the stone with the force of his landing. His wings snapped out to block the Demons from their unsuspecting prey. Billows of blue force rolled from his wings. Like ghostly waves, they tumbled noiselessly down the slope. The Demons flying above the rocks were immediately destroyed in sparking moments of silver lightning. They made no cries. Ao Rue fought in the silence of the whistling, mountain winds.

Still among the rocks. Closer. He summoned the silver-blue sword and brought his fire up. He had no time to warn the little gray, who seemed to be counting all the stars in the heavens. Demons began to pop from among the stones, dancing in chaotic frenzy. Now he had no time to think of anything. He spun madly, tumbled, stood on wing tip as he threw fire and cut demons in a blur of magic and motion. Slowly, despite all he could do, their swooping numbers backed him closer and closer to the cliff face and the dragonette. His mind screamed out, *YOU CANNOT PASS!* Full arousal came. His words rushed from his mind unsummoned: *I AM BEYOND THE POWERS OF EARTH, WIND, AIR, FIRE! I AM PRIMAL! I STAND BETWEEN DEATH AND LIFE! YOU CANNOT PASS!* The Demons hesitated before his terrible majesty. It was all Ao Rue needed. With a rush, he dismissed the sword and gathered them all into his wings. Pulled them to his chest. He felt their craving, their hunger. The membranes of his wings bulged as they frantically sought escape. His magic spoke again: *YOU CANNOT PASS!* His wings slammed closed on empty air.

Stunned by his own actions, he slowly opened his wings. He looked down, expecting to see ravaged scales, plundered flesh. He cried his relief to his heart, *There's nothing. I'm whole, whole in body and soul!*

As he turned to see if the little gray was safe, he almost burst out laughing. He was still counting away. Ao Rue moved closer. Yet one more Demon shot from a fault in the rock almost at the little gray's feet. Ao Rue slapped the dragonette out of the way with his tail and flamed the Demon gone. For good measure, he scoured the fault with fire.

"Hey, whata ye doin'. Watch it, ye oaf! Hit me with yere tail, ye did!"

Ao Rue turned to find a very angry dragonette picking himself up from the ground. Ao Rue was taken aback; the dragonette wasn't.

"Big dragons always bossin', smackin'. Why bother with ye? Gotten too dumb to fly. Diggin' around in the ground."

"I did save you." Ao Rue had recovered his poise.

"From what? Ain't nuttin' here. Get outta here."

"There were Demons all over the place!"

"Yea, where are they now?"

Ao Rue knew this conversation wasn't going anywhere. Dragonettes were always difficult. *Can't imagine why Nii-kua wants one.* He smiled

laconically as he realized that he was a hero with no witnesses again, which was no hero at all. He decided to try another approach. "What's your name, little fellow?"

"Not little, almost full grown. Name's Wen Ch'ang! Mine, it is, it is! No one gonna call me Gray 3!"

"That is an auspicious name." Any anger that might have been gathering in Ao Rue vanished. He realized this might be the only survivor of Yün-t'ung's attempt at teaching.

"What's 'oorspeccess'? Ye bein' mean again?"

"No, it was a compliment. You're quite a dragonette."

"I'm the champeen silly rhymer, I am, I am!"

"With that name, you should be." This one was audacious even for a dragonette. "You do know who I am, don't you?"

"Yea, yere the weird one Yün-t'ung was warnin' us about. Ao Rue, funny blue eyes, know ye anywhere. Ye really a sorcerer?"

Ao Rue had a strange thought. "Yes, I am, Wen Ch'ang, Champion Silly Rhymer. I am the last great sorcerer and I'd like you to think about something. Do the other dragonettes listen to you?"

"Course, champeen, ain't I!"

I'll have to take a chance that he's not all bravado. That the sorcery has some weight. "Wen Ch'ang, I want you to talk to your friends about going back to the sea. What's left of it anyway. You remember the spell?"

"Sure, any dummy can do that."

Ao Rue smiled as he remembered Erh-lang. "Well, would you think about it?"

"Why should I do anythin' ye say!"

"Easy now. It was just a suggestion." *So much for sorcery gaining any respect.* "You don't have to do anything you don't want. But you did like the sea better than the land?"

"Right about that, ye are. Don't hafta do nuttin'!"

"But don't your friends listen to you?"

"Sure. OK, think about it I will. Sea was better. Now get outta here. Got a game to play!"

"Certainly. I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Ye bet ye are! But ye ain't too bad. Not like that witch Yün-t'ung or that scarecrow Lei-kung."

"Why, thank you, Wen Ch'ang; you're not too bad either. I'll see you around."

As Ao Rue took to the air, he heard the little gray's parting call, "If yere lucky."

Ao Rue looked back. Wen Ch'ang was happily hunting among the rocks for his friends. *Well, it was a good try. One valuable piece of information out of all this: missing the terraforming has made me immune to the Demons. Their touch had no effect. Probably Nü-kua too! Good. She's safe, but no one else. Another mixed blessing. Only an empty world is a simple one. Need to talk to Feng-po about all this.*

Ao Rue increased his speed toward Mud-Pit Hollow. He wondered if Wen Ch'ang would grow up into anything worthwhile . . . if the Demons let him grow up at all.

Chapter 19
3020 words

Yolbas led the struggling phalanx of himself, General Heng-chiang, and Han Chung-li back from Mud-Pit Hollow. Despite his helplessness to Lei-kung's will, he still felt sick, disgusted. *A real dragon has died today.* As he and Han Chung-li had held Feng-po and the General had brought that brutal golden claw down on Feng-po's twitching body, that had been all Yolbas had been able to think: *This is a real dragon. A real dragon.* The thought echoed in him; he couldn't dismiss it. There had been blood everywhere. Feng-po had fought valiantly, raging into the air. They had fought as cowards. They were carrion crows -- sniping, ripping, clinging, taking him from behind. Dancing away, thrusting in. Always from the back. They had thrown him to the ground. *Blood everywhere; who'd have thought there was so much blood in him.* All three bore wounds that would scar deeply. Han Chung-li flew erratically on a ravaged wing. General Heng-chiang didn't look like he was going to make it. The left side of his chest was caved in. His dripping phlegm was now pink. He kept falling behind. Yolbas clutched one claw to himself. He was sure it was broken. Like black-draped mourners, the vultures and eagles kept pace with them, waiting for one to fall. None of the dragons had the energy even to scare them away. The whole group looked like some aerial funeral procession. Yolbas couldn't shake his morbid thoughts: *Blood everywhere; blood and mud!* When the deed was done, he'd thrown himself in the murky water of the oasis. Scoured himself with clawful after clawful of sand. Even now, as he flew, he rasped his one good claw raw with his tongue trying to erase the blood he saw on it. Han Chung-li kept telling him there wasn't anything there, but he knew better. He was forever stained. *A real dragon! We are nothing but shadows. Crude imitations gyrating on Lei-kung's black threads. Puppets! Why doesn't it bother Han Chung-li and Heng-chiang? They know. We all know. That is the pain: to know and be helpless! Will my claws, my talons, ever be clean? A real dragon!* Yolbas wished himself dead. *If a Demon came, I would embrace it in joy!* Yet as much as any dragon wished death, cried out against dishonor, cried shame, Lei-kung wouldn't grant release to even the most tormented. He left that to his Demons. *Erh-lang was fortunate I couldn't find him. Sometimes I think Lei-kung keeps us alive, forces us to*

breed, only for Demon food. Even now, he drives us home to lure Ao Rue to him. As Lei-kung's dark magic jerked their wings in increasing beats, Yolbas wished for the purity of Ao Rue's flame. A real dragon has died! Will I ever be clean?



Ao Rue flew closer to Mud-Pit, wondering if Wen Ch'ang was just another worthless snot or something more. *I certainly didn't intimidate him. Is there anything behind that little mouth?* In the distance, he thought he glimpsed three dragons rise from the oasis. *That's wrong!* Again his wings took on supernatural speed.

As he descended into Mud-Pit Oasis, it became clear that something was, indeed, very wrong. It was devoid of any life, no birds, no animals, but he did see the vultures and kites beginning to gather. He suddenly realized why. The powerful scent of blood rose like steam. *Feng-po? Feng-po?* Fear sent Ao Rue's thoughts radiating everywhere.

Here. So faint as to be a hare whispering in the dunes.

"Where? Where?" Ao Rue now called aloud as he frantically searched the wreckage. Finally he found the motionless and broken Feng-po tangled in a mass of mud, uprooted undergrowth, and his own blood. Tenderly, gingerly, he moved enough aside from the broken body to cradle his friend's head. He tried to brush the mud and sand from the gaping wounds. He reached out with his mind. A small spark of life remained. Softly Ao Rue fanned it with his magic.

Feng-po's eyelids fluttered, "Rue, I don't think I look too good. But you ought to see the other guy."

"Oh, Feng, how could I not have known? Why didn't you call?"

"Figured I could handle them. Were only three. But the General got me with that stupid golden claw from behind. Couldn't turn fast enough. Han Chung-li hanging from my hind claw. Kept my mind closed. Didn't want to get you involved in this mess. By the gods, that Yolbas is strong." He coughed, blood rushed from his snout. Ao Rue pushed a bit more magic into him. "Anyway, Rue, how's it been going. Nü-kua OK?"

The sorcerer was mute before his friend's courageous attempt at flippancy. He felt he should say something very important, very significant.

"She's fine. While you were being murdered, we were tumbling around on a bed of herbs." Shame rose in Ao Rue.

"Twisting a little tail, huh." The blood had slowed to a trickle. "Nothing better than that! Listen, old buddy, got an ugly confession to make. Don't mind me if I get too serious. Got a lotta pain here. Don't know whether I'll make it."

"I could restore you with the Spell of Ti-tsang Wang-P'u-sa, the Saver of Souls."

"What!" A manic energy gave Feng-po strength. "Spend your power forever? You have a better destiny, sorcerer. It would leave me a ripped manikin, a torn carcass, an animated corpse! No. Don't. I wouldn't be pretty anymore. What female would bother with me? Save it; save it for a better moment and a better body."

"Always the females, my friend," Ao Rue murmured as he looked down into Feng-po's mangled face. The exertion had almost been too much. Feng-po's blood streamed down Ao Rue's chest and mingled with his tears.

"Stop talking. Gotta tell you this. Been eating at me. When Lei-kung had my will, when I groveled in the mines, I hated you for your freedom. Wanted you suffering with me. Sorry. So sorry."

"That's nothing. Don't worry."

"But I'm free now. You did that. Could you do one more thing?"

"Anything."

"Take me into the air. I want to die like a dragon. Take me to the wind and clouds. See if Ch'ang-o's waiting for me."

"Are you strong enough?"

"What difference does it make?"

"As you wish, my friend." Ao Rue's eyes began to spin as he gathered the enormous strength necessary to carry Feng-po. Gently, carefully, he held his battered friend behind his wings. He poured as much freedom from pain into Feng-po as he could as they climbed into the air. Despite his care, a moan of pain escaped Feng-po's clenched fangs. Ao Rue's wings spread wide, cupped and beat the wind. Slowing, then with increasing speed, he lifted Feng-po about the tree tops, up toward the sun.

"This is high enough, my silver friend; you can let go."

"Are you sure?" Ao Rue wanted to hold on to Feng-po as long as he could.

"Nothing is forever. Let me go." Feng-po opened his ravaged wings as he began to fall. Wind torn at the holes. For a moment, he was able to glide, even make a banked turn despite his broken tail, "Am I not the Earl of the Wind? Am I not beautiful?" Ao Rue's heart rose.

"Beautiful and demented as always!" Ao Rue hid his sobs as he answered.

"Suck a vine for me; crunch an oyster." Feng-po exploded into a rainbow of richness. Ao Rue kept his eyes wide, let the dazzling brightness imprint itself on his brain, let the heat sting his body.

He hung in the air for awhile, then circled down to the oasis. Nothing was in his stunned mind but purpose. He landed. He gathered a clawful of the ample mix of Feng-po's blood and mud. He painted the Rune of the True Death on his chest. He wanted no chance that Lei-kung would ever reappear as anything. Ao Rue no longer was the caring sorcerer; he was the icy assassin, consumed by rage and grief. With a scream of fang and claw, from a time too ancient to remember, he leapt into the air. His wings trailed lightening-blue clouds. He beat in a realm beyond any air that had ever brushed the sand or sea and closed quickly on the fleeing dragons. His wrath took him completely. A small concentration broke, and far away, the black eagles dropped on Spring Halt to feed.

