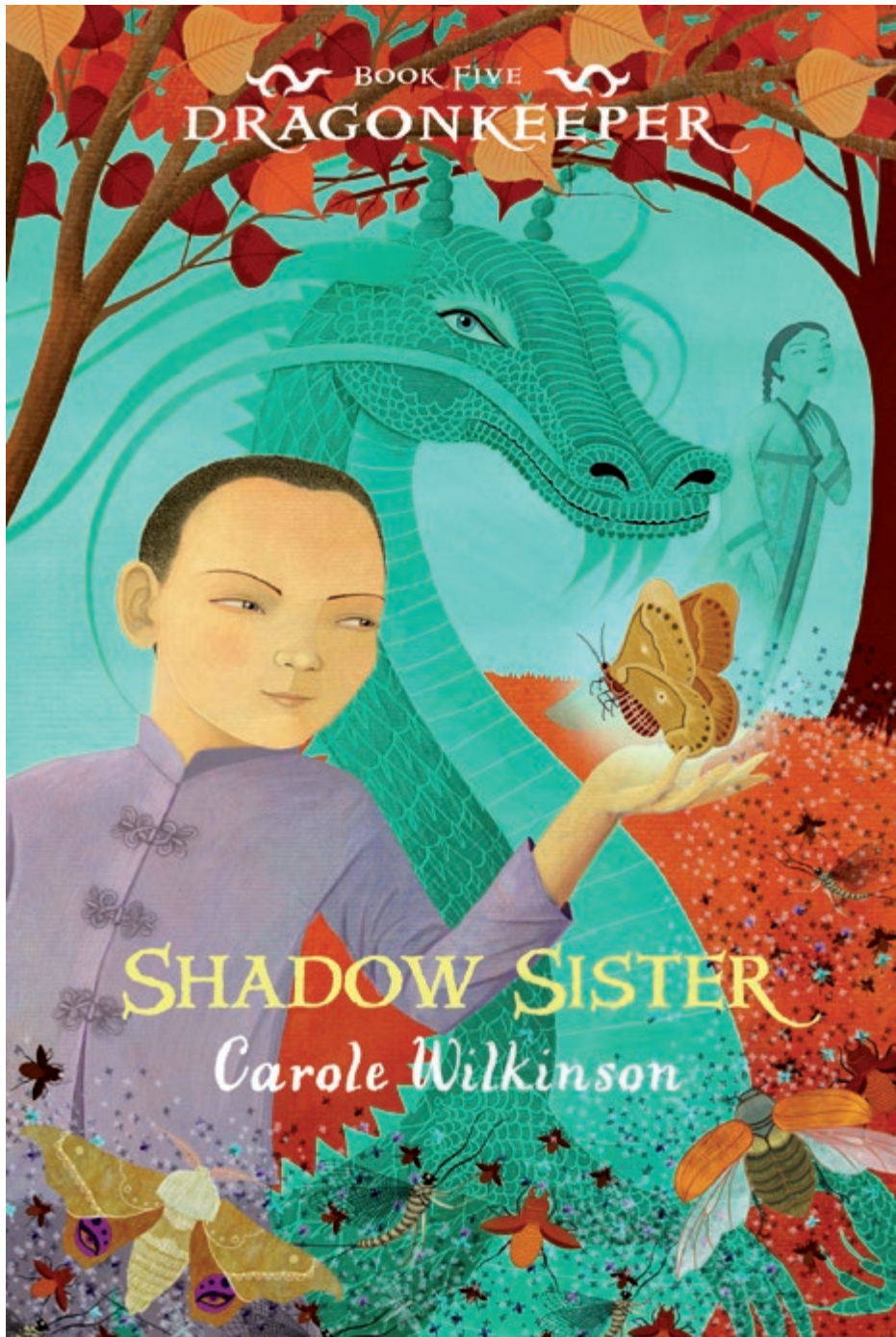


BOOK FIVE
DRAGONKEEPER

SHADOW SISTER
Carole Wilkinson



NB. This is an **ADVANCE UNCORRECTED CHAPTER SAMPLE**. Please note contents and publishing information are subject to change. When quoting from this book, please check publishing details and refer to the final printed book for editorial accuracy.



