



Carole Wilkinson

~ DRAGONKEEPER ~

PEMA'S JOURNEY

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I have found my people. I have waited such a long time for this meeting, but it is not as I ever imagined it. They are four Di men. They look at me. They do not smile. They speak to me in the Di language, but I have not used that speech for many years. They speak too fast. I hear the shape of the sentences, I catch a word here and there, but what they say makes no sense to me. I offer them the Di words that I can remember, the words of a five-year-old. *Mother. Soup. Father. Sun. Sister. Flower. Brother. Dog.* They frown and speak to me in Huaxia.

“Where are you from?”

“Luoyang,” I say, “but I am Di.”

They do not believe me.

“What is the name of the Di leader?” they ask.

I do not know.

I was cooking fish when they found me. They crept up on me, leaving their horses at a distance. I was so intent on my cooking, I did not hear them. They sniffed the air and liked the smell of my meal. They do not know how to catch fish. A dragon taught me to fish, but I don't tell them that. I have some stale dumplings that I stole in a village. They take my dumplings and my fish and share it between them, eating from their hands. They leave none for me.

I do not object. If they are going to Chengdu, I can travel with them.

They build up my fire, which I had made just big enough to cook my fish and no more. Either they do not care if others see them, or they are confident there is no one else around. I spread

my blanket on the ground at a distance, behind a small bush. They take no notice of me.

I started travelling with a family who were going to Chang'an. They were kind to me and I made myself useful, helping with the cooking, caring for the little boy. But the daughter didn't like me. The son was about two, the same age as my younger brother when he was killed by the Zhao. I enjoyed the boy's company the most. I gave him the wooden horse that had belonged to my own brother. He loved it. I was rewarded with the child's smiles, the mother's thanks and a larger portion of meat. From the daughter I got a sneer and treachery. She put some of the family's things in my bag while I was sleeping — a gold earring, a spoon, some dried figs. She said I had stolen them. I told them I might steal things sometimes, but never from my friends. They did not believe me. The father said I could not travel with them.

And then I was alone on this unfamiliar road.

I have often thought of Tao and Kai on this journey. They would be good travel companions with useful skills. And they would treat me as their equal. *Keep to yourself. Keep your thoughts secret. Don't rely on anyone.* Those were the rules that I used to live by. I forgot about them after I met Tao and Kai.

I should be used to being on my own. I was alone for years in Luoyang. Even as a little child I was not afraid of being alone. In Luoyang, I had walls around me — the crumbling walls of the city and the walls of my cellar. How I miss those walls, the close darkness, the smell of the city and my own possessions. Those things were my familiars. They welcomed me when I came back from searching for food. They were silent witness to my daily activities — cooking, mending my clothes, fashioning new items when the old ones were too small. I watched the children of the city play and fight and laugh and cry. I played with them when I was small. But as they grew older, they asked too many questions. They wanted more from me than I wished to give. I stopped playing with them — but I still watched them.

I had only been travelling alone for a few days when a band of Zhao soldiers surprised me as I slept. They were a straggly lot, with torn clothes, rusty weapons and no horses. I suspect they were deserters. They went through my things. They took all the grain I had. They searched me. Not caring about my modesty. They found the necklace that had belonged to my mother, which was hidden beneath my clothing and even the sneaky daughter of the family from Chang'an never knew I had it. It was made of gemstones — pink, white, green. Between the stones were small discs of silver. It would be worth something. But not as much as it is worth to me. They took it, that last trace of my mother.

Once, I had a keepsake from each member of my family. I carried them with me always. They were my most precious things. From my father, I had a knife, but different Zhao soldiers took that. The Zhao murdered my family. I tried to get revenge by killing Shi Le, their leader. I wounded him, but he still lives.

The day after the Zhao stole my mother's necklace, I kept hearing Tao's voice in my head. He was admonishing me, as he often did.

"It is your karma, Pema," the voice said. "If you steal, you cannot complain if someone steals from you."

It is easy for a monk to have such high standards. His monastery provides him with food. And anyway, monks take food from peasants who can not afford to give it. They call it receiving alms. But it is not much different to theft. There is no one to provide food for me.

I am a thief. I had to steal to stay alive when I lived in Luoyang. No one there would feed a Di orphan. At first I stole only what I needed — a bowl to eat out of when mine broke, a piece of cloth to cover my head, an onion to flavour my soup. But then stealing became the way I passed my days. I liked the challenge, the risk of being caught, the satisfaction of success. There was not much to steal in Luoyang, but I was not looking for wealth. I stole food from people who were not nice to me. I stole things to improve my underground home. I got so used to it, I almost forgot that stealing was a bad thing.

The Zhao deserters would have kept me as a servant, so I escaped from them during the night when they were snoring after draining a skin of *kumiss*. I travelled early in the morning and in the evening, sometimes into the night if there was a moon.

One evening I was still walking past sunset. I wanted to reach a row of hills I had seen in the distance. I thought it would be safer sleeping in the folds of a hill than on open ground. But the growing darkness deceived me. There was a sudden depression in the land, which I did not see. I missed my footing and fell. There was a stream at the bottom that I was glad to find as my water skin was empty, but that water came at a cost. I was bruised and cut by the fall. But worse than that, I landed on top of my bag. I heard the sound of splintering wood. When I opened the bag, the red lacquerware box that had belonged to my sister was in pieces.

As I lie here, waiting for the sun to rise, I wonder where Tao and Kai are. Tao should be back at his monastery by now, wrapped in his safe routine, hidden from the world. He might be lying on his monk's pallet, staring up at this crescent moon as it fades with the growing light, just as I am. But what about Kai? Is he returning to his cluster? He wanted Tao to go with him, I could tell. But Tao was not looking for adventure with a dragon, just safety. Kai's mountain home is somewhere far to the west. He would travel this way. Perhaps I will meet him on the road. A dragon would be a good companion.

The Di men have told me about Chengdu. They say the Di army has lost their hold on the city. There is fighting there as there is everywhere. Their leader has been forced to make his headquarters somewhere else. In my mind I had a picture of a city with markets stocked with plentiful food, houses that were not ruined, streets with children playing. In Chengdu I thought I would hear women singing the songs my mother once sang.

When they wake, the Di men tell me I can travel with them, if I find food and cook for them. One of them goes through my bag. He is not interested in my bowl and my fire sticks, but he finds the gold coin that Mr Huan slipped to me when no one was looking,

even though I sewed it into the seam of my bag. The man says it will be payment for taking me with them. I will slow them down. Then he finds something else in my bag. It is the 18-sided die that belonged to my elder brother. It is my one remaining precious thing. He tells the others they can amuse themselves with it in the evenings. They can throw the die and wager on which number it shows when it comes to rest. The die is the last link with my family. I watch him tuck it inside his boot.

The men get onto their horses.

“You can ride behind me until we reach those hills,” the man says. “After that, you can walk.”

I do not move.

“Are you coming or not?”