Hovering over the struggling Heng-chiang, a small part of Ao Rue's mind told him he should be thinking, told him he should be feeling something other than the blood rage. He ignored it and dove. The General rolled over in the air. His vision was filled with a screaming silver devil. He raised his golden arm against Ao Rue's rush. It was simply brushed aside. With an economy and speed that astonished even as great a veteran as Heng-chiang, Ao Rue flipped him over and sunk his fangs into the back of his neck. With all four claws, he grabbed the General at shoulders and haunches. With a quick, clinical snap, he ripped him into six parts. Ao Rue let the body fall straight down. He threw the head toward the sun and scattered the legs and arms to the compass points. Heng-chiang's golden arm pinwheeled into oblivion. The scavengers cried joy as they chased the dismembered General.

Ao Rue felt nothing. He let Heng-chiang's blood stream along his snout, back over his body.

As Lei-kung's chorten came into view, Ao Rue saw Yolbas and Han Chung-li scuttle in. The chorten rose like a immense, decapitated mushroom on the vast dead plain. Strings of dragons radiated out from it to the mines. The chorten's four curved sides absorbed the sun's reflection from the salt flats and gave back nothing but dullness. The dome that bulged from the center of the flat roof stole the sun's rays. Amid the screaming heat of the desert, it was uncaring cold. Lei-kung was perched like a shrouded vulture on top of the hemisphere, waiting. His neck kinked forward, his head down between his sharply pointed wing stubs, he looked for all the world completely calm and unaware. When he saw Ao Rue approaching, he jumped to the walkway at the base of the dome and laced his claws across his belly.

Ao Rue came straight in. Just as it appeared he would crash into the chorten, he backed wind and bathed the entire dome and Lei-kung in silver-blue fire. It streamed from his snout and curled around the chorten as if it had no end. The air crackled and shattered with its intensity. When he stopped, he was astonished to see both the chorten and Lei-kung unmarked.

Completely unfazed, Lei-kung looked up and seemingly discovered the berserker for the first time. "Ao Rue, you seem upset. How can I be of service?"

Ao Rue advanced along the walkway, his claws opening and closing spasmodically. Lei-kung made no attempt to escape.

"Speechless, are we? Now that's not good. We are reasoning creatures. It is not wise to give way to rage. It paralyzes the mind. Certainly Kuan-ti told you that."

Ao Rue reached out with his claws to shred Lei-kung's head.

Lei-kung raised his voice for the first time, "You stupid blue-eyed freak." With a slow, underhand motion, like throwing a fish to a seal, he tossed the sphere hanging from his wrist into Ao Rue's face. It snapped free from its vein and exploded. Ao Rue was instantly enveloped in a sticky net of black threads. With a malignant intelligence, it quickly oozed over his entire body. It cinched his wings, bound his claws, sealed his snout. He

could barely move, hardly breath. Wildly, he struggled. His great strength yielded only twitches.

"Oh, please, Ao Rue, don't struggle. You'll hurt yourself. We wouldn't want you falling off. Now you know the full power of Lei-kung and the Northern Lights! There is strength in this spell to still all the powers in the firmament. You will only exhaust yourself."

Ao Rue's eyes began to spin wildly as he called upon his magic. The web dulled them to pathetic, dying stars.

"No, your magic won't help either. You're mine. This spell has another delightful property. It's elastic and adhesive." Lei-kung reached out with one talon and caught the web at the tip of Ao Rue's right wing. He began to walk around the dome, towing the wing behind him. When Ao Rue thought he was going to pull it out of its socket, Lei-kung reached up and slapped it against the side of the dome. It stuck. Lei-kung sauntered back. "Now the other wing."

Ao Rue gave up his struggle and let the Great Opening Spells of Shen-t'u and Yüliü, the Guardians of the Doors to Death, rise. Nothing happened. The web tightened.

"Now your front claws. Just a bit below the wings. We wouldn't want you to be too uncomfortable."

Out of the corner of his web-hooded eyes, Ao Rue could just make out Han Chung-li joining them, one wing dragging on the stone. Ao Rue's muscles cried out as Lei-kung stretched him across the dome.

"Now the hind legs. I'll leave your head free. It's important that you can see the scenery and not miss your audience. Look, my strings of jewels all coming to admire you." From the mines, from inside the chorten, from everywhere, dragons were coming. The lines seemed endless. They all gazed up at Ao Rue spread-eagled on the dome.

Lei-kung hopped back up on top of the dome. As he raised his fore claws and stunted wings to acknowledge his servants, he continued to rave at the gagged Ao Rue. "Did you really think I would let you destroy my Great Society. Take the glory of the terraforming from me. You've been nothing but an irritant. How dare you think you're better than any of us! Did you think I'd forget Chang-Lao, my only friend, the only one who understood me, who loved me. He was my only joy. Do you remember him, Ao Rue? You

blinked him out of existence like a moth. Did you think I'd forget. That day I vowed I would be greater than you, greater than Kuan-ti, greater than the ancients. I am the ultimate dragon! I am the next evolutionary step. Before me, all creation pales. Now you'll serve me well. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? Can you imagine? First, I'm going to render you less than the stupidest dragonette. I'm going to caulk your nostrils and still your fire. Blinders will shade those ugly eyes. Clay will close your ears. Your genitals, ah, your lovely genitals; I'll tie them off! Let you watch the blood leave them; watch them atrophy; see them drop off. Once your senses are less than ours, then, I'll remind you of your sense of pain. Each day, I'm going to rip parts of you out and throw them at the claws of the dragons below. The black eagles and vultures will come and feed. While they do, my Demons will savor your beloved dragons. Of course, I'll save the tastier parts for myself. Perhaps, I'll share them with the tender Nü-kua. Yes, tender. In fact, when I'm done with you, I may start on her. That is if I don't give her to Han Chung-li. He does have his special ways with the females. Each day a new piece of you for eternity, for posterity. My power will grow as you dwindle. If only I had a spell to regenerate you. Overnight, you'd grow back. We could begin anew; each day would be the first of your life. What a wonderful idea; I'll have to look into that. If I can't, maybe I'll turn you into a permanent exhibit, seal you in amber, make you an enduring tribute to my power. Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to tell my minions what they think."

With a glance over to Han Chung-li, who was ready to lead the litany, Lei-kung began: "This is Ao Rue, who once was fierce. Once he thought himself great; once he thought himself better than us."

At Han Chung-li's signal, the crowd chanted in dull-bass response, "One of Us, One of Us."

"But he is here now in our wise hands. We hope to teach him to think better, to fly no higher than anyone else."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"In our tender care, in time, he will forget his magic, forget his quest for useless knowledge. We will cure him."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"Soon enough, he will realize the importance of the common good, the great values of our cooperation, our unity of purpose."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"My dear, dear friends, once again I serve you in bringing this deviant, this criminal, into our Great Society. Soon, like us all, he will bow to dragon destiny, to our final fulfillment."

"One of Us, One of Us."

"Now go, my friends, to your valued labor. Remember that all our sacrifices, all our trials, are to provide the greatest good for the greatest number."

"One of Us, One of Us." The chant continued as the dragons mechanically returned to their unceasing tasks. As Lei-kung descended to the walkway, Han Chung-li crept over and fearfully poked at Ao Rue. He immediately jumped back.

"Don't worry, Han Chung-li," Lei-kung reassured him as he leaned against Ao Rue's bound body. "He's ours for as long as we want. Completely helpless. But you stay away from him; this is my special pleasure. Go busy yourself with another female. You needn't worry either, Ao Rue. We're not going to begin our little project today. For now, you'll just be on display. It will be valuable for the dragonettes to see you helpless. Help them formulate their future goals and behavior. Tomorrow morning will be soon enough to start our modifications. Later, we'll get to the dissection. Or is that vivisection?" Lei-kung laughed aloud.

Chapter 20

1485 words

"But you've got to go; he needs you." Mei-chou was beginning to despair that she'd ever get through to Nü-kua.

"Why should I listen to you. Why should I believe you. You never even talked to me before. Why do you cats hang around so much anyway if we're not even good enough to talk to?" Again, Nü-kua began to stalk away. Mei-chou kept after her, ran at her side.

"If you don't go, Lei-kung will flay him alive. You're the only one who can save him. Without you, he's powerless. You know that!"

"I know nothing of the sort! Why should I take your word for anything. How do I know you cats tell the truth. I'm sure Ao Rue's fine. He'd call me if he wasn't. Besides, no one can hurt him. He's the greatest sorcerer who ever lived!" A tone of reverence and awe crept into her voice.

"Nü-kua, Nü-kua, he'd never endanger you if he was in trouble. He loves you, and when a sorcerer loves, it's sealed forever in eternity. You know how his magic works. He can't do anything significant for himself. You've got to go to him! That foul Lei-kung has called the entire might of the Northern Lights down on him."

"I'm not so sure Lei-kung's so foul. Erh-lang says he's a great leader. Continually sacrificing himself for the greater good."

"Oh, save me! You don't listen to that oaf Erh-lang, do you? If Ao Rue's the greatest sorcerer, that lummo is the greatest non-becomer the world has ever seen. He'll never be anything!"

"How dare you criticize my friends, you little moron. Everyone says Erh-lang's wonderful; a whole lot more dragons like him than Ao Rue."

"So what are you doing? Hanging around as a favor to him?"

"Nonsense, I love him. He's so great, so confident! He makes me feel secure. And when we have our egg, he'll make me the happiest dragon in the whole world!"

"How can you chain him to an egg? You know, there are more important things in the world than breeding and eggs. You're going to drag him down, make him no better than anyone else!"

"You're ridiculous! You cats don't know anything," Nü-kua's anger began to rise to the point that smoke leaked from her nostrils. Mei-chou

didn't mind that at all and moved to let it flow over her. "All you care about is smoke. Once we have our egg, Ao Rue will forget his silliness. He'll settle down to a great life. I'll be so happy curled around my egg. Then, when it hatches, I'll have a little dragonling to cuddle. Ao Rue will hunt and feed us and protect us. He'll make Spring Halt even more beautiful. I've already got a lot of ideas for changes. All my friends can bring their dragonlings by. It will be wonderful."

"Right," Mei-chou was losing patience, "you'll lie around as your belly swells, then you'll get to shove food down its screaming throat, and finally when it becomes a dragonette, it will wander off as if you never existed. Terrific plan!" Mei-chou couldn't help her sarcasm. Nü-kua didn't even notice.

"That doesn't have to happen. Yün-t'ung had some wonderful ideas about teaching dragonettes and keeping them around."

"Yün-t'ung's dead."

"Whatever. Her ideas are still good."

"Look, while we argue, Ao Rue's trapped. Are you going to go to him or not?"

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't." Mei-chou's ears were starting to lay back and the fur on her back had begun to rise.

"Ao Rue made me swear never to cross the Barkul Range. He said it was too dangerous. He made me promise to stay on this side."

Mei-chou sighed, "I don't think he had this situation in mind when he made you do that."

"I still only have your word that he's in trouble. And he wouldn't make me promise something if it wasn't for my own good. Even if he is in trouble, he'd want me to be safe. Anyway, he's so strong, that even if I left him, he'd be all right. It wouldn't hurt him. I think the best thing, what Ao Rue would want, is for me to find Erh-lang and have him protect me. Yes, that's it. That's what I'll do. There's no point in me staying here, listening to some doomsayer of a cat, and getting depressed. Ao Rue wouldn't want me to be upset!"

"So you're not going; you won't help him."

"Ao Rue wouldn't want me to. I've made up my mind. I'm doing what he'd think is best!"

This time when Nü-kua stalked off, Mei-chou didn't follow. She just sat there, her tail lashing in frustration. *That was a major waste of time. I'll have to go myself. Long run. Enough wolves, mastiffs, snow leopards, eagles, and vultures between here and there to have me for lunch a hundred times over. I'll never be in time without a ride. No idea if I can do anything if I do get there.* She shivered in fear. Nevertheless, she started out. *No one lives forever. Might as well go out in glory, even if it is for that hothead Ao Rue. Didn't I tell him to stay calm, didn't I! Who knows if evoking the Ancient Bond of the Guardianship will even work? Will I be enough to arouse his protection? Damn that Nü-kua; she was a sure thing!*

Mei-chou broke into a ground-eating lope. As she started to head out of the oasis toward the Ravine of Baboons, she heard the black eagles and vultures begin to hunt the helpless. *So much for paradise. Nothing I can do.* Then, she heard a strange sing-song chant in the undergrowth, "cow, wow, sow, dow, crow, so, mellow, hollow, loaw, mau, jell-o, gallow, row." Going to its source, she found a little gray dragonette sitting all by himself, playing with rhymes.

