Carole Wilkinson

DRAGONKEEPER

SUNILA'S STORY

black dog

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The tall tall trees are gone. All gone. Before, there were many. Many many many. Trees reaching to the sky. Beautiful trees. Green leaves like jewels. Birds and butterflies. Lizards and lorises. Long snakes coiling around branches. Delicious tree frogs. And in highest branches. Naga nests. Nagas big and small. Females tending eggs. No enemies in the forest. Only food and naga friends.

Sunila circles above. Khandava Forest should be below. No green leaves. No birds and butterflies. No small creatures. All burned. No naga nests. Not one tree. Forest home gone. Nagas burned. Lovely nagas. Brothers and sisters. Friends. All gone. No Nagas. Sunila is the last.

Instead of trees, there is big house. Big big house humans call Palace. Palace walls are high and white. Built stone upon

stone. Carved with pictures. Tell stories of war and victory. Built for King who ordered burning of Sunila's forest. So he could build Palace. Where many many nagas lived, now just one family of humans lives. Why does one human family need such a big house? Garden surrounds Palace. Many plants. Flowers and fruit. But no forest trees. Big trees not allowed. Sunila is sad. So sad. His head swims. His liver hurts. His heart bleeds.

Sunila is weak with hunger. He has flown far. His wings ache. He must land even though it is dangerous. Cannot go inside Palace to find food. Many many humans live there. King and his family. Also King cannot look after himself. Needs people. Servants. Dancers. Musicians. Cooks. Cleaners. Scribes. Advisors. Guards. Sunila finds a big hole where servants throw King's uneaten food. So much food wasted. But tastes of spices that burn Sunila's mouth. There is fruit, but it is rotten. Rice, but it is spoiled. All wasted. Sunila eats a little. It makes him vomit.

On the edge of King's garden, Sunila finds some trees. Not very tall. Just six. Only these have regrown from his forest. No tree frogs to eat. No birds. Not even worms. Sunila is very hungry. So so hungry. He eats beetles. They do not fill his stomach. He is sick again.

Then he sees tiny patch of bright green. Frog! Beautiful tree frog. His stomach makes sound like rocks tumbling down a hill. Sunila does not have strength, but he catches the frog. His mouth waters. It is small, very small. And there are no others. Sunila is the last Khandava naga. The very last. Maybe this is last frog. Sunila does not eat frog.

Frogs did not harm nagas. Humans did. Frogs were burned in fire too. Humans are bad. Very very bad. Worse than tigers. Sunila cannot live in forest home.

Sunila hears a screech. From above. Sky turns dark. Something is blocking sun. He looks up. His heart full of fear. Big big big bird. Garuda! Its huge body is green. Like forest once was. Sunila's eyes are good. He can see Garuda even though it is dark. Its golden feathered wings fill sky. Beak is curved and sharp. Mouth full of teeth. Claws like daggers. Garudas are enemies of nagas. Garuda is guarding Palace for King. Sunila is afraid. Very afraid. He is too weak to fight Garuda. He could change shape. Become seven-headed monster. But not enough strength to shape-change for long. And Garuda knows about naga shape-changing. Would not be afraid.

Garuda sees Sunila and dives. Tries to grasp him in huge claws. But Sunila twists like snake. Garuda claws rake his tail. Sunila wriggles from its grasp. Garudas are clumsy on the ground. Long claws make it hard to run. Sunila is quick. He runs fast. Into Palace. Garuda too big to fit through doors. It shrieks with anger. Soon soldiers will come.

Humans told fire god Agni to burn Sunila's forest. Killed all his friends. Sunila will die soon. But first he will kill some humans. He can shape-change. Become half serpent, half demon. Just for a little while. He can make humans very very afraid. And he can bite some. Watch them die. But he needs strength. Needs food. He runs through passages. Looks in halls and chambers. Finds no humans. Not one.

Sunila enters another room. It is smaller. There are carpets.

