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The chatter of cascading water was the only sound that could be heard. It tumbled down a cliff and collected in a wide, dark pool. Beneath the surface, darker shadows circled—the slender, darting bodies of fish and larger oval shapes. Clumps of reeds grew among black rocks in the shallows. Further along the bank, delicate ferns pushed through a scatter of smooth black pebbles. One of the dark oval shapes drifted slowly to the surface. It was a turtle. A swirling current caught it and tugged it towards the rim of the pool. The turtle paddled its

webbed feet to keep from being carried over the edge where water spilt out of the calm pool and hurried on its journey down the side of the mountain.

A dragonfly balanced on the surface of the pool. Its slender legs were blood-red. Its long thin body was a startling blue, like a splinter of sunlit sky that had fallen to earth. The insect had two pairs of delicate wings crisscrossed with black veins. Each wing was marked with an eyespot. It could have been a precious jewel dropped by a careless princess. The dragonfly's wings whirred and it took off. It buzzed to a reed, and then from the reed to a rock.

A shadow fell on the dragonfly. A bundle of reeds swooped through the air and landed on it with a thwack, squashing it flat. Ping picked up the dead dragonfly and put it in the leather pouch that hung from her belt, adding it to her collection of crushed caterpillars and flattened moths.

A breeze disturbed the reeds. There was a sharp chill in the air that meant winter wasn't far away. Ping gazed into the distance. She had been looking out at the same view for half a year, but she hadn't tired of it yet. It was a clear day and mountain peaks stretched before her like a crowd of giants. Pine forests covered the lower, gentler slopes. On the higher, steeper slopes there were only a few twisted pines perched like vultures wherever their roots could get a hold.

Among the dull green of the pines were a few trees

tinted with the oranges and reds of autumn. Sunlight glinted off a distant lake. Ping sometimes felt like she was living in one of the paintings that hung in Huangling Palace. She had once believed that such landscapes only existed in the imagination of artists. Now she knew they were real.

Behind her the sheer cliffs of Tai Shan blotted out the sky. Ping preferred to look to the south where the mountain peaks were smaller and softer and didn't bring back memories she would rather forget.

The peace of the afternoon was disturbed by a harsh squawk. Ping closed her eyes and sighed. The squawking grew louder, more persistent. It sounded like something was being strangled. She didn't hurry. She walked over to a stand of pine trees. They were small trees, less than twice Ping's height, gnarled and twisted. The squawking turned into a continuous screech.

She stood beneath a particular tree with her hands on her hips.

"Long Kai Duan," she said crossly. "I told you not to climb trees."

A small creature was clinging upside down to one of the highest branches. It was covered in purple scales, the colour of violets in sunshine. Down its back was a row of sharp spines. Its tail was wrapped around the branch. It had large paws that seemed much too big for its body. Each paw had four sharp black talons that were all digging into the tree bark. The little creature turned

its upside-down head towards Ping. Bright-green eyes blinked anxiously. The creature's straight snout ended in a fat, pink nose with quivering nostrils. Its large mouth opened wide to let out another squawk, revealing sharp little teeth and a long, red tongue. It was a small dragon, not much bigger than a cat or a hare.

The bark under the creature's front talons came away from the branch. The little dragon's cry became more shrill. The talons on its back paws couldn't support its full weight. The dragon let go of the branch and was left dangling by its tail. It whimpered. Ping climbed onto a rock and reached up to the dragon. It clung onto her outstretched arm, digging its talons into her flesh.

"That hurts!" Ping said, but if the dragon understood, it took no notice.

Ping slipped on the rock's smooth surface and skidded down on her bottom, landing with a thud on the hard earth. The dragon let go of her arm, gave her a sharp nip on the nose and scuttled off.

Ping rubbed her nose. "If that's your way of saying thank you, I'd rather you didn't bother."

She examined the scratches on her arm. Both arms were covered with claw marks—some fresh, some healed to scars. She heard a splash. Kai had decided that tree climbing was too dangerous and had gone to swim in the pool. It was his favourite pastime, one that kept him happy for hours. He was a strong swimmer and as comfortable in the water as he was out of it, but Ping

still watched him anxiously. She couldn't swim. And the times when she'd found herself in deep water she'd been terrified.

Ping had needed a place to bring up a small, purple dragon—a secluded place where no one would disturb them, where Kai could run around without being seen. She didn't have a lot of experience of the Empire. She knew of only one place where no one ever went—Tai Shan, the sacred mountain that she had climbed with the young Emperor when he had sought the blessing of Heaven at the beginning of his reign. Only the Emperor and his shamans were allowed to climb past a certain point known as the Halfway to Heaven Gate. To do so without imperial permission was punishable by death.