Surprised by her good luck, she called, "You, boy, get over here. I need you!"

He looked up, a sullen look immediately forming on his snout, "Name's Wen Ch'ang; how come nobody calls me right. Ain't no boy. Stupid cat! Practicing. Go away! Ye bother me."

"Forget that. We don't have time to dance around, boy. Get off your tail! You have to take me to Ao Rue; he's in dire peril."

"Don't hafta do nuttin' I don't want! Hit me with his tail, he did."

"I'm sure there was good reason. I'll bet he apologized."

"He did, he did. Never hadda big one say sorry before. Maybe OK."

"Fine, fine. I need you to fly me to Lei-kung's chorten right now."

"Chorten's too ugly. Lei-kung's bad. No way, cat!"

Mei-chou took a deep breath; she didn't have time to cajole. *I'd hoped to save this energy. Glad I didn't waste it on Nü-kua! Can this possibly work after all these eons?* She looked directly into Wen Ch'ang's eyes. "I am Mei-chou, the First of the First, the Guide Eternal. I invoke the Bond of Talon

and Claw, Fire and Fur! The ancient mind oath. I call upon our friendship and your aid!"

Something clicked in the back of Wen Ch'ang's young mind. He snapped to attention. All the belligerence fell away from him. "How can I serve ye."

"To Lei-kung's chorten; and don't spare the wings, boy."

"Still not sure."

"All right, tough guy, how about just getting me close. I can walk the rest of the way."

Wen Ch'ang paused and thought for a moment, "Can do that." The little gray extended a claw; Mei-chou climbed into it. He curled it protectively to his chest, did a short run, and took to the air.

Mei-chou had forgotten that dragonettes weren't the fastest things around. She settled in for a long flight. "Boy, could you pick it up a little? At this rate, we won't be there 'til dawn tomorrow."

"Will try, but it's a long way."

"Give some thought to the fact that this might be the single most important thing you've ever done in your short life. That the future of the world's greatest dragon, if not the world itself, hangs on your wings today. Consider that, if we don't make it, there won't be even a slim chance that you'll ever fly free as an adult or speak another rhyme!" Wen Ch'ang's wing beat deepened and quickened a bit.

"Best I can do."

"That's all I can ask. You're already doing more than that baby Nü-kua. By the bye, what color are your eyes?"

"They aggramarin."

"That's 'aquamarine.' You sure they're not blue?"

"No, no, not freak. Don't wanna be no freak! Not special."

"Wen Ch'ang, one day you may have no choice about that."

The little gray dragonette had no answer for her, but he was inordinately pleased that Mei-chou had remembered his name. He did so like feeling important.

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 protege?"

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.

Chapter 22

1275 words

Han Chung-li scrambled into the vaults of the chorten. Survival, raw life, were his only thoughts. He'd watched in disbelief as Ao Rue had stepped out of the web. *Lei-kung swore I'd be safe from that blue-eyed freak. Yolbas falling. Lei-kung so much dust in the wind.* The blazing halos of sorcerous light still stung his eyes. Everywhere he turned, they marked the darkness until he thought they hunted him like Demons. He ran everywhere, nowhere. He gritted his fangs to stifle cries of panic, whimpers of pain. *No one, no one must find me!* He slammed into walls, bashed his head against so many ceilings he was sure his skull was scraped bone raw. Some primordial urge drove him to the dark, into the depths, trying somehow to plunge back into the lost, black catacombs of mother sea.

Finally, there was nowhere else. Walls closed all about him. He couldn't return. *No retreat for poor, little Han Chung-li!* Madly, he clawed at the walls, dug at the floor, tried to burrow to safety. Broken and quivering, the shock of the end stabbed at his retching mind. He snapped at his own tail in madness. Spinning in dread, he chased himself into a frenzy, snapping and spinning to nowhere. Yet, some small scrap of cunning remained. He began to gather debris with his wings and claws. He gouged the oily filth from every corner of the cavern. Scraping every crevice, he pulled slime to his quaking body. Silt and rocks, he dragged them all to him and began throwing the mass over himself. Heaped the filth over his once shining scales. Throwing it in great slushing waves, he packed every wrinkle, every fold. He sagged exhausted to the floor. His belly and snout dropped flush until he was no more than a slick, gibbering, globulous worm, the meal in a snake's belly. Helpless, he begged his small gods for invisibility.

Slowly, very slowly, after an immeasurable time of breathing the slime, quivering at every noise, slowly, when no terror had shaken his nest, small thoughts returned: *Me -- sick. Me -- scared. Blue-eyed monster! Ugly, ugly, little cat. Smug cat! Lei-kung exploding dust! Flying gray imp. Yolbas clear-eyed again! General drawn and quartered in mid-air! How could they have abandoned me . . . me . . . so loyal me. No Demons. Lei-kung called, begged them. How could they have abandoned him? How could he forget me? So faithful, ever was so faithful me! Who will care me, protect me?*

Finally, he dared to peak out, smearing and picking the filth from his eyes to see. At first, it was too dark; then, suddenly, a great Demon bubbled from the crevasse. Desperately, he tried to scuttle back into his pile of filth, only to have it flake and crumble away from him. His fear became almost overwhelming. He realized he was in Lei-kung's inner sanctum, the cave of the Map that is the World. Against the dull yellow of the Demon, he could see the broken Map before him. Its lifeless pieces were scattered everywhere. It looked like a great claw had fallen on it in a rage beyond comprehension. In a small, dark shadow of his mind, Han Chung-li had a dim memory of blackening it, spitting on it, delightfully mocking out its lights.

"Small meal." The Demon's primal urges thundered down in him.

"Oh, great one, save me, protect me! Please don't destroy me!" The whining tones that had so often made Han Chung-li's life what he wanted flowed unthinkingly from his snout.

"What want, small meal?"

"Protect me! Save me! Once they find all those little females buried around the chorten, hidden in the caves, they'll come after me. Me, I'm only little. Helpless. They'll rip me to pieces. Make me hurt. Hate pain. Please, save me from pain."

"Do!"

"Do what? There's nothing can be done. It's gone. It's all over. The threads are broken; the center cannot hold. The dragons are themselves again. The Map of the World is smashed. Lei-kung, great Lei-kung, is gone. The great General, my wonderful master, my majestic lord, torn like a piece of seaweed, thrown to those winged sharks. Oh, how they fed; how they cried their joy."

"Do or die!"

"What do you want me to do! What can I do?" Han Chung-li's voice rose to a shrill scream. "Yolbas and Erh-lang are three times my size. They'd squash me like an anemone. Nü-kua is protected by Ao Rue and"

"BLUE HORROR!" The Demon's scream cut him short. Its surface was suddenly rippling, twisting, swelling. Han Chung-li's snout was filled with the pungent scent of fear. It filled the cave.

"Yes, that one. What can you expect me to do with him? He's a real sorcerer, a natural, like the old days. You should have seen what he did to

the Web. Hung in it for a day, lurking like the viper he is, waiting to strike. Then, he walked out of it like he was out for a morning stroll." Han Chung-li couldn't believe anyone was what he seemed. "My eyes still burn from the fire of his magic. He made that arrogant cat appear out of nowhere. Then, he conjured a gray imp to do his bidding. No one can stand against him. Not you! Not anyone! His eyes are the power of the universe. They spin the planets and the suns. His anger could shatter the Earth, his might boil the seas. Even you fear him! Lei-kung told me: his name means Demon Slayer, Great Wizard, Pain -- all those things and more in the old tongue. That's why you didn't help Lei-kung, isn't it? You're frightened like me. What can I possibly do that you can't?"

"KILL CAT!"

"You're crazy. Mei-chou? We can't kill that cat." Han Chung-li was stunned by the Demon's insane demand. "She's the First of the First, the Guide. All nature will rise against us!"

"KILL OR DIE!" The Demon began to swell above him, to come closer. Han Chung-li felt his soul moan in fear.

"All right, all right. I'll do it." *Or try to*, he thought to himself.

The Demon drained back into its hole, leaving Han Chung-li to his own thoughts. *Kill the cat? The little cat. It would be so easy. A quick swoop, a sharp blast of fire, and I'd be away. In and out like a ferret. Who would know? Incinerate the tiny fur blob . . . no, fur turd, for Lei-kung's memory. Yes, I can do it. Hurt Ao Rue. Give pain. Never needed them! Hated General Heng-chiang anyway. Always watching me with the females. Impotent, old fart, could hardly understand what he said. Arm ached from swinging that sieve. All called me stupid. Dumb. Don't need them. Demon will protect me. Make me greater than Lei-kung.*

Han Chung-li's tail throbbed with pleasure as he imagined his great power. *Endless females. All Mine! Now me! For me! Mine! All me! Linger over females. The little ones; love the little ones! The tinier, the better. Maybe dragonlings too. His tail gorged with warmth. Yes! Kill the cat! Kill the cat! Have to wait 'till night. Need darkness, like darkness.*

As Han Chung-li planned a safe route to slither out of the chorten unseen, a small part of his mind wondered why the Demon hadn't just killed him. Ecstasy rose and filled him as he realized why: *Too important. Too*

valuable. Going to be great. Just like Lei-kung. Greater than stupid Lei-kung, than stupid General, moron Yolbas. I won't die! His heart of cinder filled with affection for his mighty protector. Demon protect me!

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 Lei-kung, 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."

Chapter 24
2320 words

Mei-chou was struggling up the craggy slopes of the Bogdo-ola. Some called it the Mount of God, because they thought its peak pierced eternity, but for her, it was only the arduous way to her mentor's cave. And she had always wondered which god? *Probably varied from species to species. I wonder what the Jerboas' god looks like -- a giant rat? An impossibly benevolent cat that doesn't eat them?*

The trip wouldn't be anywhere near as much trouble if it wasn't for the figs she dragged along. Master Chu just wasn't very polite to visitors who didn't cater to his sweet fang. Of course, he insisted that the bunches of grapes, branches of figs, and occasional pears were roughage for his aging colon. Mei-chou knew better: *I wonder if there's any truth to the story that in his youth he once burrowed through a landslide to get one pear?* She remembered the time she'd had to lug a pear up the mountain: *My jaw ached for weeks! But he does so love his sweets!*

She finally arrived and gratefully pulled the branch of figs out of the icy wind into Lord Chu's warm cave. Mei-chou was always astonished by his beauty no matter how many times she saw him, no matter how old he got. The rational part of her knew she saw her mentor with her inner eye and not with the light of day, but love's gaze is always better than reality's. His dark-blue eyes were almost black in the dim light of the cave. They still shone within the lush fur of his ebony mask. His face and ears were framed by a creamy, camel-colored mane that circled to his full jowls. At least, Chu-Chu liked to call it a mane; Mei-chou thought of it more as a ruff. He'd say ruffs were prissy. But he'd also say that jowls had nothing to do with weight and everything to do with dignity. His mane blended back and down through rich, thick shades of chestnut and sable to black legs, paws, and tail. No color quite separated. They all moved in harmony, one into the other. The changes were so subtle that, when the light changed, there were moments of tan, chestnut, chocolate, and charcoal on his body. His most arresting feature were the oversized fangs that extended down over his lower jaw into the velvet of his chin. He thought they made him look fierce; Mei-chou knew it was only overbite. As a Himalayan Sealpoint, Lord Chu insisted he was one of the few felines indigenous to the Gobi. But Mei-chou had heard enough to

suspect that he was the product of a momentary lingering between a Black Persian and a Siamese. Cats, for all their proclamations of civilized demeanor, were erotically prone to random couplings, to spontaneous trysts. Perhaps, they had something to do with their complete immunity to guilt, their absolute freedom from embarrassment. At times, Mei-chou admired the dragons' devotion, their exclusiveness. *Then again*, she thought, *look at the trouble fidelity continually causes Ao Rue -- first Chih-nil, now Nü-kua, and who knows how many before. Sexually, at least, Feng-po had been a better cat than a dragon. Rest his great heart!* Of course, such carnal and uninhibited observations, which in any way questioned the dignity of cats, could never be uttered within Chu-Chu's hearing.

