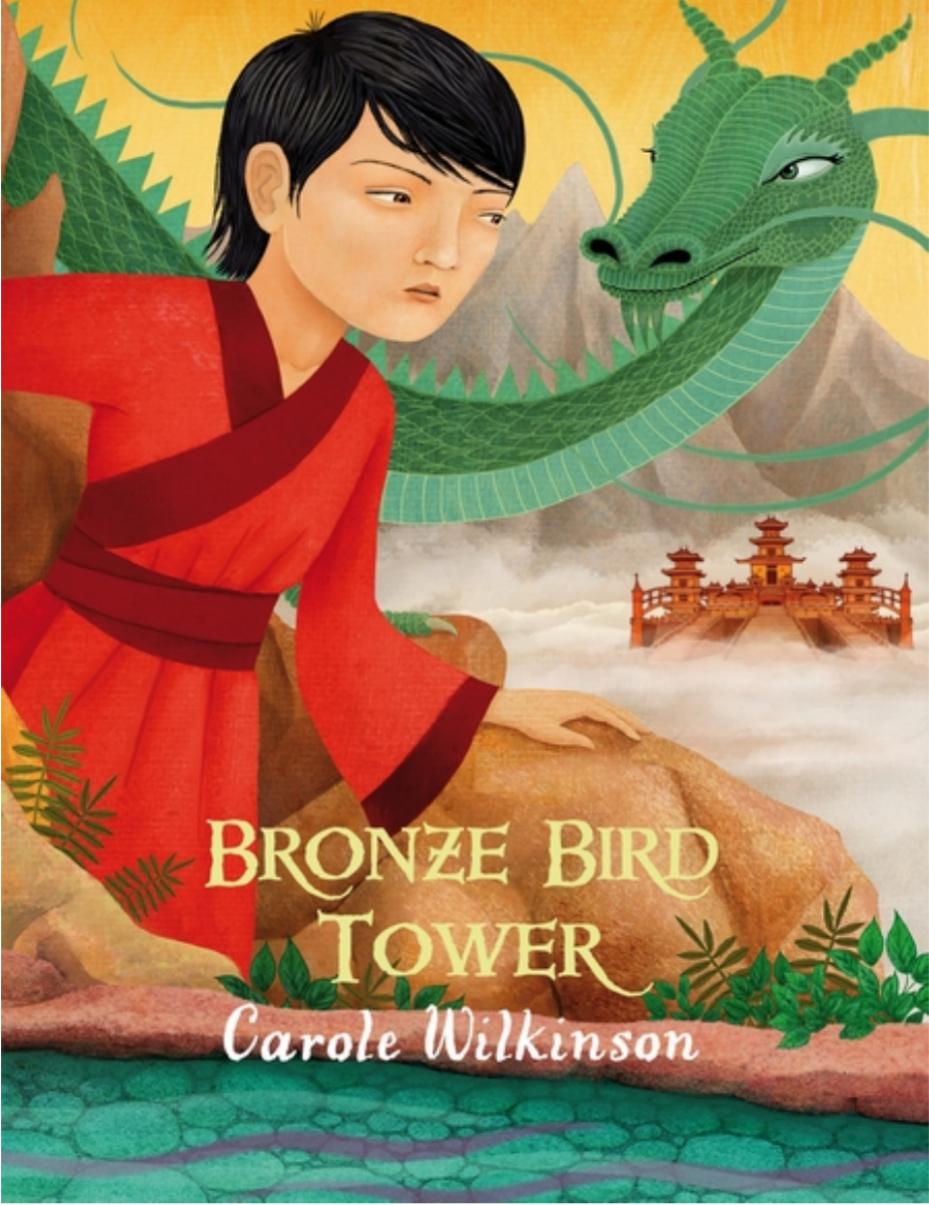




BOOK SIX



# DRAGONKEEPER



BRONZE BIRD  
TOWER

Carole Wilkinson

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## Chapter One

# THE WHITE POOL



“This is the dragon haven,” Kai said.

Tao leaned wearily on his staff and stared up at the mountain peak before them.

He had seen many mountains since he’d left his family home four months earlier. Some were higher, some more breathtaking. This one was the strangest. It rose vertically out of the high plain, looming over them, dark and daunting, its face perfectly flat. But the cliff wasn’t composed of one large piece of rock, it was made up of long, straight columns of black stone, each perhaps two handspans wide and packed together neatly, as if a *deva* had patiently arranged them. Then the mountain stopped suddenly. It looked like that same heavenly being had sliced off the top with an enormous sword blade.