Chapter One

BELLYACHE



The dragon groaned. “My stomach hurts.”

He had been slow-moving all day, insisting on stopping often to rest.

“Let me see your tongue.”

The dragon sat on his haunches in front of the boy. Tao had grown a little in the weeks the two had been travelling together but, when sitting, Kai was still head and shoulders taller. He was imposing, even when his scales were dull and the spines down his back were drooping. He obediently stuck out his tongue. It was long, narrow and ended in a point, like a snake’s tail. A grey snake.

Tao knew that a dragon’s tongue should be a healthy red, not grey. Also it should not be covered with a thick, greenish coating. Tao prodded it with a twig. “It doesn’t look good.”

Kai groaned again. “I think I am going to be—”

He retched. Tao stepped back but he wasn’t quick enough. A stream of dragon vomit spewed onto the ground

SHADOW SISTER

and splattered all over Tao's straw sandals. It formed a grey puddle, thick and slimy, containing dark yellow lumps and several squashed insects. It smelled putrid.

"That is disgusting," Tao said, wiping his sandals and feet with leaves.

"Feel bad," Kai moaned. He held a large rusty nail in his left forepaw.

"The cockroaches I gave you to eat might make you feel sick, but they still could stop the iron from hurting you."

The dragon opened out his paw. Blisters had formed where the nail touched his pads. Kai threw the iron nail into the forest and then retched again, adding to the pool of vomit.

Tao moved to where he could breathe in fresher air. He drank from his water skin. Then he consulted a list scrawled on a piece of bark and crossed out an item with a stub of charcoal.

"That rules out cockroaches," he said.

"Insects with shells are bad. I told you that," Kai said, or at least those were the words Tao heard in his head.

Tao recited a sutra for the dead cockroaches and prayed that their next life would be better.

"I ate some beetles when I was small," Kai continued. "They made me sick too."

Tao spent a long time searching for the nail in the undergrowth. When he finally found it he scooped up a

BELLYACHE

handful of wet earth and squeezed it around the nail. He wrapped a length of leather around the clump of earth and put the bundle in his bag.

It was Tao's fault that the cockroaches had died. He felt guilty, but he was eager to discover how to protect Kai from the effects of iron. Dragons reacted badly to contact with anything made of that metal. Just having iron nearby made them lose their strength. If it touched the belly or the hide around their ankles, where there were no protective scales, weeping sores formed. Prolonged contact with iron resulted in sickness and awful welts. Tao had seen it himself. It also weakened their eyesight.

It was impossible to avoid iron while they were travelling in the realms of men. The poorest peasant had some sort of iron implement for the field or the kitchen. Even a piece of iron as small as the nail, buried in earth and wrapped in three layers of leather, seemed to make the dragon lethargic. Tao hoped they would eventually reach uninhabited lands but, while they were still near human settlements, Kai's sensitivity to iron was a serious handicap.

"We need to get going, Kai."

"Am too sick to walk," the dragon said. "Want to stay here."

"It's mid-afternoon. We can't stop yet."

The dragon crouched down and pulled all four paws under him, which meant he wasn't going anywhere.

SHADOW SISTER

“And I will not eat the other things on your list.”

Tao leaned on his staff. He was tired too. For six weeks he'd been walking up and down mountains with the dragon. The idea of stopping early was tempting. He looked at the sky, or at least the patches of it visible through the trees. It had been overcast for weeks, but hadn't rained. They didn't really need shelter, but Tao still preferred to spend his nights with a roof over his head, or at least a cliff at his back.

To ensure that they didn't run into bands of nomads, Kai had chosen a path that was no bigger than a goat track. Nomads were men from the tribes beyond the Great Wall who had invaded Huaxia. They were skilled horsemen who could ride anywhere they wished, but they were used to wide plains where their horses could gallop. Nomads didn't like the mountains with their tall trees and narrow hemmed-in paths. Tao hoped that if they were careful, they could avoid being caught up in the chaos of the time. Most of the conflict took place in the cities and the towns, where rival nomad tribes fought over the ruins. There was little left in the towns for nomads to plunder, but there was nothing at all in the mountains. That's what Tao hoped anyway.