When she got closer, she could see that his fur was even more matted toward his hindquarters than last time. As he got older, he was too lazy to reach all the way back to groom. Still, his long fur was the softest thing she'd ever felt. It was softer than the under fleece that the argali left on brambles as they dragged their wool against the thorns, softer than the goose down that balled amid the underbrush. Mei-chou had kitten memories of being curled in the hollow of his flank, half dozing, listening to his tales of days gone by and days to come. *My Woolly-Bully*. Her favorites were those that were the hardest to believe, and more than once he had called her a lazy dreamer. There was the one about the days before the Azghun Demons, when dragons fought among themselves, the days before the Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur. Her favorite, his silliest, was about how he had battled a rogue dragon, a dragon that had been killing cats. He always began with the stalk:

"I moved silently through a night with no moon. All in tender, tiny-placed paws, I blended from tap root to top star. I was one with the darkness, in harmony with creation. The great oaf blew fire, but always I slipped beyond the smallest, rummaging sparks. He thought he sensed me, but I was too sudden. Went for the eyes. You hear me, kitten; you have to go for the eyes. That's the only thing to do. Otherwise, there's no chance. Too much dumb muscle, too much fire."

Mei-chou always wondered why he'd been so insistent about her knowing how to kill a dragon. How could he think that she believed there was any truth to his bragging? No dragon would harm a cat since the sacred

Bond. It just wasn't possible. Another of her favorite stories was about the Seven Great Feline Lords who slept under a great spell in some deep cave and the dragon that had crept in with them -- all to rest until the end of time and wake only for the last battle. Curled in his fur, the idea of greatness waiting in secret always made her feel secure and proud to be a cat. She imagined herself among the great lords, all aglow with the powers of her race, as she happily kneaded his side with her fore paws.

One of his silliest was about the future and a great naked ape called the Pendragon, who would one day rise against chaos to form a great simian fellowship. He would fall, betrayed by a friend -- always one of life's great, inevitable patterns of foolishness or fate. Then, he too would sleep somewhere on an island, waiting for the final battle. Mei-chou wondered if she should count all the beings Chu-Chu said were asleep in various places. She was sure he regularly lost track of how many he'd bedded down in his many tales. As much as she liked his stories, she knew that was all it were, just stories. Nothing wise or worthwhile would rise from those screeching and scratching monkeys.

Lord Chu was deliberately ignoring her as she stood in the entrance. *In trouble again*; she wasn't surprised. Pita, his current acolyte, moved around the cave attending to his needs. She was simply classically beautiful. Her slick, short fur was sharply marked in pure blacks and whites -- black on top, white on bottom, with the splash of white across her pink nose and a white question mark on her back. Mei-chou knew from past encounters that Pita was painfully shy and wondered how she dealt with Chu-Chu's gruff manner. After a brief nod in greeting, Mei-chou was relieved to see that Pita moved confidently and surely about her duties. She ignored Lord Chu's glares when she made the slightest noise. Mei-chou noticed that the procedure with the jerboas was still the same. They must be caught unharmed, carried gently into the cave so they didn't panic, and then left close enough to the large male that he didn't have to move too much to catch them. The cave's jerboa population seemed a bit high; in fact, there was now a content nest of them over his head on a ledge. Chu would have vigorously denied that he was growing old and slow. The explanation that he'd given Mei-chou was probably still current: "Ignorant kitten," his stock introduction, "an adept of my achievements has risen above necessity to the pinnacles of leisure and

thought. It would not be at all seemly for me to be dashing around chasing rats! Would you have me bound by such pedestrian tasks?" Of course, there could be no answer, not from her at least.

Mei-chou realized she wasn't going to gain his attention by just sitting in the entrance with a fig branch hanging from her mouth. She set it down in Pita's direction, took a deep breath, and spoke, "My Lord Chu." His head swung slowly around; he fixed her with a haughty stare. *Oh my, I am in deep trouble this time!* "My Lord Chu, Teacher of the Great, Light of the East, Wisest of the Wise, may I enter." His nod was almost imperceptible. She walked across and sat before him, being sure to maintain the posture of respect. "My Lord seems disturbed with his most meager acolyte."

"'Disturbed' is too mild a word to describe my reaction to your pretension, ignorant kitten. I understand you've been passing yourself off as the First of the First. In a bit of a hurry, little Mei-chou?"

"Forgive me, master, but urgency necessitated it. I meant no disrespect."

"I am not dead yet. My wits are still far sharper than yours! My fangs and claws still sharp!"

"My lord, it is a minor matter. Not worthy of your wisdom. I did not think it merited your making the long, difficult journey down the mountain."

"You presume to think for me, me, the First of the First. Do you think me senile? How's this? The dragons are back on the land, they're tormented by their own, the fell power of the Northern Lights has been tapped, the Azghun Demons are abroad again, and yours is the only surviving blue-eyed dragon to stand against it all. Is that not an accurate description of the current state of affairs? How dare you patronize me!"

"My Great Lord Chu, forgive me. I am the lowest of the low. I do not deserve the slightest moment of your great attention." Mei-chou's mind spun: *How did he know? How do I tell him he's too old? How do I tell him I had to? How may I redeem this great insult?* She might be incapable of guilt, but she could feel shame. "My master, there is no forgiveness for my transgression. I will leave."

"Sit, ignorant kitten! Did you dare believe that the slightest act escapes my attention? Again you presume to know the thoughts of your better. As it is, what you have done is not a complete disaster." Relief swept

through Mei-chou. "It is best that I stay here, far above the petty concerns of dragons and cats, and plan the great, overall strategy. Involvement clouds the mind. Your Ao Rue should have told you that. And if he hasn't, you better tell him."

"My great lord, I am humbled that such a flawed tool as I could do your will." She was clever enough not to ask what the 'great strategy' was.

"Bury the pandering nonsense in the sand with your urine! Pay attention! This is the most important time of your short life. You must bring all your resources to it. The fate of our world rests on your lazy head. You must remember all your lessons. It may be too soon; your education is still unfinished, but you are the best that we have. Despite your obvious inadequacies, you will have to continue to be the Guide. Take good care of your dragon. You are very privileged; yours may be the last of the great ones." Mei-chou gave him her complete attention, but the fire was lowering in his eyes. His voice began to fade into irrelevance. "You know, Mei-chou, there was a time when every cat owned a dragon. Now they're all too stupid to bother with, too stupid to listen. Good for nothing but smoke. Had a little gray one up here awhile ago. Feisty little lizard. Still, he fumigated the cave for me. Shows even dumb, little dragons know their betters! Complained the whole time though; when he wasn't whining, he was chanting nonsense rhymes. Got Pita off my tail though. Females just don't appreciate the ambiance of a bachelor's place!" Mei-chou thought she heard a faint mutter of "smelly" from Pita's direction, but if she had spoken, Chu ignored her.

Now he was completely silent. His head had settled to his paws. He was asleep. *Just like his great heroes, waiting for the last, great battle.* Very carefully, Mei-chou leaned forward and touched her nose to his in a gentle, lingering moment. A faint, deep purr rose from him. She turned and moved as quietly as she could to the cave mouth. Just as she was ready to step out, his gravelly voice called softly to her once more, "Mei-chou, be careful out there. There's a hunter on the loose, and I think you are its prey." His head settled down onto a three-paw stack; he was asleep again.

As she left, Pita caught up with her. "My Lady, may I speak?"

"Of course, Pita, you don't need permission to speak to me. I'm not the First of the First yet."

"Your visit was good for him. He hasn't been this animated in some time. But don't be fooled. Be prepared. His time is coming close. He sleeps almost all the time now. I practically have to drop the jerboas on his tongue these days."

Mei-chou was surprised by what was a long speech for Pita, and she lowered her head as her surprise mixed with sadness. A world without her Chu-Chu, her Woolly-Bully, was too much to imagine. And it was hard for her to think of herself as even remotely ready. When she looked up, Pita had already run back into the cave, seemingly embarrassed by her boldness. As Mei-chou turned to go, she felt a chill; a large shadow passed over her.

Chapter 25
1925 words

Ao Rue and Nü-kua flew toward the thunderstorm they'd seen at the far end of the Barkul Range; he was in good spirits again. Even the sickening uncertainty he'd begun to feel about Nü-kua had faded to moonlight shadows. *Nothing like the power of poetry to transform even an uncomfortable moment! With her in the rainbow!* As they rose closer to the boiling dark clouds, his flight was all power and skill; he challenged the powers of the jinn of the air. Unlike him, she moved like a sylph who had been sired by some wayward jinni. He ripped through clouds; she glided among them, hardly disturbing the filigreed wisps. She was a graceful streamer of gold among the fragile, towering billows. Sinuous and sensuous, Nü-kua was female dragon at the pinnacle of physical beauty. The distant lightning made her molten. Its alchemy skimmed all the dross from her scales. The darkling air transformed her freckles into stars that danced in her golden night, kept time to the music of her swaying motion.

In the rapidly-shrinking distance, the storm turned the mountains gleaming pearl, the valleys and crevasses stone black. The flashes transformed the world into stark triumphs, forming glaring clarities that were more honest, purer. The scene told absolute, ennobling truths and evoked deep, intriguing mysteries. Most of all, the terrible might offered the challenges of power, trials fraught with promises of spectacular triumphs and monstrous failures. It was the age-old seduction of the descent into the maelstrom, the lure of death and rebirth. The thunder muttered and grumbled. It called to Ao Rue. It was all he could do to hold himself to a pace Nü-kua could maintain.

"Oh, my Thoth, the lightning makes you a mirror with no reflection. Your scales are too pure to be stained by an image."

"You'll have to look inside me to see your shining self, my Bright Eyes."

"Look, look at my wing tips, my talons, my claws. I'm magic!" This close to the storm's charged air, glowing, crackling nimbuses had formed all over her. Nü-kua was decorated with blue auras that touched her with loving intimacy. While their nature was identical to the horrible static electricity of the sand storms, now it created glory rather than attracting irksome talc.

Ao Rue laughed joyfully, "You have them on the tips of your nostrils." She wrinkled her snout. It was such an endearing gesture that Ao Rue swelled with love and protection, but he didn't have the warm time he wanted to savor it. The charcoal and white clouds rose before them. Their tops climbed beyond the shadowed sun. As they plunged into the tempest, she cried out to him, "Thoth, don't go too far; I've never done this before." Again, he laughed in joy and exultation.

Description always escaped Ao Rue when it came to thunderstorms. They were primal meanings from which words turned away. Even the simplest language failed with too much complexity. To a cat or an ape, the engulfing rain was everything; to him, it meant nothing. It paled before the wind. The great bursts penetrated every crevice of their bodies, blew their tendrils slick. Only mighty strength prevented their claws from being driven into their own bodies.

Many dragons avoided storms; they shunned the lightning's strikes. Ao Rue sought them. He chased the great fireballs of energy, pouncing on them as they zipped through the air. He rolled over on his back and let the bolts hit him full on. They penetrated him over and over again until he was all light. His heart blood ran silver; the stunning blue of his blazing eyes appalled the storm's moiling grays and blacks, dared its stunning whites. He capered among the pillars of clouds. Beside him, Nü-kua cavorted and frisked, charming the lightning to her and then coyly sliding away from its charge.

Ao Rue began to take the rampaging power to him, absorbing its chaos and pouring it back. His wizardry turned the lightning to towers of energy that shot through the clouds, struck at the peace of deep heaven. He cried aloud in conquest and danced in the strikes and shocks. The world was void of color, heat. It was all noise and power. More and more, he forced his magic into the tempest. The two dragons gamboled in the great mother of storms, an anarchy unlike the world had ever seen. Still he pushed his power into it, stunning the mountains with claps of thunder that shocked them to their ancient roots. Now, in complete contempt, he frisked like a kitten within the madness he created and fed. He was feral; he was wild. Yet, even as he took the soaring roar for his own, he heard Nü-kua 's panicked cry.

"I can't hold on anymore. I'm losing control."