The flight from Tai Shan to Ocean on the back of Long Danzi, Kai's father, had taken less than a day. It had taken her a week to walk back to Tai Shan. Carrying newly hatched Kai, she had climbed up the imperial path, passed beneath the Halfway to Heaven Gate and into the forbidden area. Then she left the path, cutting across the steep slopes. Liu Che, the young Emperor, had mentioned a pool to the west—Black Dragon Pool. It sounded grim, but with a dragon name it would be an auspicious place to raise Kai.

Black Dragon Pool wasn't as forbidding as it sounded. The cascade collected in a rocky depression where the steep slopes of Tai Shan levelled out briefly to form a

small plateau. The water wasn't black; it was the rocks that gave the pool its colour. There was a grove of pine trees around one side of the pool and a narrow meadow on the other. The plateau was sunlit for most of the day. Ping had found roots, mushrooms and berries to add to the simple meals she made with grain and lentils. There were also fish in the stream.

By the time Kai had tired of the pool, the sun was an orange ball on the jagged horizon. The lake in the distance reflected the same colour, as if molten liquid from inside the sun had leaked onto the earth. Ping shaded her eyes to enjoy the spectacle while it lasted. Then she went back to stirring the pot of fish soup that she had prepared over a small fire. She felt guilty for catching the fish which swam up to her so innocently when she bathed in the shallows, but she needed more than roots and berries to eat. She had to conserve her small store of grain and lentils for winter. The turtles would have made a welcome change from fish, but Ping couldn't bring herself to kill them. Apart from the baby dragon, the turtles were her only companions.

A bleating sound reminded her that this wasn't quite true.

"Yes, you're a companion too," she said to a she-goat tethered to a nearby tree. "In fact, I get more sense out of you than Kai."

Ping sat by the goat and milked her. She didn't have

to call the dragon. He was there before she set the bowl of warm milk on the ground, slurping it up with his long tongue, his front paws in the bowl, milk splashed on his nose.

The goat bleated again.

"You also have better manners than he does," Ping said.

She sat next to the fire, warming her hands. The baby dragon had grown. He was now ten times the size of the tiny creature that had hatched from the dragon stone into her lap. And he needed ten times as much food. When Kai had finished licking the bowl dry, he squawked plaintively.

"I've got something else for you," Ping said.

She pulled the dragonfly from the pouch around her waist. Kai snatched it from her. Ping let go before he bit her fingers. His long snout snuffled around her pouch looking for more.

"I wish you'd start catching your own meals," Ping grumbled, giving him a caterpillar.

Kai swallowed it whole. Then he gobbled down the other five caterpillars in Ping's pouch. He sat back on his haunches and belched. Ping hoped that meant he was finally satisfied. After walking round in a circle three times on the edge of Ping's gown, the little dragon settled down. He was asleep almost immediately.

When the old green dragon had flown off to the Isle

of the Blest, leaving her on the shores of Ocean with a dragon hatchling in her care, Ping had had no idea what to do next. Danzi had told her she was the Dragonkeeper and that she would know what to do. It was a heavy responsibility for a girl of ten-and-two years. She didn't want to stay on the beach. She didn't like Ocean. It was overwhelmingly huge. She felt insignificant enough as it was, without being dwarfed by the endless waters of Ocean.

The beach where Kai had hatched from the dragon stone was a long way from any town or village, but that didn't mean it was always deserted. Fishermen came to the shore to launch their flimsy bamboo and goat-hide boats, and Ping knew she had to keep away from people. If anyone saw Kai, the news of a baby dragon would soon spread from person to person, village to village. She didn't want that. Though Diao, the dragon hunter, was dead, there would be others who saw dragons only as creatures to chop up and sell. She'd already had to confront one of them—a necromancer. He'd captured her and Danzi, and had taken the dragon stone. He had powers beyond understanding that he used only for evil; he was a shape-changer too, like the old dragon. Ping felt a flash of pride. She'd managed to outwit him. She'd escaped with Danzi and the dragon stone.

Even a dragon as small as Kai was worth much gold to such greedy men. Also, if word of the dragon found its way to the Emperor's ears, he would send imperial

guards to arrest her. As far as he was concerned, Ping had helped the only remaining imperial dragon escape. If he found out that she'd also kept secret the birth of a new dragon, he would be furious.

The sun disappeared behind a distant mountain. The sky darkened. Loneliness crept over Ping like a chill as it always did when she thought of Liu Che. They had had long conversations together, just the two of them. Although he was the Emperor, he was just ten-and-five years old. He had enjoyed spending time with her. Ping had led the lonely life of an ill-treated slave girl. Liu Che had lived the pampered life of an over-protected prince, but they had at least one thing in common—neither of them had ever had friends of their own age.

