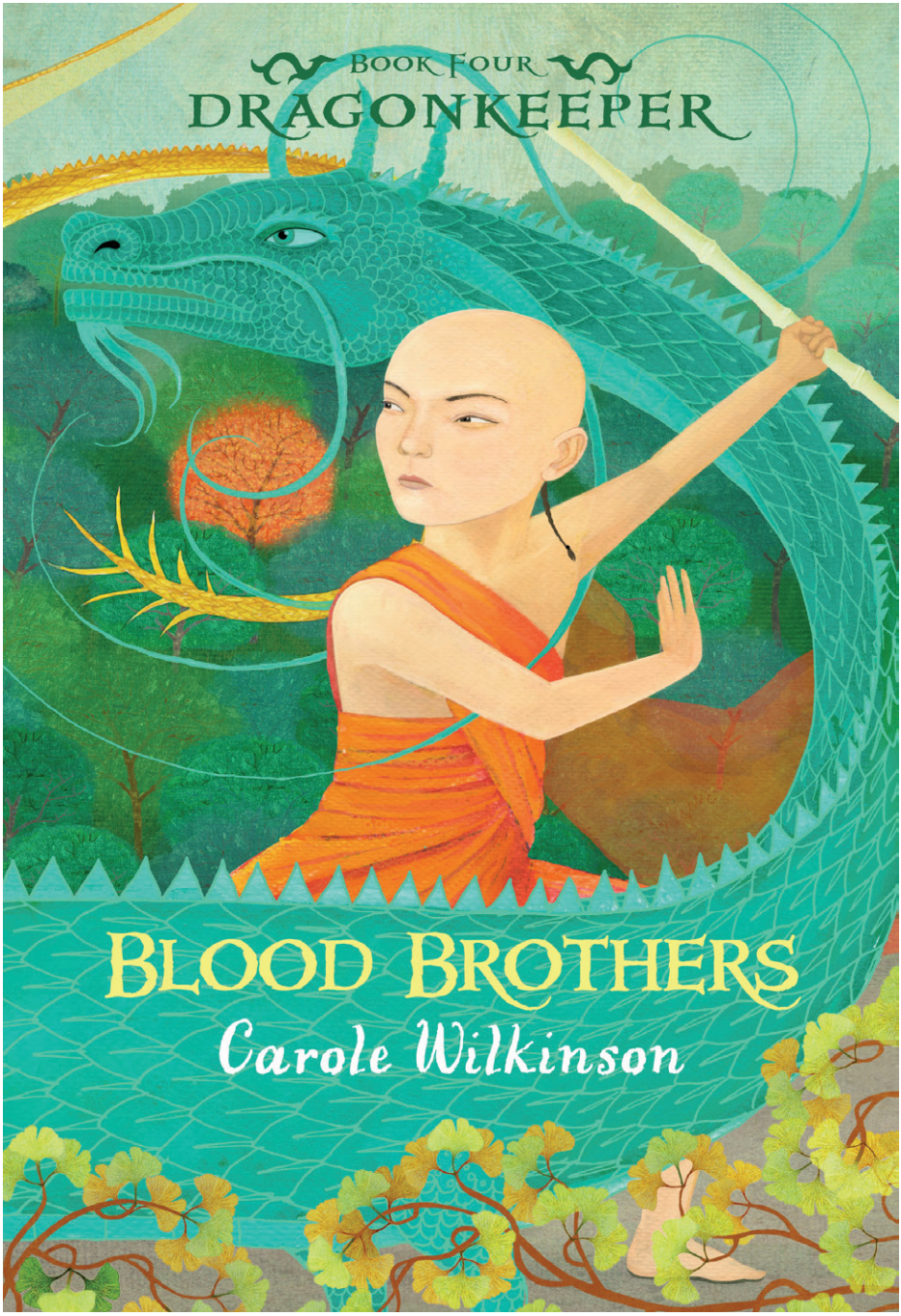

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BLOOD BROTHERS

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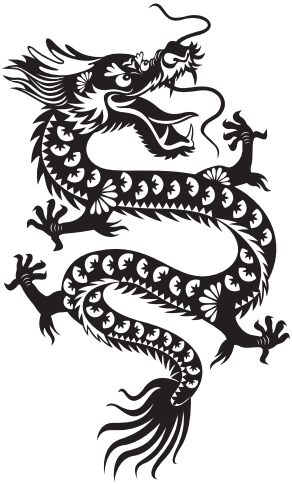
BOOK FOUR