The sky above was blue, but the black mountain absorbed the sunlight that fell on it. It also sucked up any pleasure Tao might have felt at finally reaching their destination.

“It doesn’t look too high,” Tao said, trying to sound positive.

Mist streamed from the dragon’s nostrils. “It is high enough.”

Tao wished he’d kept his thoughts to himself. Kai was a handsome green dragon, fully grown with impressive horns – but no wings. He couldn’t ascend the mountain any more than Tao could. It would be at least five hundred years before he was old enough to grow wings.

“And it’s the same all the way around?”

Kai nodded. “The mountain has four faces and I never found as much as a toehold on any of them. It is impossible to climb up ... or down. The only way to reach the haven is to fly.”

Kai sighed. The dragon haven had been his home since he was a dragonling, yet he showed no pleasure in returning.

“Gu Hong selected this place to be the home of the dragons,” he said. “She chose well. It is not so high that it is wintry throughout the year round. And no creatures can scale the sheer cliffs – not a goat, not a rabbit and, more importantly, not a human.”

Kai had told Tao about the ancient red dragon who, although not their official leader, had taken it upon herself to guide the dragons until Kai was old enough to lead them. But since her death, the dragons had had no leader.

Tao and Kai had come to the dragon haven to warn them about the threat from the leader of the nomad tribe called the Zhao. And so that Kai could claim the leadership.

Tao wondered how Kai intended to get up onto the plateau where the dragons lived. Kai had reluctantly explained how he'd gotten down from the plateau. It had been an accident. He'd fallen off while playing a juvenile but dangerous game and had been lucky it hadn't killed him. Once he was off the plateau, he realised he could escape.

Kai wasn't studying the cliffs. He was scanning the pale blue sky.

"I was expecting the dragons to come down to greet us," he said. "Whoever is the lookout should have seen us hours ago."

All dragons had exceptional eyesight. Even humans knew that. It was said that they could see a mustard seed from a distance of a hundred *li*. Dragons' hearing however was poor and humans could hear much better than them.

"Can you hear anything?" Kai asked.

Tao shook his head.

No dragons descended to welcome them. Kai shape-changed into an eagle, a sparrow and then a butterfly. He sighed again. He was an exceptional shape-changer, but he couldn't really transform into a winged creature. The forms he took were only an illusion.

Kai wasn't the only dragon in their travelling party.

Sunila was a different sort of dragon, a *naga* from the land of Tianzhu. He flapped his small wings and made a chirruping sound. As they had journeyed together, Kai and the *naga* had learned to understand each other's speech, but Tao didn't need a translation. Though Kai couldn't fly up to the plateau, Sunila could.

"You and Sunila must go up." Tao heard Kai's voice in his mind. It was tinged with sadness and frustration. "The haven dragons will not be able to understand Sunila. They may attack a strange dragon. They are not trusting of humans either, but you can speak to them. Most of the dragons can understand some human speech."

For months, Kai had been talking about the day they would reach the dragon haven. Now they had arrived and he couldn't introduce Tao to the dragons. Travelling with Kai, it had seemed that being his dragonkeeper was as easy as wandering around the countryside, enjoying each other's company. It meant freedom. But Tao's destiny was to be dragonkeeper for all dragons. He wanted that more than anything in the world. And yet, being dragonkeeper to a whole cluster of unfamiliar dragons, who had chosen to live in seclusion on the top of a bleak mountain – that was another matter entirely.

"How should I approach them?" Tao asked.

"Speak before they have a chance to attack," Kai said.

Tao's excitement turned to alarm. "Attack?"

“They might be nervous about strangers arriving. I am sure they will be friendly, as long as you observe the proper protocols. Get down on your knees, bow your forehead to the ground and say, ‘I come in peace. I honour your foremothers, and all the great and grand fliers of old.’”

It was not the meeting Tao had imagined.

“Tell them I am below. If they look hostile, offer to massage their toes.”

“Massage their toes?”

“It is a sign of submission. And sing to them. That will calm them. But there is no need to worry. Once they know I am here, you will be safe. You must tell them I wish to ascend.”