She reached out to spoon some fish soup into her bowl. With her gown pinned down by the sleeping dragon, she could only just reach the pot of bubbling liquid on the fire. Her soup spoon wasn't as roughly made as her bucket (which she'd carved from a log herself); it was a bronze ladle with an elegant curved handle that ended in a dragon's head. She had bought it in the village where she had gone to buy the goat and her store of grain and lentils. An iron ladle would have been much cheaper, but iron hurt dragons when it was nearby. When it touched them, it burned their flesh. Her knife was bronze as well.

Ping was relieved that Kai was asleep, there was no squawking; there were no talons digging into her. But

evening was her least favourite time of the day. It was the time when she missed her friends the most. Liu Che wasn't the only friend she'd lost. She had enjoyed the young Emperor's company for just a short while, but Danzi and her pet rat Hua had been her companions throughout the perilous journey from the mountains in the west all the way to Ocean in the east. Danzi was a dragon of few words, but he was most talkative in the evenings. Other people thought of rats as dirty, ugly pests, but Hua had been Ping's saviour on many occasions. Before Hua had come into her life, Ping had no one. She'd never had a family. Her parents had sold her as a slave to Master Lan when she was small.

Old friends and new, somehow she'd managed to lose them all. She remembered the sounds that the old dragon made. They hadn't set her teeth on edge like the noises of the baby dragon. Danzi's sounds changed with his mood—the wind-chime sound of his conversation sounded melancholy, but meant he was happy; an urgent gonging meant he was impatient with her; the jingle of bells was the sound of his laughter. Then there was the gentle voice that she heard in her mind translating his sounds into words. When Kai was still inside the dragon stone, she had been able to hear him as well, not in words but in raw emotions—sadness, happiness, fear. That ability had disappeared after he hatched. It had flown away with the old dragon. She kept waiting to hear words form in her mind, just as

they had with Danzi, but there was nothing. Kai made all sorts of squawks and squeaks, but Ping had to guess what they meant.

She rinsed her bowl and filled it with water from a smaller pot on the fire. She sipped the hot water. (She'd long ago used up her small supply of tea leaves.) Her thoughts darkened with the sky. She tried not to think too much about Danzi and Hua. She wanted to believe that they were both happy and well—healed of their wounds and weariness by the magic waters of the Isle of the Blest far across Ocean. But she couldn't convince herself this was true. At first she had spent hours staring off to the east in the hope of seeing the old dragon flapping back towards her, but as the months slipped by Ping had come to accept that he was never coming back. She wasn't even sure if she believed that the Isle of the Blest existed.

Sometimes when she remembered Danzi, it brought tears to her eyes. At other times, she felt frustration and anger bubble up inside her. She was grateful to the old dragon for freeing her from the misery of her life of slavery at Huangling Palace. She was thankful for all the knowledge he had given her about herb lore, about the constellations of stars, and how to concentrate her *qi* power. She owed everything to Danzi. She hadn't even known her own name until he came into her life.

At the same time, she was very angry with him. As they had travelled to Ocean, day after day, *li* after *li*, he



had taught her much about the world, but the one thing he hadn't told her was how to raise a baby dragon. He hadn't even told her that the dragon stone she carried for him was an egg. Rather than telling her the names of birds and flowers, the mating habits of bears, why hadn't he spent every minute telling her everything he knew about dragon rearing? Instead he had given her just a few words of advice before he flew away from her and his dragon son—forever.

It made Ping furious when she thought about it. He had told her the baby dragon needed milk and she had found a goatherd willing to sell her a she-goat whose baby had died, but she didn't know how much milk Kai needed every day. It seemed he would go on drinking until he burst if she let him. Danzi had also told her that as Kai grew he needed to include insects in his diet, and later small birds, but he hadn't mentioned when and how many. She had started feeding him caterpillars and dragonflies when he was three months old because he was always squawking as if he was hungry.

Ping shivered. The fire had died down. It was dark. Her bowl of hot water had gone cold. The sleeping dragon's purple scales glowed faintly in the light from the slender moon. She carried him into the cave where they slept. Inside, a pile of dried grass and pine needles served as a bed. She put Kai on the bed and then lay next to him. Kai slept in a tight coil, with his nose under his back paws and the end of his tail drawn up through



the centre. It looked as if someone had tied him in a knot. He wriggled closer to Ping until his spines stuck into her side.

At least the baby dragon slept well. Ping's nights were peaceful, but she often couldn't sleep. It wasn't the snoring near her ear that kept her awake, but the thoughts churning in her mind. Was Tai Shan the right place for them to live? Should she have stayed near Ocean? How would they get through the winter?