Ao Rue fought his way through the tumult to her, the winds testing his every sinew, trying futilely to whip his wings into chaos. He defied the storm and gathered her to him, wrapping himself completely around her, enclosing her in the sanctuary of his wings. Entwined, they tumbled through the air. They were saturated with erotic power. He let them be buffeted and blown for a time, stretching the moment, lavishing in the lightning's power and her embrace. Then, he raised his magic, enclosed them in the sphere of love. They drifted and floated. Like a summer leaf, they gently spiraled and glided. The storm pounded futilely against them. He guided them toward the rainbow circles that lived for moments in the layers of moist haze at the storm's edges. Just as it seemed they would drop through one, the colors would fade. Timid, but lovingly, another would call in the distance, only to vanish no matter how softly they approached. Each ring of colors gave way to the lure of yet one more complete circle -- ever close, never near. Nü-kua hummed and cooed. She slipped her tail around his and rubbed her snout against his chest. She writhed gently, slid her wings against the tender insides of his, touching the softer, delicate flesh of his body. Locked in ecstasy, they settled into the sea. Even though they met the white caps with no more force than a snow flake on a flower, great gouts of steam and spray exploded into the sky as they discharged all the storm's energy.

The time they spent floating and loving passed as a rapturous dream for Ao Rue. He never wanted to wake, never wanted to think of Demons or Northern Lights again. Each scale lifted to her touch. They curled around each other, maintaining a lazy rapture that was struck over and over again with the sharp elations of fulfillment. All endings promised the next beginnings. They rose and fell and rolled within each other. Awareness merged in amorous mist.

Finally, the sun brought them back. The storm had passed. Lolling on their backs, savoring their union, they floated wing tip to wing tip.

Finally, Ao Rue lifted his head. "Bright Eyes, I'd like to go for a deep swim. Listen to some whale song. Maybe find Wen Ch'ang; see how he's doing. Enjoy some tranquillity after the storm." He waited until Nü-kua finished the tuna she'd been snacking on.

"I don't know. I think I'd like to go find some of the others. See what Yolbas and Erh-lang are up to."

He cringed a little. These days he feared the echoes for dragons dying, Demons rampaging at the back of his mind. The thoughts of Last Flights and the light of glitter sand had even colored his usual joy with the storm's pyrotechnics. "No, I need some time to revitalize before I go back to business. You sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Oh, Ao Rue, why don't you just go with the flow? You're always so tied up with duty. Anyway, the whales' songs always sound the same to me. I know you think they're different each time, but I just can't hear it. And what do you want with that little weirdo? He's no fun. I thought you didn't like dragonettes? What did he go back to the sea for anyway?" Why couldn't he stay on the land like the rest of us?

"I'm afraid he and his friends are back in the depths because of me. I told him they'd be safer there. The Azghun Demons can't pass through water. And he's not so bad. The bumptiousness will pass soon enough when he gets older. For now, I can take him in measured doses. And he is special.

"Special"? I don't see anything. He even tries my patience, and I adore normal dragonettes! Not the weird ones though."

"I'm not sure what's there, but something tells me he has unusual promise. I feel I should keep an eye on him."

"All right, you go listen to your whales and attend to your duties. I'm going to head back to the chorten. I'll see you at home later."

"Oh, when you see Yolbas, ask him about the kaochang to discuss fighting the Demons. I'm a little surprised I haven't heard from him. I should be there. I can help."

"Of course, you can. Are you not the most powerful dragon in the whole world? I'll be sure to ask him." She reached out and gently touched her snout and her mind to his. *My Thoth! My very own Thoth!*

As she flew into the distance, he watched and admired her until she'd faded to a speck. It made him feel so deeply good that she admired him, loved him. *She makes me feel beautiful. She is the yes of my being!* Still, he began to feel how crowded he'd been lately. *I do need my time alone. Meichou's right. These moments of isolation -- self-indulgence? -- allow me to disengage.* As he swam down toward the deep caves, he did wish he could be more involved, be different for Nü-kua, get caught up in the socializing

she enjoyed, but it didn't engage him; it bored him. The mindless frenzy threatened the perspective his magic and wisdom needed.

As usual, he tried to set his thoughts of alienation aside and reached out with his mind for Wen Ch'ang and the whales. Both were some distance away. Transforming himself, he choose the pleasure of swimming rather than flying. He knew he should be looking forward to the whales' newest symphonies, but the edge was missing. Nor did the thought of reading what few tablets remained captivate him. As he examined his unfamiliar feelings, he came to a sudden realization: *She's taught me to be lonely! Not even Chih-nil accomplished that!* His unsuspected reliance on her made him uneasy, and he tried to find comfort in the thought that they'd always be together, tried to ease his mind with the knowledge of their co-dependence. Yet, he couldn't shake his troubled thoughts, his haunting sense of uneasiness. But they were whipped quickly away by a strange, mental call. It was a faint, clear cry of need, unlike any he'd heard before. It wasn't a dragon's. He stopped, trying to listen more carefully, tuning his mind to its odd nature. *IT'S MEI-CHOU! MEI-CHOU IN TROUBLE!* He shot back to the surface. His wings threw great bails of water as he used raw strength to wrench them from the cradling sea. With deeper and deeper beats, he flew toward the distant Barkul Range. He cursed even his great speed: *Can I possibly be in time?*

Chapter 26
3025 words

Mei-chou cut through a wide, high-walled canyon as she descended the Bogdo-ola. Her thoughts were filled with the dying Chu-Chu: *So old. Senile, I guess. So fat. Hardly moves at all. Pita makes his last days soft. Good! His strange, demented stories. Mind wanders more each day. Dragon slaying, indeed! Wonder if there ever was such a tomcat? As much chance of that as a smart ape!*

If she had not been so preoccupied, she probably would have heard the raver that waited for her. She was both surprised and annoyed at her lack of vigilance when he lurched out from behind a large outcropping of rock. Mei-chou looked right and left. The canyon walls were too far away to run. She couldn't out race his fire despite his obvious clumsiness. There was nowhere to go. So she sat down, began to clean her paws, and acted like he wasn't there at all.

"Now you are mine, fur turd!"

"Oh, hello, did you say something? Who are you?" Of course, Mei-chou recognized Han Chung-li, but she had decided that the best tactic was to keep him off balance. *This one is deep dumb. He shouldn't be too hard to handle.*

"I am General Han Chung-li. The rightful and blessed successor to the glorious Lei-kung, you stupid cat!"

"Oh, you're a general now. Who appointed you?"

"That's dragon business. Nothing for you sub-creatures to worry about." Smoke began to rise from his nostrils. Mei-chou remained undaunted. Dragons never frighten cats. Not only are they indifferent to any dragon's magic, much less this one's poor excuse for anything, but cats fully enjoy the smoke of their anger.

"So, what can I do for you, General?" She shifted slightly to try to catch the full effect of the smoke.

Han Chung-li paused for a moment to remember what he was doing on this cold mountain. "I am here to complete Lei-kung's majestic work, to serve the great power of the Northern Lights, to lead the Azghun Demons to bring dragonkind to its full potential! And Lei-kung had special plans for you cats. You have a place in the master plan. You will serve!"

"You sure that's what you're here for? I remember you saying something else when I called you and told you to come here." Now Han Chung-li was doubly puzzled. She was right. He'd come with some other purpose. And now he couldn't remember her calling him either. "Well, General, while you're trying to get yourself together, I'll continue on my way. Catch you later."

Mei-chou almost believed she'd get passed him. He was shaking his head. It looked like he was trying to roll the pieces of his brain into their proper holes. She strolled toward him. *Mustn't show any fear! These primitive types can sense fear.* At that moment, a Demon streaked from somewhere; it hovered before Han Chung-li's snout. He snapped to attention. With his right talon, he threw a spray of gravel in Mei-chou's path.

"Now, I remember! Prepare to die. You are mine, fur turd!"

"I would have thought you'd learned from Lei-kung that nothing you maniacs think is yours really is. Don't you know that there are beings and things you can't own?"

"You won't confuse me again!" The smoke came in great billows from his nostrils.

"These plans you have. Tell me about them. You know, us cats don't yield to regimentation very well. We don't care for such things." Now another development was an added cause for her concern. Up behind Han Chung-li's head, Mei-chou saw Chu-Chu. Sleep was far gone. His eyes were wide; his concentration complete. He was playing out the ageless discipline of the stalk: ears back, body low, tail-fur fat with anger, its tip twitching. His fine, gossamer fur lifting in the faint breeze, he moved on the dragon with murderous intent.

She remained poised, if concerned: *The old dear, he'll have a heart attack. Where's Pita?* Confidently, she looked up at the rearing dragon, his fire rising like bile. "Dragon, you cannot harm me. I am the First of the First. Friend to Ao Rue, last and greatest of the sorcerers. I summon the Bond of Talon and Claw, Fire and Fur."

Han Chung-li laughed grotesquely -- shrieking. He almost choked on his own joy, drawing in more air than he let out. "Your words are nothing. You inferiors have no minds worthy of note. You are good only for orders and menial tasks. I will think for you! I am the first of the new dragons! We

make our own bonds. There will be oaths of fealty and submission to us. All of nature will yield before our superior power and intelligence." His mouth opened; flames began to lick around his tendrils.

Mei-chou stood firm. *So this is how it ends. Cooked by a half-wit!* Then, from out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lord Chu spring. She knew the distance was too great -- *too much age, too much weight.*

Lord Chu looked like a dolphin in the sea. His body was stretched out, a smooth blur in the air. Just before he got to Han Chung-li's head, he opened up. All four legs were fully extended. Every claw caught the red glow of the dragon's fire. He screamed his success, Han Chung-li's first sign of disaster. The dragon had no time to turn his head. Chu's front claws stabbed into the dragon's eyelid. Immediately, his hind legs began to snap up and down. He raked the naked eye with his claws. Han Chung-li wildly swung his head from side to side. His wings beat the ground, throwing great clouds of dust and stone. His pinions and claws ripped splinters and hunks from the granite. He flung fire everywhere, but all his struggles couldn't dislodge the squalling monster that was taking his sight.

"Run, Mei-chou, run! Hide, hide, until I finish him off."

Mei-chou was paralyzed. All she could see was her Chu-Chu's beautiful fur charring as fire rushed from Han Chung-li's snout and ricocheted off the rock.

"Get, girl! Move! Once, do as I tell you!"

Mei-chou responded automatically to that old tone. It was kitten and teacher again. Obediently, she turned and ran beneath a ledge into a crevice. Her ears were filled with the fury of the spitting, screaming tomcat. Han Chung-li's roars filled her with terror. She cowered in her hole, trembling in fear. Horrified at the thought of life without Chu-Chu: *Who will tell me? It's not time! Too soon! Too soon! Who will care? My Chu-Chu.*

Suddenly, all noise vanished -- the total silence of a world without ears. Despite her fear, concern dragged Mei-chou on her belly back to the canyon. She could see nothing amid the holocaust. It was as if the fire of the earth had punished the mountain. Great shards of rock were thrown and broken everywhere. The white granite was cursed with blackness. There were places it had melted and run, forming macabre sculptures of beings beyond madness. All had been scoured by evil, scoured by a dark pain.

Mei-chou fell in upon herself in despair: *He is gone. I didn't help!* Then, something moved and moaned beneath the thrown slabs. As she ran to it, she almost didn't recognize him. So little of his rich colors remained. He was black with char, too brittle to touch. So little blood. All burned away. Yet a shadow of bright life remained.

"Couldn't get to that other eye. Couldn't get across the snout. So far, seemed so far. Dragons must be wider between the eyes these days. Are you all right, kitten. You were my best student!"

"Lie still; I am here." *Ao Rue, where in the seven hells are you when I need you!*

"Wasn't much of a dragon. Would've liked to go out on a big one."

"Oh, Chu-Chu, it was the great father of all dragons. Nothing could have stood before him. Not now, not in the old days." *Ao Rue, Ao Rue! He's fading.*

"Was he really big?"

"He was a monstrous rogue. All the ancient blue-eyed sorcerers couldn't have stood before him, my brave Chu-Chu. I should have helped; I should have!"

"No, this was no job for a kitten. And don't call me Chu-Chu. Best left to us adults. How I miss your mother." He had begun to babble in pain.