Tao climbed onto the *naga*’s back. He was a small dragon compared to Kai, covered in neat blue scales. His eyes were blue too, and instead of two horns, he had just one. It was creamy white with pretty markings shaped like misshapen teardrops and it rose from the centre of his head, curving back gently and narrowing to a point. The end of his tail was not spiky like Kai’s, instead it was soft and floppy.

Tao wove his fingers through Sunila’s mane, which was a beautiful golden colour and silky. He braced his feet on the *naga*’s bent hind legs, glad he wouldn’t be strapped on like a fearful child. He wanted to make a good impression when he met the haven dragons.

Sunila took off vertically, as he always did, flapping his

wings sideways. As they rose, Tao heard Kai's anxious voice in his head.

"If Sha is there, she will vouch for you."

"Should I tell them about Jilong's threat?" Tao called out.

"Not yet."

The last time Tao and Kai had seen the Zhao warlord Jilong they had defeated him in battle, but he had survived. Tao shuddered at the thought of the threat the warlord had made. If the dragons were alarmed by one harmless human and a small *naga*, he would have to wait until the right moment to tell them about a barbarian from beyond the Great Wall, who had made a vow to kill all dragons.

Most humans were wary of dragons. Along their journey, Kai had kept his dragon shape hidden, shape-changing into a human or animal companion for Tao. Recently, they had heard fearful people in villages whisper tales of dragons who stole their goats and pigs, leaving them without enough food to feed their families. Sometimes they stole gold coins and pretty ornaments. Tao wondered how such stories had started and if they were true.

It wasn't the first time Tao had ridden the *naga*. As they'd travelled, they had constantly needed to know if there was danger ahead, or if anyone was following them. Since Tao and Sunila didn't always agree on what was dangerous, and

Sunila's idea of a safe place was the topmost branch of a tree, Tao had always accompanied the *naga*. Kai was never happy when that happened.

Tao counted the wing beats, just twenty-two before they reached the top. The steep cliffs weren't the only defence. Sharp sticks projected from where the rock face ended and the plateau began. Sunila was forced to rotate his wings in an awkward manoeuvre so that he could flap backwards and avoid the vicious points. Readjusting the angle of his wings, he flew horizontally for a few *chang* until he was hovering above flat ground. Then he descended, landing with a bump. Tao had fallen off many times, thanks to Sunila's clumsy landings, but this time he didn't lose his grip and stepped off gracefully. He stood tall, his robes rippling in the breeze. He couldn't have wished for a more impressive arrival. There was only one thing missing.

"I can't see any dragons." Tao spoke to Kai in his mind.

A faint sound floated up on the air current from below. It sounded like metal blades scraping over each other. Tao could also hear Kai's anxious voice in his mind.

"No dragons!"

The sound from below changed to the sad clanging of a cracked bell before the breeze carried it away.

Tao looked out over the plateau. The dragon haven wasn't the pretty place Tao had imagined. The only

vegetation was spiky bushes. Yellow grass that hadn't seen sunlight all winter was starting to push through the grey melting snow. The plateau was only about two *li* in length from north to south, narrower from east to west. Sunila walked between the bushes, sniffing the ground. He had big feet that made a slapping sound on the clay. Towards the centre of the plateau, the land fell a little. Tao scrambled down a tumble of loose rocks and found himself in a completely different landscape.

On this southern end of the plateau, the snow had melted, revealing a lumpy surface of slippery greyish clay, a few straggly ferns and some moss. This part of the plateau would have been even bleaker than the other if it wasn't for one feature – it was covered with pools. Instead of reflecting the blue of the sky, they were other more startling colours – yellow, orange, bright pink. They were like jewels sewn onto faded robes. Plumes of steam rose from them. There were also smaller pools of bubbling mud. The landscape was strange but, in its own way, beautiful.

"The dragons must be still hibernating in one of the pools," Tao said.

"They never hibernate and they always ..." Kai's voice in Tao's mind faded and was replaced by a low chattering sound.

"I can't hear you, Kai."

The plateau was eerily silent as Tao wound his way between the steaming pools. He warmed his frozen hands in the steam that rose out of a crater. The air on the plateau had an unpleasant smell. It reminded him of when the cook at his family home had cracked open an egg that had been in the larder too long and gone bad.

Kai's voice returned, although it was still not as clear as it usually was. "Are there any signs of an attack? Any ..."

Kai had told Tao the story of his journey to the dragons' previous home, and how he and Ping had arrived to find only the bones of dead dragons. Tao was dreading coming across a similar awful sight, but though he walked around the plateau and Sunila flew aloft, there was no such discovery.

