Carole Wilkinson

DRAGONKEEPER

PROLOGUE: LEAVING HOME

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10 YEARS OF DRAGONKEEPING

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Leaving Home

Great-grandfather is sitting in the doorway of the hut where he sleeps. He can't walk very well now, so he hardly ever comes into the house any more. Mother doesn't like him eating at the table because he makes a lot of noise and dribbles soup down his gown. He says strange things as well. He talks to Great-grandmother, even though she died before I was born. He is deaf and he gets cross when he can't hear what we say. He shouts at us and tells us to stop whispering. I like him though. He doesn't tell us stories any more, but I have saved them all, in my head and my heart. He waves me over to him.

"This is for you," he says.

He holds out something for me to take. In the shadowy doorway, I can't make out what it is.

"How old are you now, Tao?" Great-grandfather doesn't often remember my name.

"I'm seven."

He nods slowly as if this is important information.

"My father gave this to me when I was about your age." He sighs. "It wasn't meant for me though. I tried to give it to your grandfather when he was a boy, and your father, but neither of them wanted it."

I take it from him. I need two hands to hold it. My eyes have adjusted to the dim light and I can see what it is now. It's a shapeless stone.

"Perhaps you are the one it is meant for. It has been in the

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Huan family for many generations."

I wish he'd given me something more useful, like his knife with the ebony handle, but I say thank you anyway.

"You might find a use for it."

I smile at him. I'll miss Great-grandfather. Not as much as my brother of course.

After breakfast, I ask Mother if Wei and I can go over to the stream. She says no.

"It's their last day together," my sister Meiling says. "Let them go."

We're allowed to go, but only if we are accompanied by two servants.

The stream is peaceful as it usually is. The branches of the willow tree, covered in pale green buds, dangle in the quiet waters.

It's the last time we will sit here for a while, my brother and I.

Wei is watching a beetle that's stuck on a half-submerged branch. It's troubling him, I can tell.

"Don't worry," I say. "I'll save the beetle. It's the sort of thing a Buddhist should do."

I take off my shoes and wade in up to my knees to rescue the beetle. It's a large shiny black one. I take it over for my brother to see, before I set it down on the grass.

"I've got something else to show you," I say.

I hold out the large stone. In the sunlight, I can see that it is a shade of pale purple.

"Great-grandfather gave it to me. To keep. It's not a nice shape, but it's a pretty colour."

I put the shapeless stone into his hand.

"Great-grandfather says it used to belong to his father and he tried to give it to Grandfather and then to Father, but they both refused to take it. I don't really want it either, but I didn't want to upset him. He said I might find a use for it. I don't know what. Maybe to prop open a door or put on a sheet of paper to stop it blowing away."

My brother's fingers curl around one end of the stone.

"It's nice and cool to touch, isn't it? See. There are milky

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streaks running through it."

He smiles.

"I won't be allowed to have possessions though. So you can have it if you like."

His fingers uncurl. He wants me to keep it. I don't know why I feel so glad he doesn't want it.

The servants are getting restless. They'll get into trouble if we don't go back soon.

"I'm not frightened of leaving home," I say to Wei. "I'm looking forward to a different life. But I wish you were coming with me."

I'd like to walk the long way back, through the orchard and past the big rocks where the foxes have their winter den. It's about time for the kits to come out for their first taste of the world, and I'd like to see them. But the servants lead us back along the path, which is the quickest way.

My last meal at home is quiet. I can't eat more than a few mouthfuls because my stomach is clenched tight.

My mother frowns at me. "The cook made this tofu dish especially for you and you've hardly eaten anything."

I've already stopped eating meat.

Father asks Meiling to pass him the greens. Great-grandfather is allowed to eat with us for my last meal. He scrapes all the tofu into his bowl. My mother clicks her tongue.

A servant comes in to tell us there's a monk at the gate.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to, Tao," Meiling says.

"It's too late for him to change his mind now," Mother says. "No one's forced him to become a novice."

I smile at my sister. "Mother's right. It was my idea. I want to go."

I have nothing to pack. I will not be permitted to have possessions. I hitch my rolled-up blanket over my shoulder. I pick up my bag, but all it contains is a water skin and some steamed buns for the journey. While no one is looking, I slip in the purple stone. Great-grandfather is the only one who notices. He winks at

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me.

The monk is waiting outside the gate. He is older than I expected. He wears dusty brown robes, which look too thin and worn to protect him from even a spring breeze. His head is shaved. On his feet he has straw sandals. I look down at my sturdy leather shoes, made from water buffalo hide. I hadn't even thought about them! But it's too late to change now. Perhaps I can discard them along the road and arrive barefoot.

The monk pulls a chipped bowl from a bag over his shoulder.

"Rice for our journey?" he says. It's the first time he's spoken. It's not so much a request as a demand.

Mother sends a servant to the kitchen to fill it up. Father gives the monk some gold coins, a donation for the monastery. Mother's mouth is a straight line.

And then it's time to leave. The monk and I are just going to Luoyang today, where we will spend the night in a temple. I've never been further than that city before. Tomorrow the real journey begins. We will walk towards Song Shan where, hidden on the slopes of that mountain, there is a monastery. That will be my new home.

I'm ready to go. I've been ready since I first decided I wanted to be a monk more than a year ago. I bow to my parents and Great-grandfather. My sister kisses my cheek. I look at my brother – my closest friend and companion since the day I was born. He has tears in his eyes. A wave of panic is trying to force its way up my throat, and I can't breathe. I'm seven. I should be braver, but no matter how much I swallow, I can't stop tears filling my eyes. I hug my brother hard and now I am crying like a little child. I realise that I can't manage without him. I'm scared of what lies ahead.

"Don't be such a crybaby, Tao," my mother says. "You'll be coming home to visit us at Autumn Festival. Don't embarrass me in front of this holy man."

I let go of my brother. My tears have left a wet patch on his gown.

I look around at my family home. Every familiar detail is suddenly precious to me – each petal on the peony flowers, every

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fish in the pond, the diamond-patterned pebbles in the path, alternating light and dark. I breathe in the smell of the peach blossom. My heart pounds. My legs feel like they are going to buckle beneath me.

The monk puts a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Come,” he says. “It is time to go.”

We walk away from the gate. My legs support me. I turn to wave, but the gate is just closing. It has started to rain and everyone has gone inside.

“Each day will be easier,” the monk says. “And soon you will feel no regret.”

I hope he’s right. My bag bumps my hip as I walk. I reach in and feel the smooth coolness of the purple stone. I breathe more easily. The spring rain washes away my tears.

Today I begin the rest of my life.

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