“Let's keep going for a little while. There might be swallows nesting in an overhang around the next bend in the path.”

BELLYACHE

The thought of having his favourite food for his evening meal encouraged the dragon and he got to his feet. Tao was pleased he'd managed to get Kai moving again. Now all he had to do was convince him not to abandon the iron project.

The idea had come to Tao when they were climbing up a particularly steep path and he was wishing he could fly – or at least that Kai could. He had remembered the yellow dragon Sha, a dragon old enough to have wings. Tao had given her a scroll of precious sutras that he had rescued. He was wondering if she had fulfilled her promise to carry them to safety. When Tao had first seen Sha, she was a captive of the Zhao nomad general Jilong. He had given the dragon a potion to make her aggressive – a foul brew of tigers' blood mixed with scorpion tails, cockroaches, snake tongues, bat droppings and cinnabar. Tao had noticed that when Sha was in battle rage, although iron blades wounded her the same as any creature of flesh and blood, proximity to iron did not make her sick or weak. He had concluded that one of the ingredients of the potion must have made her immune to the effects of iron. The tigers' blood was the main component. Tigers were one of the few enemies of dragons, and Kai was sure that the blood of an enemy would be what made the shy dragon aggressive. In fact, it had turned her into a killer.

Tao was quite proud of the experiment he had devised

SHADOW SISTER

to discover which of the other ingredients had given Sha immunity to iron.

Scorpion tail had been the first item on the list. Kai had refused to cooperate, so Tao had no choice but to find a scorpion on his own. His conscience troubled him sorely – a Buddhist should not harm any creature – but he had overturned every rock they passed, searching for one without success.

One night a few days earlier, Tao had made a small fire to cook some taro root.

“Iron is not a problem,” Kai had complained. “Most people have moved south.”

It was true, they had hardly seen a soul since they’d left Yinmi Monastery. Anyone who was able to make the journey had fled from the nomads to Jiankang, a city in the south. Tao had insisted on conducting the experiment anyway.

“We might run into nomads,” Tao had said.

Nomads carried many weapons – spears, swords, daggers, arrow tips – and they were all made of iron.

As he’d poked the taro root to see if it was cooked, he saw a sandy-coloured scorpion sitting on one of his firestones. It edged closer to the fire, warming itself.

“Kai! There’s a scorpion. Catch it!”

The dragon moved his head slowly from side to side. “I will not.”

BELLYACHE

Tao was sorry to disturb the creature, but he managed to trap the scorpion under the melon gourd he used as a bowl. While he was wondering what to do next, the creature had escaped and stung him. Kai came to Tao's rescue and squashed the scorpion with a large stone. The dragon consented to taste it. After he roasted it over the coals, he actually enjoyed eating the scorpion, and added it to his list of favourite delicacies.

The scorpion bite made Tao sick for three days. He accepted that it was karma for killing the creature.

Snake tongue was even more difficult to locate. Kai felt a kinship to all scaly creatures, and wouldn't kill a snake. Tao couldn't contemplate killing one himself. It was by chance that they startled a hawk in the process of eating a small snake. The bird flapped away and dropped his meal. Tao was relieved that he wasn't responsible for the snake's death. He cut out the dead reptile's tongue and Kai ate it raw. Since small creatures like scorpions and snakes were so difficult to catch, Tao was very glad that they didn't need to capture a tiger for its blood.

The previous night, Tao had made Kai eat the cockroaches as the next phase of the experiment and now Kai was still groaning about their effects on his stomach. Tao tried to take the dragon's mind off the pain.

"You haven't recited a poem for a while," he said.

"You do not like my poetry."

SHADOW SISTER

“It’s improving,” Tao said, though he didn’t mean it.

Tao had grown tired of Kai’s riddling and one day, after twenty-five riddles in a row, he’d put his fingers in his ears and refused to listen to another one, let alone answer it. Kai had sulked for a *li* or two and then started reciting poetry of his own composition.

Kai didn’t need a lot of encouragement now.

*“When my insides ache
And make a gurgling sound,
The contents spurt
All over the ground.”*

Tao could have been critical about the metre of the poem, not to mention the subject, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

Kai stopped walking again. “I need sweetie berries to settle my stomach.”