DRAGONKEEPER



BLOOD BROTHERS

Carole Wilkinson

black dog books

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Chapter One

Brush and Ink

An oil lamp cast its pool of light on a blank piece of paper. A hand entered the pale circle – a left hand gently holding a brush exactly perpendicular. In the top right-hand corner, the wolf-hair bristles touched the paper, the black ink soaked in. Fingers, wrist and brush moved as one, leaving behind a column of strong, neat characters, each one perfectly formed. The bottom corner of the paper was held down with an irregular piece of gemstone, deep purple in the dim light. The hand moved to the left and started another column. It gently waved away a moth to save it from flying into the flame, then the brush disappeared for a few moments before returning, recharged with ink. The night crept past and the page slowly filled with columns of characters. Towards the end of the last column on the page, the hand slowed, loosened its grip. The brush became horizontal. A shaved head sank towards the paper.

Tao woke with a start. He heard a sound like wind chimes tinkling in a breeze. The sound faded and he could

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hear nothing but the steady patter of raindrops. He slid the lamp to the bottom of the page. Fortunately, his brush had been almost empty of ink when he had fallen asleep while writing the third brushstroke of a nine-stroke character. What should have been a firm vertical line was skewed to the right. He dipped just the tip of the brush in the pool of ink on his ink stone. He finished the character, managing to cover the wayward line with the remaining strokes. The character was ill-formed, but it could have been much worse. At least his night's work wasn't ruined.

Yinmi Monastery had a single scroll in its library. On it was written a translation of the *Vinaya*, the rules and disciplines that Buddha had set down for his followers, passed on by word of mouth for centuries before someone wrote them down. Lao Chen, Yinmi's oldest monk, had brought the *Vinaya* back with him when he returned from his journey to Tianzhu, the home of the Buddha, many years before. He was the only one at the monastery who understood Sanskrit, and he had translated the words for the other monks to read. This was fortunate, as the original scroll was destroyed in a fire. Only a small, scorched fragment of that scroll survived and it was kept in a scented rosewood box in the monastery's shrine. Tao was making a copy of the translation.

The rain had stopped. The clouds parted, allowing an almost full moon to dust the needles of the pine trees with

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pale silver light. Tao blew out the lamp flame to conserve oil. He could hardly keep his eyes open as he rolled up the scroll and put it away on a high shelf, out of sight of the other novices, along with his writing implements. He picked up the purple stone to place it next to them, but reconsidered. There was a thought at the back of his mind that wouldn't quite form. The more he tried to get hold of it, the further it slipped away, like something almost forgotten. He was too tired to think.

As he picked up the water jar to refill it, he thought he heard the wind-chime sound again. The silver moonlight was replaced by a different light – greenish and unnatural. He turned and dropped the water jar. It shattered on the stone floor. A great four-footed animal stood in the doorway, glowing like a huge piece of polished jade. There were wild animals in the forest, some of them dangerous, but nothing as big as this, and none of them glowed in the moonlight. This creature's body was covered with glimmering green scales. Long branched horns ending in sharp points protruded from its head. It had a hairy mane and, on each side of its mouth, long whiskers. Large teeth glistened in the eerie light. Curled around its huge front paws was a thick tail that ended in a fan of green spikes.

Tao's eyes were wide. A terrified whimper escaped from his gaping mouth. Standing in front of him was a dragon.

The creature observed the boy with unblinking eyes,

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and took a step towards him. Convinced that the dragon was about to attack, Tao turned to run, hoping he could climb out a window. Fear gave him speed, but the dragon was faster. It reached out a paw and grabbed him. Four curved talons, as long and sharp as knife blades, wrapped around his upper arm like a shackle, but didn't sink into his flesh. Tao cried out for help, even though he knew no one would hear him; the sleeping quarters were too far away. With its other paw, the dragon took the purple stone from Tao's hand, peering at it as he turned it over so that the moonlight revealed a milky white vein and fine maroon threads. The stone was worn smooth by centuries of constant handling, though Tao thought it would have once had sharp edges.

The dragon pulled the boy closer. The creature had a sharp, tart odour, which Tao didn't find unpleasant. Two deep parallel wounds on its chest oozed dark purple blood. The dragon made the tinkling wind-chime sounds that Tao had heard before and then looked at him as if it expected him to understand their meaning. The dragon's tone changed, sounding more like the tolling of a cracked bell. It loosened its grip. The green glow of its scales faded as clouds covered the moon. The dragon turned and disappeared into the darkness.