"I knew if I waited, if I was silent, I'd have you again, stupid cat." Han Chung-li had returned. His head was tilted so he could see them with his one good eye. Blood welled from scratches across the bridge of his snout. Chu-Chu had almost made it. "Gonna cook some kitties now, I am, I am." He was clearly in great pain, almost incoherent. Yellow ichor formed a shiny smear on his scales, clotted in the tendrils below the ripped eye. Its flaccid membrane was pink with diluted blood. "Cook you slow, I will. My agony will be nothing to yours." His head reared back; his jaws opened; Mei-chou curled herself around Chu-Chu. His gathering fire mocked her meager protection.

Nothing's happening. His head was coming forward again. Mei-chou braced and cringed. Hugged Chu-Chu. *Again, nothing.* Han Chung-li's head wavered in confusion. Mei-chou looked up, gently cradling Chu-Chu's head as it slid from the curve of her throat. Han Chung-li's swinging head finally

brought his good eye toward the summit of Bogdo-ola. He screamed in terror.

Ao Rue had come around the Mount of God and was plunging down upon the canyon. His rushing body blew a valley in the peak's snow; white waves leapt away in great sheets from the stone as he roared down. Silver sparks trailed the edges of his wings. His speed burned and cut the air. He threw his anger before him. Ao Rue flew through his own fire. Again and again, he burst anew out of flame. He was the purity and might of lightning without storm, thunder without noise. His eyes blazed in great whirlpools of blue. Billows of energy streamed from his scales. Great swells of broken air cracked in his wake. He rode all his power to Mei-chou's call! His talons reached out for Han Chung-li.

"Now, the fear is yours, little general." Mei-chou had risen to stand astride Chu-Chu. "He is your death. The perfection of fur and fire. He has stilled your hot breath. He has taken your fire; now, for Lord Chu, he will take your life!" Han Chung-li, half-blind, turned in panic. He scrambled down the mountain. Too witless to fly, he banged against the stone. Ao Rue was almost upon him.

"No, No, Ao Rue, here. Here, to me, to me!" Mei-chou's cry stopped Ao Rue so quickly that he had to sink his talons into the granite to keep from flying by. As he cracked out of the stone and moved to her, concern marked every step. He offhandedly threw a blue orb in the direction of the fleeing Azghun Demon; it popped out of existence.

"What is it, Mei-chou; I came as fast as I ... Oh, no!" He had seen the black body. "Who is this?" His voice dropped to a whisper.

"This was Lord Chu, the real First of the First. My teacher. I should not mourn; I should not. He wouldn't like it. This is as it should be. He had a full life. He died saving me. It was important to him. Important that he die for his student. Important he die this way." It was all Mei-chou could do to talk, but it was no time to let Ao Rue see any weakness in her. "He died a hero. Now, at least, I know. I never believed his stories. He was the dragon slayer. He was the legendary tom! Our greatest hero. Legend incarnate. To think I never knew. So much wisdom and courage in one body. Can anyone be this much again? Chu-Chu, my Chu-Chu, Chu-Chu!" She had begun to shake.

"Easy, my little friend." She was almost hysterical. Ao Rue found himself wishing he could hold her. "There's still some life. I think I can save him, heal him." The swirling blue light rose in him. "Yes, a small spark. Nothing's broken inside. The fur and flesh will come back. Climb up on my claw while I hold him, Mei-chou; I need to feel you with me."

Ao Rue carefully slid one claw under Chu-Chu's brittle body. Covered him in a light clasp with the other. Mei-chou climbed up on top. Blue light began to pulse within his folded claws as he concentrated. She could feel the magics that moved from him to Chu-Chu. They were summer breezes, budding flowers, small things stirring in warmth, awakenings, the warm loam, tender shoots. Despite the moment, she felt good, healthy. Ao Rue lifted his head. He let out his breath in relief. Mei-chou jumped down. Ao Rue opened his claws to let her look within. Chu-Chu was curled up, happily sleeping. His new, pink skin was already covered with a light fuzz, a promise of wonderful fur.

"You are the one!" The words burst from Mei-chou like birth. Ao Rue looked at her. He was stunned to see her staring at him in open awe. Or he thought he had; the look vanished so quickly that he questioned its reality.

Just as Mei-chou thought to say something and as Lord Chu began to stir, Pita arrived. She was tearing, sliding, skittering through the rocks and sand. One shoulder was marked with blood where she'd scraped a boulder. For once, a cat didn't seem to care about being awkward.

"Pita, you're a mess. You're not even smart enough to groom!" Lord Chu had climbed down out of Ao Rue's claw and was standing. He was shaky but working to recover his dignity.

"You old fool, what's the matter with you. I go out for one second, for one jerboa for myself, so not to touch your precious larder. And what do you do. You wander off. Get lost. I've been all over this mountain looking for you."

"Watch your tone, silly kitten. How could I get lost? Why I knew every crack of this mountain before you were born. I have been protecting Mei-chou."

"You're too old even to protect yourself. Get back to the cave where I can take care of you. Leave this First of the First stuff to Mei-chou; you're too old."

"I hardly need your protection, madam." Nonetheless, he began to move. "I'm not that old. I've been doing some dragon slaying."

"Those stupid, old stories again. I do believe you've started to believe them yourself." She walked at his flank, herding him in the right direction. "Don't give me any of that nonsense. You get your tail to bed. You look terrible. What did you do to your fur? I can't trust you for a minute. You'll be the death of me."

"Just who do you think you're talking to, pink-nosed Pita! Why I remember when the best you could do was get a teat in your mouth. Don't use that tone on me, little Pita. It wasn't so long ago that your eyes weren't open. Funny thing, you were, stumbling into everything."

"How dare you, you senile lout."

As their yelling faded into the distance, Mei-chou smiled. Ao Rue was nonplused: "Why is she so furious with him? Doesn't she think he did the right thing, was noble?"

"Ao Rue, how can you be so powerful yet so naive. She's not angry, just relieved. She loves him."

"He's twice her age."

"Age isn't the critical factor. Genuine affection is; loyalty is. Rare commodities in this age or any other for that matter. There are some that say that the young, like Pita, are to be avoided. Too mercuric, too fickle. I don't know. There are few rules in such things. Look at us. Inter-species friends. Good love? Luck, maybe? More likely the wisdom to pick well. Who knows?"

"Yes, you're right." Ao Rue was recovering his poise. "I'm so pleased I found Nü-kua now when I'm smart enough to know what she is. She is so special. She makes me more than I ever thought I could be. It's good to find the right one." Ao Rue was obviously proud that he could interpret the moment in his own terms.

"Well, try not to be too quick. It's early yet."

"Mei-chou, you're being cynical again. Isn't Nü-kua at least the equal of Pita? After all, Pita's only a cat."

"Only a cat?" Mei-chou quickly stifled her anger. "You might also entertain the idea that fidelity isn't species-specific. Look at your gray herons."

"Enough. It's not up to you to question Nü-kua; she is mine. Anyway, Lord Chu can now rest without being disturbed again."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Chaos is loose in the world. We all may yet play roles none of us expected. But that's something no one can predict. For now, I must thank you. Bless all that's holy that you were nearby. If you hadn't seen us." Mei-chou let her voice trail off into a future she didn't want even to think about.

"I didn't. I was off looking for Wen Ch'ang and the whales. You called me!"

"I did?"

"Well, I heard you. Now that I think of it, how can that be? I know dragons and cats are bound, but telepathic contact?"

"Maybe great moments do summon great powers. We'll probably never know. Now I must go fix something. I never believed he was a hero. It just seemed he was born old, a creature of mind, not courage. I need to tell him he is a hero and, more importantly, that I know."

"I have to go too. As much as I'd relish going after Han Chung-li, I have an important kaochang; I hate meetings. Do you think Lord Chu will listen to you?"

"Chu-Chu? He'll make fun of me, but it's something I have to say. And he'll listen. He'll pretend not to, but he'll listen."

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 bellowed 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!"

Chapter 28
1485 words

If Ao Rue hadn't been so preoccupied with Nü-kua and trying to listen to Mei-chou, he might have sensed the vindictive presence beneath his feet or smelled the rotting flesh. Han Chung-li had crawled into the cave near the ravine's rim hours before. He had known nothing of a kaochang; all he'd wanted was to escape the jeering females, the bullying males, and the memory of that hideous brown imp that had taken his eye with magic beyond imagining.

The world had become too much for Han Chung-li. All his senses were veiled with confusion, all his reactions filtered through hate. His body was no better than his mind. There may have been a time when his looks would have let him approach the little females he mindlessly craved with some degree of normal appearances. Now he was too marked to lull anyone. His body was torn and ulcerated. He couldn't remember when he had fed well. Some kittens had been his last meager meal. His skin crawled tight around his bones in hunger. With only one eye, he could hardly fly. When he tried, he slammed into things. Rocks had gouged and scraped the scales from his bones. His infected eye ran with yellow pus and watery blood. It pooled in the ridges of his snout and dripped from its tip like phlegm. He continually rubbed at the socket with his foreleg. It gave him a certain kind of pleasurable pain, like wiggling a loose baby tooth with his tongue. As he worried it, he was smearing the virulent mixture into his other wounds. They had all begun to fester. No dragon would come near him. His female prey drove him off. The males chased him from the gold-laden caves. He had no fire to defend himself. Ao Rue's spell had worked well; Han Chung-li was a flameless, flightless worm. Without the gold dust to replace the balm of the sea, his scales had become brittle. They had broken away, opening his sensitive skin to the ravages of sun, wind, and sand. The infections and dryness now made his scales molt in large, dead sheets. What few patches remained served only to highlight his running sores. He was an emaciated piebald of running red and yellow.

His fitful dreams were still haunted by that mighty brown imp that had appeared from nowhere. *So sudden! So quick!* Han Chung-li still didn't understand his own memories: *From nothing. Horror. Crawled out of my*

ear? My eye aches so! He rubbed at it again. The pain brought him some awareness. A maggot from my brain? Imp of the id? Ran flame over it. Burned good. Hungry! Smelled good. So hungry! Voices? What voices? Females? Tasty females? Voices in the cave? Eye aches. He rubbed it again. Sweet pain. Good hurt!

Faint voices flirted with his fevered brain. Ghosts from his past? *General, is that you? I'm coming; I'm coming.* His talons clutched fitfully for his sieve. Fear rose in him when it didn't come to claw. *My General, do not punish; do not hurt little Han Chung-li.* The voices grew louder and softer, oscillating in and out, messages forcing their way into the sunlight from a dusky, nether world. Louder, softer, louder. *Lei-kung, oh dread lord!* A vision of Lei-kung rose before him -- black, braided thread held high. Han Chung-li scuttled back against the stone, flinching from the whip that was stone black even in the cave's shadow. *No, dread lord, no, mercy, me, Han Chung-li, faithful, ever faithful. No bad; no bad.* Lei-kung's image faded. *Been good, dread lord. Been so good; feed Demons; love Demons.* Louder, softer, louder, the voices moved in and out, away and then near. He thought he heard Ao Rue. Again, a sick vision came. The sorcerer appeared before him. *Ao Rue, Ao Rue, no more. Will go. Never again. Give back fire! Please fire.* A brown amorphous monstrosity sat on Ao Rue's silver snout. *You dead. Burned you! No imp. Ugly beast. You dead! Give back eye.* The imp swelled, grew larger until it loomed over Han Chung-li. *No, leave good eye! Claws, no!* The imp's bloody claws writhed and hung over Ao Rue's snout. Despite their stony edges, they clenched and twisted. *No, claws; bloody claws!* The imp's indigo eyes burned maiming from its dark mask. Its mane crackled with an aura of bright magic. *No more! No more!* Its poised body was framed by Ao Rue's spinning blue orbs. Beneath the double gaze, Han Chung-li shuddered; he couldn't stop quaking. He bunched his faded muscles against his terror. They failed.

Han Chung-li covered his good eye with his claw, tried to drive his head into the security of his sharply plated shoulder. He found no softness in himself, only bone. Again and again, he raked at his empty socket. Madly, he pulled at the flesh, hooking the sharp talons. The tips caught. He dragged down against himself, bowed his neck. His talons snapped free of the bone. Flesh ripped, and gangrenous shreds caught in the curve of his talons. He

licked it away. *Clean, must be clean. Females! Clean!* Rip and lick, rip and lick, over and over, he parodied primordial grooming. Rip and lick, rip and lick, until he collapsed to the cave floor. The dust puffed in and out of his nostrils; he scrubbed the grit with his hanging tongue.