“I’ll search for some wolfberries if we can keep walking until sunset.”

Kai reluctantly trudged up the mountain track, groaning as he went. Tao tried to do some walking meditation to distract himself from his blistered feet and aching calves, but his meditation skills had deserted him. This wasn’t the life he’d imagined when he’d decided to go on an adventure with Kai. His mind was full of thoughts. What would they have for their evening meal? Where would they sleep that night? And, more importantly, where were they going?

BELLYACHE

Tao had spent seven or eight happy years being a devout novice at Yinmi Monastery, with the full expectation of living the quiet, contemplative life of a monk for the rest of his days. But then one night Kai had turned up at his monastery, and Tao found himself on an adventure, breaking every rule Buddha had set down for novices. He'd expected that the adventure would end, and his life would return to its normal measured pace but it hadn't. He abandoned his dream of becoming a monk and left his monastic life to travel with a dragon.

Although Tao had failed to be a good novice monk, he was trying hard to be a good Buddhist. He still followed the novice's precepts as best he could, refusing to eat the flesh of animals. He did now allow himself to eat after midday, and he'd given up straining the water he drank to rescue any tiny creatures living in it. He no longer wore monk's robes and he didn't carry an alms bowl to beg for food. As a novice, Tao had relied on the charity of others to feed him. Now he was learning how to forage for his own food, since Kai's idea of a tasty meal wasn't always to Tao's liking. It had taken hours of meditation and much careful consideration before Tao decided that it was all right for him to sacrifice the lives of a scorpion and three cockroaches for the cause of saving Kai from pain and discomfort, perhaps even death.

Their journey had started unexpectedly when they fled

SHADOW SISTER

from the monastery where the evil monk Fo Tu Deng was about to take control from the abbot. Monks were permitted only five possessions, and Tao had less than that at first – the clothes he wore, his staff, a vial of yellow oil, and a shard of purple stone. He was no longer a novice monk, but Tao had been determined to have no more than five possessions. He couldn't survive with the traditional possessions of a monk; instead he would carry his own five unique belongings. He'd added a water skin to make up the five. Then he'd realised that he wore a wolf tooth on a leather thong around his neck. Instead of discarding it, he sharpened it and used it for cutting. That meant he had six possessions. And he needed to cook food, so he'd found a melon gourd and firesticks. The nights got colder and a blanket became essential. Nine possessions, not five. Then there was so much to carry; he'd woven a bag from willow twigs. Ten possessions, and that wasn't counting his bark list and charcoal. It was not an auspicious start.

Tao had enjoyed their wanderings at first, letting the fall of his staff decide which direction they went, but his feet were sore and he needed a purpose. He wondered if he'd made a mistake abandoning his dream to be a monk for this uncertain life of wandering.

Kai poked him in the arm with a talon. "You won't find any sweetie berries if you allow your thoughts to keep wandering."

Tao ignored the dragon. He didn't want to lose his train of thought.

"When we left Yinmi, you said we were going on a quest," he said. "We've been labouring up and down mountains for weeks and I still don't know what our quest is."

"You did not like any of my ideas."

"Hunting for bears because they taste good is not a quest for a Buddhist who doesn't eat meat."

"I had other suggestions."

"I'm not interested in searching for hidden treasure either. I have no need of treasure."

"I am waiting for heaven to suggest an appropriate quest."

Ever since Kai had announced that Tao was a dragonkeeper, his dragonkeeper, Tao hadn't known where his life was heading. His and Kai's destinies were entwined, he was sure of that, but he wished he knew what being a dragonkeeper meant. So far Kai had been rather vague about what it entailed. The dragon had also said Tao couldn't become a true dragonkeeper until he had accepted the bronze mirror that had been owned by Kai's previous dragonkeeper – and by his father's dragonkeepers before that. It was confusing. Tao was honoured that the dragon thought he was worthy of such a role, but he was only fifteen. It sounded like the job of

a much older, more experienced person.