Tao was aware of a faint rumbling, like distant thunder. He moved towards the eastern edge of the plateau. The sound grew louder. As he got closer to the source, he realised it wasn't a single sound. It was a chorus of different notes combining. The deepest was a growl that he could feel reverberating through the soles of his worn boots. There was one that was higher pitched than the others, like a mosquito buzzing.

The noise was coming from a cave, the largest on the plateau. Tao's previous experiences in caves had led him to expect bad things – bats, ghosts, the bones of the dead. But a dragonkeeper had to be brave. Sunila made a growling

sound deep in his throat. He was ready to spit venom at any enemies. Tao stepped into the darkness. The rumbling chorus rang in his ears. He realised what the sounds were. They were snores.

As Tao's eyes adjusted to the dim light, large lumpy shapes became visible. Each one expanded and contracted in time with the rhythm of the rumbling. His mind conjured up wolves and wild men, but there was a smell too. Not the rotten-egg smell from outside, this was more like socks that someone had been wearing for weeks on end, or the manure farmers used to feed their crops. Added to these smells was another, like slightly rotten plums. He knew that smell. The shapes in the cave weren't monsters. They were living, breathing dragons.

"Kai, I've found the dragons! They're asleep in a cave."

Kai's voice in his head was faint. "They should not be sleeping at this time of day."

Tao took a step closer. One of the dragons leaped up with a roar. Tao had stepped on the tip of its tail. He stood his ground, but Sunila, who had followed him into the cave, let out a shriek.

There was a flash of lightning, a crack of thunder.

"No, Sunila. Don't make it rain!"

Sunila had different abilities to the dragons of Huaxia. Making the weather turn bad was one of them. He suddenly stopped shrieking and disappeared completely,

like a flame blown out by a gust of wind. Being able to make himself invisible was another of his skills.

The dragon on whose tail Tao had trodden was greyish white, the colour of the old snow on the northern end of the plateau. It made the same harsh cry as Kai when he was anxious. In the thin light, Tao saw five other heads rise up.

Tao's mind was suddenly full of noise, wordless but distressed, confused, discordant, like starlings roosting together at sunset or a crowd of frightened children all calling out at once. If Kai was trying to speak to him, this clamour was drowning him out.

The biggest dragon was black. It made a deep grumbling roar. Tao's courage deserted him. He turned and ran from the cave. Once he was in the light, he regained some of his nerve and faced the cave entrance.

"I come in peace. I am Tao, dragonkeeper to Kai." This wasn't entirely true. Kai hadn't formally asked him to be his dragonkeeper. "I honour your great-grandmothers and grandfathers, the ..." He couldn't remember what Kai had told him to say. "The old fliers of the past." He knew that wasn't right.

The dragons emerged from the cave slowly, blinking and yawning. As well as the black one, there was a red one, a yellow and three white females. Tao's heart sank. The yellow dragon wasn't Sha. She hadn't returned to the haven with the precious sutras he had entrusted to her.

And he had no one to vouch for him. That didn't matter: the dragons ignored him completely. They stood there as if they couldn't remember what they were going to do. Now that they were out in the daylight, Tao could see that there was something odd about them. Their eyes were not the soft brown of happy, healthy dragons. They were milky white and vacant, not focusing on anything. The chattering noise continued. Tao jammed his fingers in his ears, but it made no difference. The noise was inside his head.

Kai had told him about the dragons in his cluster. The black dragon with a broken horn was Hei Lei. The red dragon was Jiang, daughter of Gu Hong, the old dragon who had died before Kai left the haven. She lowered her snout until it was only a handspan from Tao's head. The dragon sniffed him. Tao was about to reassure her that he was a friend, when Sunila suddenly materialised in the shape of a monstrous serpent with seven heads. Seven mouths opened to reveal fangs dripping venom. The other dragons made the scraping-blades cry of fear. They outnumbered the *naga*, but most of them ran away and hid. Only Hei Lei and Jiang stood their ground. Sunila shape-changed again. This time into a hideous creature, half-demon, half-coiling snake. He didn't shape-change to conceal his dragonish nature like Kai, who could change into anything he liked. He could only shape-change when he was afraid and only into two different shapes, both intended to terrify his enemies.

“Sunila! These are Kai’s friends. There’s nothing to fear, no need to shape-change.”

The *naga* did as he was told and returned to his true shape.