Slowly, as he lie there, his heated brain cooled and cleared a little, just a little. There were voices. He hadn't been dreaming. *Ao Rue and that turd cat. Yolbas and Erh-lang. Chattering females! Dragons were here. Many voices. Hit me? Hunt me? No, leave me! Leave!* But no shadows darkened the cave mouth. Carefully, slowly, he dragged himself closer to the opening. He jammed his fangs together against his cries of pain, but now he could hear; now he could see; now he could listen to his tormentors.

"Friendship . . . Cooperation . . . Mutual support . . . All against the Demons . . . Love among us all . . . Giving . . . Sacrifice." The words knotted in the running twists of Han Chung-li's brain. He shook his head in confusion, almost screamed in torment as one of his tendrils smacked his bad eye. He gritted and remained quiet. Elemental cunning guided while his mind failed.

He looked out over the multitude. *Stupid traitor, Yolbas -- Yolbas, Prince of Empty Words. Turned on us all. Could've saved us. Saved the Great Terraforming. Took my females. Little, soft dragonlings. Hold in my tail. Squeeze with love. Damned Yolbas.* His eye scanned downward; his tendrils slid in the sand as he turned his head to see. *Little Nü-kua. Not so pretty. Too big, too old. Ao Rue's bag of guts. Too happy! Hate happy! Chatter, chatter, chatter, chatter. Stupid talk. Laughing at me. Take my females from me. Cut my tail from me! Wring necks. Wring necks slow like geese. Cry like geese. Blood from mouth. Soft honk, honk like geese.* Han Chung-li quivered in the delight of his happy thoughts of power. *Giggling, stupid dragons. Happiness hurts. Hate happiness. Look all cats. Many cats. Smoky crunchies. Cats good crunchies. Better th'n oysters. Oysters cold; cats warm! Runny, tickly-throat warm. Crunchy warm!* His tongue caressed his fangs. He sucked at the gaps in his teeth trying to recover the taste of the last litter of kittens. *Little crunchies. Lay on tongue. Little mews. Good crunchies!* All he found was his own putrid flesh.

Han Chung-li shifted his attention when Erh-lang swaggered forward to follow Yolbas' call for unity, purpose, and dedication. He wanted to hear

nothing of flight. Hours before he had watched the dragons dancing in the clouds. He had turned his dead eye to them. Their joyful grace cursed his mutilation. Now the wind blew fragments of Mei-chou's words to Ao Rue into his cave. *Tell, tell, stupid cat. Crunchy cat. Yeah, yeah, tell friendship. What about Han Chung-li? What for me? Where me? Exile! No females. Outcast! No flight. Ugly little Han Chung-li. No fire. No gold. Chased away. Poor Han Chung-li. Show ye, show ye. Call my friends. Good friends talk to Han Chung-li. Love Han Chung-li. Yeah, yeah, my friends!*

Han Chung-li gathered his malignancy into a vile call of scorn and pain. He reached deep into his decayed heart. There, amid his wretchedness, he found a power that had escaped even Lei-kung's purposeful malevolence and contrived sorcery. By twisted will alone, he summoned the Azghun Demons. He alone commanded the scourge of despair. And his deepest desire was to befoul, to punish, his own kind. He laughed and laughed to see the unclean shapes bubble and ooze from the broken rock. He roared with joy to see dragon after dragon fly shrieking into oblivion. The showers of glitter sand made him swell with ecstasy. He cheered aloud, "Yeah, yeah, yeah! You like little Han Chung-li's friends? They love me! They want me!"

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.

Chapter 30
2660 words

Mei-chou had waited around long enough at Spring Halt to know that Ao Rue's conversation with Nü-kua had not gone well. In fact, from what she had seen of it before she'd left the Ravine of Baboons, it had been very animated. Erh-lang had stood behind Nü-kua, alternately looking guilty and stupid. He cringed when Ao Rue's blazing blue glare had fallen on him. The little tabby wasn't looking forward to having to talk to Ao Rue; he wouldn't be very coherent if things had gone badly, and she strongly suspected the worst. She'd begun to wonder if he was going to appear at all. When he finally did arrive, it was in stony silence, his bright silver turned to aged pewter, his once bright eyes to dull prussian. For a moment, he and the lone heron stared at each other across the water. Mei-chou felt more pain rise from Ao Rue. Then, he unceremoniously scooped her up and flew for Mud-Pit Hollow.

Ao Rue didn't talk during the flight. Curled in his talon, tight against his chest, Mei-chou felt trembling in his flesh. Once they got to Mud-Pit, he set her down and busied himself smearing his silver scales with mud. The fight against the Demons had burned most of the gold off, and she knew he'd be reluctant to have the company of other dragons that a trip to the gold caves would occasion. She busied herself slapping a couple of brown vipers around, being careful to keep her claws sheathed. *Bloody snakes take forever to arouse! No sport at all.* She knew he'd speak soon enough and would need her there when he did. Cats never underrated the pleasure or importance of their company.

"I'm sorry I was so abrupt." Ao Rue had finally emerged from his wallow. "I just couldn't stand being at Spring Halt. Too much of her there. Many places I won't be able to go for a long time. They all smell of her. I don't want to be reminded. This was the first place I thought of. We won't be here too long. But it does make me feel a little better to think of Feng-po. I miss him."

"So it's over. I can't say I'm surprised. I tried to warn you. You sorcerers rarely find mates. You're too strange for the normal workings of the world. Still, you insist on trying. Oh my, you do insist!" As she spoke, Mei-chou slapped the vipers out of the way, approached his encrusted form,

and hopped up on the cleanest talon, the one with the least amount of that filthy mud on it. Listening was one thing; getting dirty was another.

"Mei-chou, do you know what it's like finding out you're not real? I stood in the bottom of that ravine like a supplicant. I think she would have let me uselessly beg. Her mind was blank to me. There was no touch, no warmth. She made me a stranger. Yesterday, I was beautiful; today, I'm ugly! Oh, and that Erh-lang stood there like the world's greatest innocent, trying to look apologetic. I really needed his pity. Oh, how I longed to make him disappear just like Chang-Lao. The two of them stood there making a mockery of what I feel. Made me emotionally stupid! Me! Nĭ-kua thought I was angry because my pride was hurt. That was about eighth on the priorities of pain."

"My sorcerer, the immature are always traitors, no matter what their age. It's their nature. They feed on us."

"Yes, her betrayal is primal. She struck down the most elemental of bonds, greater than all others, greater because it is given, not required. She has taken my belonging from me -- I have no place. I look inside myself and find void. There is no safety in me, for me. Not that inane security you spoke of. No, not that. What's missing is holding someone greater than myself within me, someone I can give myself to. You know what she said? She asked if we could still be friends! How could she imagine I could bear that after what we'd had? What was she thinking of? How could I stand seeing her with anyone else?" He paused, gathering himself, drawing deep breaths to stop his sobs, fighting tears. "Mei-chou, it is a nothing thing to be rejected or insulted by someone who doesn't know you. With no insight, all they have are best guesses to use as weapons. It only works if you believe in a stranger. But to be ripped by a friend, by a lover, who knows intimately, thoroughly, insightfully, by someone you've given the power of yourself -- that is the greatest agony! The greatest desolation! How could she think it was something as vapid as pride?"

"You expect too much from her; you always did."

"But she was so special. I never felt so powerful, so in place, so smart, so strong." A large tear rolled from each eye, making a silver path in the mud. Mei-chou made sure they weren't going to hit her before she spoke.

"Maybe, you should be satisfied with normal. Most beings are." She got some spray when the tear broke on his foreleg. *Great! Dirty and wet! The things I do for love!*

"I don't feel good when I'm normal. You know that as well as I. It's my dread legacy. What was it you said, 'If you want to be special, you have to be different.' Didn't you say that?"

"I expect I did, but I wasn't trying to make you miserable."

"That's my own fault. You did warn me. I understand now what you were saying. I gave too much away. I was vulnerable when I should have been wise. Foolishly over extended myself. Now it feels like I laid my tenderest tendril over a rock and someone hammered it." He successfully held back more tears. "Someone once told me that we are all born with holes in our hearts. Love is supposed to fill that hole. If that's true, when it's ripped out, love leaves a much greater void than it filled. Sounds like something Feng-po would say when he was drunk. Oh, I miss him. Far more now than when she was around. She shielded me, I guess. So much of my feelings were centered in her that I didn't have much left for anyone else."

"Feng-po was more than a lot of dragons thought he was. We cats always liked him. Quick with a puff, he was. A good guy."

"You know what else she said." Ao Rue was still too stricken to think of anything but Nü-kua for too long. "She said I'd been magnificent, that she'd always cherish my memory. How can she say that? My memories have turned false. It wasn't real. I have no past. Cherish is a lie. The present has killed the past, stolen the future."

"You were terrific; you are astonishing. I'll never forget you coming around the Bogdo-ola. No other dragon could have done that. Unlikely that another ever will again. I'll never be able to give enough gratitude for your saving Chu-Chu. You do have a future, a great future, an imperative future. How you feel now is the perspective of the moment. You'll think differently later."

"I don't think so, Mei-chou. If it was real, she and I would still live in each other."

"You may be right. I don't know. I've never given as much of myself as you have." *Poor, muddled child! I wish I could hold him.* "You did

deserve better. I never thought I'd hear myself tell you that, but you did."
He's ranting, but I must let him speak, must listen.

"My words fight me, fail me. There's an old, old poem. I don't remember the verses; Kuan-ti would be angry; he'd say I was lazy." The memory of his mentor brought a small, wry smile to the dragon's snout. "But it said something like 'What cannot be spoken, I must pass over in silence. More words are in ending than beginning. Spontaneity requires only joy and goes beyond words. Endings demand analysis but evade language.'"

"Does it help you to know that?"

"Not really. It gets close and then the rage blots it out. How could she leave me! She said she still loved me but not enough. What in damnation does that mean! Then she flies away as if nothing had happened and I'm buried in the mud?"

"Perhaps you feel more than she does?"

"I feel too much! What bothers me is that I'm absolutely sure this is the wrong thing for her to do. She babbled about dedicating herself to her nonexistent egg, to her dragonling. In this world? I should have killed Erh-lang; let her cry for an egg then! She's going to become ordinary."

"Yes, you certainly did make her more than she is. You have that effect. Your company ennobles. It's the thaumaturge in you."

"The tradition she thinks she wants and has isn't what she wants at all. Does that make any sense, Mei-chou?"

"Nothing here is expected to make sense. If you're right, let's hope for her sake she never discovers it. Probably won't. The odds are that realization is beyond her now."

"There's a part of me that wants to grind her snout in her choice, that wishes her nothing but pain and failure."

"That's not you."

"You're right. I just wish it was. It's awful to think so badly of someone you can't stop loving. I just don't understand. She was the driving force in the relationship, always pushing it to new heights. Now she decides I'm nothing. I sometimes envy selfish rage, insensitive anger. They blot out the fear. You know I'm afraid to be seen, afraid to be near anyone. I'm surrounded by an alien environment. I feel so disengaged, so ineffectual. My thoughts, my words, my feelings -- all seek meaning where none exists.

I'm boring. I don't know what I'm saying. You don't have to hang around if you don't want. You've been far kinder than I ever could have expected."

"What, and leave you with no one to irritate, no one to keep you on the tips of your talons? After all, I am the last friend of the world's greatest sorcerer, the world's only sorcerer! Regardless of how you feel, all life rests in your eyes and fire. Forget her; you have better things to do than mourn! A world needs saving! It's important for you to keep busy anyway. Admittedly, killing Demons is boring, but it beats lying around in the mud." Mei-chou tried to redirect him, change his perspective. It didn't work.

"I still love her; I can't forget; I'll never forget. Did you ever want someone so much that you think you can create the same want in them? That if you gave it all your energy, all your dreams, you could make it happen? Then, pour all of yourself, your deepest essence, into it . . . and it just isn't enough."

"That kind of magic is beyond even you. Lei-kung could do that. You can't. It's selfish and manipulative. You couldn't be happy with that!"

"Maybe if I talk to her again." Ao Rue still fought what he thought was his failure.

"You yourself said she flies now as if you'd never been. She has her prize. You'll only make yourself more the fool by chasing her. Make your love useless, non-functional. Don't let it be in the world even if it must be in your heart and mind. Redirect your anger, your pain. Do something creative. Change your perspective. Pour your grief somewhere else."

"I think I'll start writing poetry again."