Somewhere to the west, on the top of a mountain, far from humans, was a place Kai called the dragon haven. This was where the other members of his cluster lived. Kai was the leader of that diminishing band of dragons, or so he said, but he had left his home when he became bored with life on a remote mountain top. That was where the dragonkeeper's mirror was kept.

"We need a proper quest, Kai," Tao said. "Shouldn't we be heading towards the dragon haven?"

"That is where I am going. But it will be a long and slow journey. We cannot get there before you are ready to take up your role as dragonkeeper."

"I am ready." Tao didn't mention the doubts that were nagging him. "I've left behind everything I've ever known."

"Like a craftsman, first you must learn the appropriate skills."

"Yes, but what are they? You haven't told me yet. And how far is it to this dragon haven exactly?"

"No more speaking," Kai said. "My stomach still hurts."

That made no sense at all to Tao, but when the dragon wasn't in the mood to talk, there was no point pressing him further.

Tao knew that he was descended from Kai's previous dragonkeeper, a young girl called Ping. There were three characteristics that marked out a dragonkeeper – using the

left hand, being able to interpret a dragon's sounds, and having second sight. Kai had said that Tao was the first of Ping's descendants to have the characteristics.

He glimpsed the drooping branches of a wolfberry tree not far from the path. There was one thing he had learned about dragons – they loved the fruit of the wolfberry tree. He pushed through the undergrowth to get to it. Birds and animals had long since stripped most of the tree of its fruit, but he searched each branch and managed to find a few of the red berries, now darkened and wrinkled. He found more that had fallen to the ground. There were mushrooms growing at the foot of the tree and he picked some for his evening meal.

“Here, Kai,” Tao said. “I’ve found you some sweetie berries.”

Kai took the berries. Tao was expecting him to grumble that they weren't fresh, but he didn't. He ate four and put the rest behind one of his reverse scales, and then set out along the path again. Tao followed him.

One thing had changed since Tao met the dragon – he had developed what Kai called second sight. The visions were difficult to unravel, like puzzles, but he had learned to interpret them – eventually. That gave Tao confidence that he really was a dragonkeeper. He hadn't called up a vision since they left Yinmi. He didn't want to squander this gift. For all he knew, the number of visions could be limited.

SHADOW SISTER

“I would like worms for dinner,” Kai announced. “I wish they were not so hard to find.”

“Worms are easy to find!” Tao was tired of listening to the dragon complain. He pointed at the damp earth. “You can see where they’ve burrowed into the earth.”

Kai dug holes in the soft earth, grumbling when he still couldn’t find any worms.

“You’re pretending they’re hard to find, so that I’ll do it.”

“I am not!” Kai said, digging an even bigger hole and flicking dirt into Tao’s eyes.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Tao said. “You don’t need to dig, that scares them off. This is what you do.”

He laid his hands flat on the ground. “You can feel them below the earth.”

“My paws are always in contact with the earth.” Kai was getting annoyed. “I never feel worms.”

Tao waited patiently with his palms on the damp soil. Before long worms emerged and Tao put them in the gourd. More creatures were about to meet their end because of him.

“Hmmp,” Kai said. “I suppose there has to be *one* thing you can do better than me.”

A few months earlier, Tao’s life had been filled with holy pursuits – meditating, transcribing sutras and learning Sanskrit. Now it was all about finding worms for a lazy dragon.

BELLYACHE

The sky was dark and heavy, the landscape was colourless and the sun hadn't shown its face all day. Night had been reluctant to leave the land that morning, and all day darkness had been lurking not far away, eager to shroud the world again.

Tao didn't have the energy to continue. He could see a rock face with a slight overhang not far away. It was probably the closest thing he would find to shelter that day.

"Let's stop here for the night," he said.

Kai didn't object. He went off to hunt, while Tao did some meditation.

When Kai returned with two mice and a squirrel, Tao was sitting next to a pile of twigs and sticks, neatly set to make a fire.

"I suppose you'd like to cook those."

"Of course I would," the dragon replied, a little perplexed.

"Go ahead."

Tao looked smugly at the dragon.

"Could you light a fire?" Kai asked.

"I could," Tao replied.

"*Will* you light a fire?" Kai said. "Please."

"I will."

Tao reached for his firesticks. He was pleased there was more than one thing he could do better than Kai.