“We come in friendship,” Tao shouted, although he thought it was entirely possible that the frightened *naga* would sink his fangs into one of the dragons if he got the chance. “Hei Lei, this dragon thinks you mean me harm. If you could just take a step or two back.”

The black and the red dragons didn’t bare their teeth or roar out a warning. They cocked their heads on one side when Tao spoke to them, but their milky eyes showed no understanding. They walked around in circles as if, despite their fearsome talons and horns, they’d forgotten how to defend themselves.

The other dragons gradually emerged from their hiding places. Seeing the strange blue dragon they rushed at him, snapping their jaws and hissing like angry geese. The *naga* disappeared again.

“You are Hei Lei,” Tao said to the black dragon. “Kai has told me about you.”

Hei Lei had been Kai’s greatest rival for the position of leader of the cluster. They had fought once, and Kai, though little more than a baby, had beaten him.

“The dragon with me is Sunila.” Tao pointed to the spot where the *naga* had just been standing. “He has the skill of

invisibility. He is a dragon from the land of Tianzhu.” Tao made a dramatic gesture with his arm to the west and then corrected it to the south-west. He hoped that the dragons had no more idea where Tianzhu was than he did.

“The forest where he lived was destroyed by humans. He is homeless. He returned to Tianzhu, hoping to find others of his kind, but none have survived, and so he came back to Kai and me, his only friends.”

The dragons stopped hissing and snapping, although they didn’t seem to understand a word Tao said.

The black dragon sat down suddenly and scratched behind his ear with a hindpaw, as if he’d forgotten Tao was there. The smallest of the white dragons stayed close to the yellow male. She had horns but no wings. That meant she was young in dragon terms. Tao knew she must be Kai’s lost love, Lian. Although he was very curious about her, she took no notice of him.

The dragons had lost interest in the newcomers and they wandered around as if they didn’t know what to do. Except for Lian, who walked purposefully towards a pool full of whitish water and waded in, making a tinkling noise as she lowered herself into it. That was the sound Kai made when he was happy.

Tao knew from Kai’s descriptions that the other two white dragons were Shuang and Bai Xue. When they saw their sister walking away, they followed her. Then Tun, the

yellow male, did the same. The other dragons trailed after them. Soon they were all sitting in the white pool.

"But Kai is waiting below," Tao protested.

The dragons sat with half-closed eyes, enjoying the hot water.

"Is there some way you can help him up here?" Tao asked.

They did not respond. Tao jumped when a jet of water erupted from the earth, spouting more than a *chang* into the evening air. The haven dragons didn't show any sign of surprise. Some of them yawned. They climbed out of the pool and trudged back to their cave. Within a few minutes, Tao could again hear the rumbling sound of snoring.

Now that the danger had passed, Sunila reappeared.

"We must go back down to Kai," Tao said.

The *naga* allowed him to climb on his back and they were soon at the bottom of the cliff.

"What happened?" Kai asked. "I could not hear your voice, or theirs, just an unpleasant chattering noise. I was worried they had attacked you. Are they angry with me?"

The pads of Kai's paws were bleeding and a talon had been ripped out of its socket. Tao knew without asking that, when the dragon could no longer hear his voice, he had tried to clamber up the cliff face knowing it was impossible.

"They didn't respond to anything I said. I heard that

sound too. I think it was coming from their minds. I couldn't hear your voice."

Tao mentioned the jet of water that had made him jump.

"That is the fire dragon," Kai said. "Dragons believe that there is a huge dragon that lives beneath the earth. He breathes fire and is responsible for heating the water in the pools. Every night, he sprays hot water into the air. It is the signal for the beginning of a moon gathering."

"They just went back to their cave," Tao said, "and now they're asleep again."

Kai shook his head and made a low sound like a bell with a crack in it tolling in the distance. "They should be gathering in the orange pool every evening when the fire dragon spurts and there is a moon in the sky. It is when they make important decisions."

"There was another thing," Tao said. "Their eyes have a strange milky film over them."

"The eyes are the mirror of the liver, where the true spirit of each dragon lives," Kai said. "When dragons are sick their eyes become yellow. When they are aggressive, their eyes turn red. I have never heard of dragons' eyes turning white."

"What's wrong with them?"

Kai made his anxious sound like sword blades scraping together.

"It is as if they have forgotten how to be dragons."

# Carole Wilkinson

## DRAGONKEEPER