"I do think that should wait until the Demons are exterminated."

"Yes, after; you're right. I know the perfect place to put my verse. There's a cave with an arch over its entrance. Already some of the lines of the ancients are carved there. I'll add to their chronicles. I think that's where we should go when it's over."

"Good, you'll be able to magic gold out of the stone there. You look stupid with that mud dripping off you."

"Mud? This isn't mud. It's the ritual paint of the Demon Slayer, the Mad Shaman, the Master Hunter. I will become a demon myself, hunt them until exhaustion takes me. And when I wake, I will hunt again and again and again. I will give the future the memory of a beast possessed. A dragon

without heart or mercy. Ruthless, death incarnate. I will live in the memory of the very Earth as a killer, a berserker. I have nothing else to leave. When it is done, when no Demon violates the face of life, I will rot in a cave or turn myself into glitter sand if I ever find the courage or the cause."

Mei-chou said nothing. She was grateful that he found any purpose for his life. She knew it was vital that the Demons be killed, imperative for all living things. But, oddly, her relief was only that it was good for him.

The two sat in silence for a time. He spoke first. Now his voice was more philosophical, more resigned. The rage had left him. "It's common knowledge that time heals pain. It's probably true too. I wonder if I have enough time to heal mine. When I finish the Azghun Demons, will I be well? Will I die with pain?"

"You'll still have me. And you don't think I'm going to let you blow yourself up, do you?" Once the Demons were gone, and Mei-chou had absolutely no doubt that he couldn't achieve that, she knew that all that would hold him to the world would be her.

"Mei-chou, I never did have my moment, did I?" She was pleased that he hadn't laughed at her.

"No, everyone was always looking at themselves or the other way. You weren't a hero, but you will have the satisfaction of ridding the world of evil."

Now he did laugh. "Mei-chou, most of the time, you're so wise; you really are." She was glaring at him. "I'm sorry; I wasn't making fun of you. It's just that evil is never gone. Intelligent beings will invent it over and over again and blame someone or something else that it's there. The Azghun Demons are a manifestation of dragonkind's manipulation and insensitivity, the product of too much power combined with smug ignorance. Yolbas knew that at the end, but no other dragon would ever admit it. So many are satisfied with the short term. All they ever achieve is survival and breeding."

"Survival, busyness, mindless activity should never be enough."

"Ah, you're wise again." Now they both chuckled. "It's our minds that separate us from the animals. When we don't use them, we are nothing more than beasts. Feng-po knew that. He knew it in the oblivion of the vines. Speaking of vines, I'll bet Feng-po stashed some around here, probably in the pool to keep them cold. Would you mind too much if I went off by myself

for awhile. I need the time. Try to put Nü-kua in balance. Seek new energy; we have a lot of work ahead of us."

"No, that's all right. I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you. Thank you for your kindness. You'll be all right without me?"

"I'll be fine. What do you think I am, a kitten?"

"No, you, at least, are the real thing."

As Ao Rue ambled off to suck a few vines, Mei-chou tilted her head in sympathy. The pain had descended on him again. But he wouldn't be alone. She would keep an eye on him and he'd never know. That was one of the many advantages of a cat. The best was having one as a friend.

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!**"

Chapter 32

735 words

"So, if you didn't want to talk to me, what are you doing here?" Lord Chu was clearly irritated that Wen Ch'ang had breached his solitude and now just sat, shifting from claw to claw, saying nothing. "You know what kind of danger you're in? There are still Azghun Demons abroad in the land. Did you think Ao Rue could kill all of them in a little over a year? Get back to the sea, boy, where you're safe!"

"Strange stuff goin' on in me. Nothin' like it happenin' to my friends. Don't figure." Wen Ch'ang spoke begrudgingly, like he was throwing up some alien brew he'd been forced to swallow. Lord Chu clearly intimidated him.

"Oh, you're one of them. Should've noticed. Lemme see those eyes, boy! Yep, there it is big as life. You've no mentor. How could you understand. No one knows enough to guide you."

"Can't go to Ao Rue."

"Of course, you can't, boy. He's chasing Demons. You need to stay as far away from them as possible. But now's not the time for us to do anything. We'll have to wait until the land is safe again. And I don't know how much of Ao Rue will be left when the Demons are gone. The hunt and Mei-chou are the only things that keep him going these days."

"Ao Rue's gonna kill'em quick. Mighty sorcerer. Great hero. And don't call me boy; name's Wen Ch'ang."

"Your admiration serves you well, boy, err, sorry, Wen Ch'ang. But it's going to take years, decades maybe, for him to ferret out those yellow horrors. Even magic has its limitations. You'll know that soon enough. And Han Chung-li's still out there somewhere. His mind's completely gone. He'd rend you and not even know it. Or know it and do it for the joy of plain spite."

"When then? Feeling really weird. Keep wantin' to go off by m'self. Strange visions. Odd voices. Stirrings in me. Mei-chou said yea'd help me if no one else would or could."

"Of course, I can help you, but you're going to have to be patient. Fortunately, you dragons seem to hang around in adolescence forever. And I'm not about to sacrifice you to haste."

"Yea're old."

"What are you talking about? I'm not old, just mature. If you doubt me, take a look at the cave mouth."

Wen Ch'ang looked. Pita was fussing over a small litter of kittens. They were of mixed colors -- one was stone black, another white; one had brown and white patches. The most rambunctious showed dark-blue eyes and the hint of a camel mane amid the blacks and browns of his kitten fuzz.

"Does that look like old to you?"

"Yeers?"

"Of course, they're mine, boy."

"Guess yea're not too old. Will wait."

"You bet you will, and I'll be waiting here when it's safe. Now get out of here, and do try to work on your speech. You sound like an illiterate! Now get!"

Wen Ch'ang said nothing more. He simply nodded before his master and took to the air. Lord Chu walked back to the cave. There was more vigor in his step now than even the kittens had brought him.

"What was that all about, Chu-Chu?" Pita paused from bathing two of the dirtier kittens. If there was dirt anywhere, they found it . . . repeatedly.

He didn't answer her immediately. The little, brown monster had decided Lord Chu's bushy tail was the perfect prey again and was wrapped around it claw and milk tooth. Chu looked at him for a moment, deciding whether to toss him over the side of the cliff, beat him silly, or just endure the indignity. He chose the last, reasoning that Pita wouldn't approve of the other two.

"Well, Chu-Chu, are you going to spend the rest of the day watching your son practice or are you going to answer me?"

"Oh, sorry dear, just trying to remember some ancient wisdom."

"Wasn't he the one who saved Ao Rue and Mei-chou?"

"Yes, he was the one. Got blue eyes too."

"So what did you talk about?"

"The future, I think." Chu's eyes took on a faraway look as he thought of Wen Ch'ang. "Maybe the future. Ouch! Damn, Pita, will you take this little thug." Chu swung his tail around so Pita could pry the kitten loose. Even the future waited on some things.

Chapter 33
1085 words

The first sign of an answer to Nü-kua's call was a rising whistle from beyond the Barkul Range. Animals scattered from its coming. Snow leopards and black eagles fled their hunts. Shrieking baboons covered their ears. The mountain argali danced from ledge to ledge to escape the increasing shrill. Cats sought the depths to blot it out. It grew in intensity, echoed and smashed off the peaks. Stones cracked and fell. Snow shifted and avalanched. A great stunning silver-blue sphere tinged the sky with its rush. Its coming defied everything. The air fanned away from it in glowing incandescence. Thunder tried to follow. Its crashes and cracks fruitlessly trailed the orb. Within the glowing sphere was a brown pellet, a mud-encrusted projectile.

No one will ever know how Ao Rue came so quickly. He was a wonder that the world had never seen before, would never see again. Perhaps love and magic succeeded where wings would fail. No dragon's wings could cup the thin air atop the Bogdo-ola and yet he came. With contempt for all, he answered Nü-kua's call. Sorcery incarnate, he shattered nature.

His inviolate bond had raised him beyond the power of mountain and flight. The limits of space and time ran before his wrath. He scorned stillness and mere motion. His purpose stole light and dark and turned the world to the silver blue of his making. His vow moved him beyond the chains of thought and change, passed the bonds of pleasure and pain. Ao Rue's pledge, made in a softer, younger, sweeter time, smashed the controlling spirits of the world.

He swept down the Mount of God toward Lei-kung's chorten. The sphere disappeared. He flung his wings and claws out. The mud flashed away. Energy crackled from his body. Air and sand were blanched stone white by his might and glory. His fire was silver, far beyond ordinary dragon flame. He was born again from the radiating rings of a new star. His eyes blazed unthinkable power.

Before his stunned gaze, Erh-lang clawed at Nü-kua. He was oblivious to her, crawling up her, trying to get to the sky, trying to die. They struggled and rolled in the sand. Frantically, she held him. Great gouts of sand and flame cascaded above their deadly embrace.

Ao Rue landed sharply beside the two struggling dragons. He reached out with his claw. Instantly, the raging Erh-lang's flaying body quieted. Great, pitiable cries of devastation rolled from him, but his demented movements ceased. Nü-kua clung to his twitching body. She looked up in surprise and appeal at Ao Rue. "You! How? Help me! He's trying to leave me. Help me!"

"Let him go. No one can save him. He's only a shell. There is no will to live in him anymore."

"No! Never! Fix him! He can't leave me. I won't allow it! Do something! You're the great sorcerer."

"I can't. The force of life lies beyond all magic. He doesn't want to live."

"What good are you!" Nü-kua let go of Erh-lang and slapped Ao Rue's stilling claw away. Erh-lang erupted into violent flight. With no one to hold him, he leapt into the sky. Nü-kua was stunned for a moment, still surprised that he would shun her. But she quickly followed; her claws and voice reaching out to him. "Erh-lang, I forgive you! Come back! Don't leave me!"

Ao Rue followed both dragons into the clouds. He cried after her. "Bright eyes! Don't! Stay with me! I'll take care of you."

She wasn't listening. All her attention was on catching the wildly erratic Erh-lang. Once, twice, her grasping claws almost had him. Each time, he jerked away. He was consumed by a mad, elusive course -- a path that would take him to the death he craved.

Ao Rue continued to try to reach her. "He's going to go up. Get away from him. You're all right. You can live! You can live! Stay!"

Now she had Erh-lang by a rear talon. "Go away! He's mine." As she gained control of his twisting form, her rage faltered. Only now she remembered -- only now she questioned what she was doing. She tried to pull away, but the frenzied Erh-lang had her. He began to climb her body toward the sun. His talons sunk deeply into her. Finally, she looked to the rapidly closing Ao Rue; appeal filled her eyes. His spun in raging answer. She tried to yell through Erh-lang's mournful cries and the howling wind. "The egg. The egg" She never finished. Erh-lang's fires had peaked. He exploded into the inevitable glitter sand. She was consumed.

Ao Rue recoiled from the heat and sand that splattered against him. His deep wing beats stopped. Waves of despair and resignation forced his head to droop between his wings. He just kept them open out of habit and spiraled down on the updrafts. He floated like a dead leaf. His tears mixed with the falling gems. He settled on the glitter sand. Aimlessly, he combed through it with his talons. *Still warm.* A sob escaped him. *Something special here? Must be! It's her! Should be most beautiful.* He sifted through more and more of it, grain upon grain. Yet, no matter how hard he looked, the truth became too obvious to him, impossible to avoid: *Nothing. Nothing. Like all the rest. Nothing to cherish, to take; nothing to hold.*

How long he stayed -- his silver wings spread weakly over the sand, his claws balled beneath him -- is lost in time. Finally, he stirred. There was a weariness in his movements that went beyond the frailty of flesh. He opened his claws and let the glitter sand fall through his talons. It was nothing more than another place the cats would not walk. As he flexed his wings to leave, Nü-kua's last words came to him. *What was she trying to say? Something about an Egg?* He lifted off the plain and looked among the geometric rows of Yün-t'ung's classroom, then out across the sand. *Nothing.* He extended his smell and magic: *Lingering tinge of Demon. Sterile sand. Salt death.* He directed his attention to the chorten. *Choking stench! Foul! Evil!* Despite his efforts, his head and magic flinched from the malodorous miasma. *Cleanse it? So tired! Another day. Maybe leave it? Warning?* His wings beat stronger now in search of the Demons who had taken Nü-kua and Erh-lang. All he felt was a dull rage, a single purpose. It would continue to grow.