Tao ran to raise the alarm. It was raining again. He tripped and fell on the steep, slippery steps that led to the

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abbot's quarters. He was about to hammer on the door and call to his reverend master that the monastery was in danger, but something stopped him. The dripping trees and the moist, warm air seemed so ordinary, and there was no evidence of the unusual intruder. How would he explain what he was doing up hours after all novices were supposed to be in bed? Tao began to doubt his own senses. He was overtired after working late into the night. Surely he had imagined it. He returned to the Meditation Hall and, weak from exhaustion, swept up the broken pieces of his water jar. Tao stumbled to the novices' quarters in pitch dark. He took off his robes and sank onto his straw bed.

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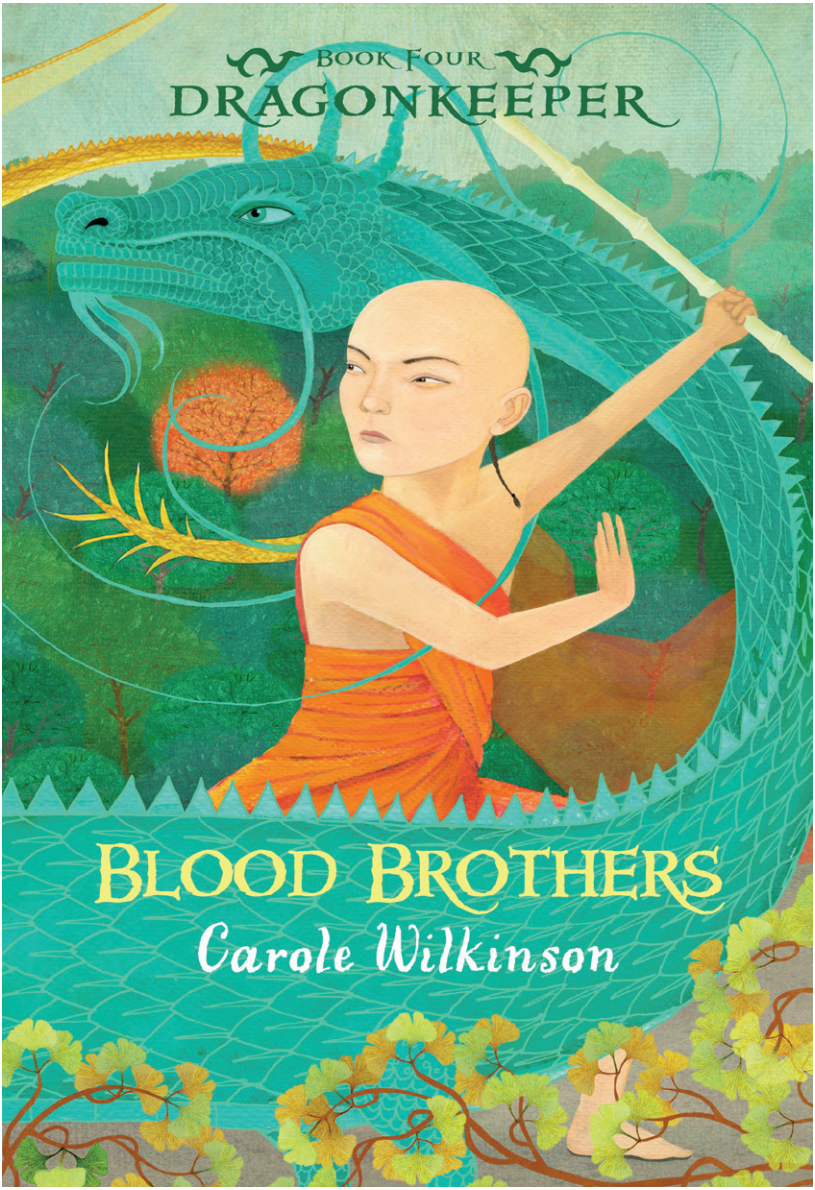

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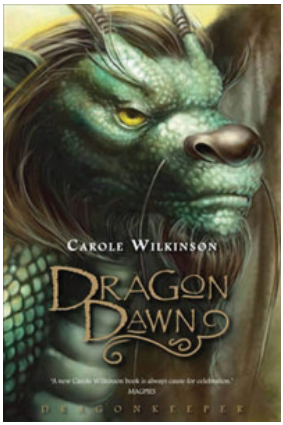

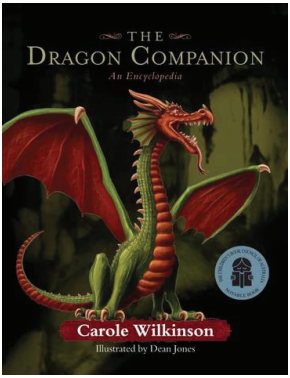

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