Colours so bright they hurt his eyes. Many jewels are scattered around. Discarded. Sunila sees something else. More precious than jewels. Bowl piled high with mangoes! He takes one in each forepaw. He sinks his teeth into their flesh. Mangoes are sweet. Taste like nectar. Saliva runs down his chin. He eats all mangoes. Not bothering to spit out stones. Purring with pleasure.

Sunila picks up jewels and golden coins. What a beautiful hoard he could make with them.

"Hello."

Sunila is startled. A human voice. Who is there? His good eyes search the chamber. He sees someone crouched behind a chest. A human. Venom gathers behind his eyes. Not much. Enough to kill one enemy. The human steps out from behind the chair. Not King. Not soldier. Small human. Dressed in fine clothes. Stitched with gold. Jewels woven in hair. Jade hanging from ears. Strings of pearls draped around neck. Female child of King. Princess. She stares at Sunila. Blinks. Her eyes grow large. But she is not afraid.

Princess holds out a mango. "Would you like another?"

Sunila does want another mango. He snatches it from her. Juice dribbles into his beard. The small human makes a sound. Like wind chimes. Like dragon-friend Kai when he is happy.

Princess looks at him. "You are very pretty," she says. "I would like a gown the same colour as you."

She reaches out. Small fingers touch Sunila's blue scales. Stroke his golden mane. Trace patterns on his horn. She does not fear nagas. All nagas gone. No one taught her to fear them.

"Are you going to steal my toys?"

Sunila looks at the jewels and gold he has gathered together. One is shaped like a gold horse. Another like a ruby flower. They are Princess's playthings.

"Take them. I don't mind. I am angry with my mother. She has gone to the festival to praise Agni."

Sunila's blood freezes. His heart stops. Agni god of fire. Has two heads. Four arms. Crown of flames. He burned Khandava Forest.

Princess still speaks. "My amma was supposed to look after me. But she's lazy. And she was cross that she couldn't go to the festival. She said I'm old enough to look after myself. She's gone to the festival too."

Girl sees claw marks on Sunila's tail. Beads of purple blood.

"You're hurt!"

Princess picks up silken shawl. Embroidered with many colours. Wraps it around Sunila's bleeding tail. Fastens it with golden ribbon. Gentle Princess. She leads Sunila to kitchens. There is food he can eat. No frogs. But chicken meat. Bananas. Princess pats Sunila's back.

"You can stay here in the palace," she says. "I will hide you. You can be my friend."

Friend. Sunila would like a friend. He remembers another friend. Reaches behind one of his reverse scales. Pulls out red crystal. Cinnabar. It will heal his wounds. He swallows it.

Sunila also remembers humans he killed before. He was hungry then too. Searching for woodworm. He broke their houses. Crushed the people. Sunila did not mean to. He was very very sorry.

And then there was Tao. Tao always Sunila's friend. Gave him honey to sweeten sour food. Gave him cinnabar to heal wounds. Tao is good human. Human who devotes his life to a dragon. Kai.

Sunila eats bananas, plums, jackfruit. More mangoes. He eats until he is full. Princess sits next to him. Strokes his golden mane. Angry voices approach. Soldiers. They will have iron swords and bows that shoot arrows with iron tips. Sunila feels strength returning. He will not make venom. Will not kill any more humans. Will use strength for flying. Flying far from Palace. Princess will be sad he does not stay. He wishes he could thank her. Wishes he could explain. He picks up golden coins and puts them behind his reverse scales.

Sunila has another skill. He makes himself invisible. Goes out of Palace. Khandava Forest no longer home. Flaps his small wings. He will return to friends. To Tao and Kai.

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Carole Wilkinson is an award-winning and much loved author of books for children. She has a long-standing fascination with dragons and is interested in the history of everything. Though Carole has written over 30 books, she did not write her first book until she was nearly 40. Before that she had worked as a laboratory assistant and as a film and television writer and editor. Carole's website is **carolewilkinson.com.au**

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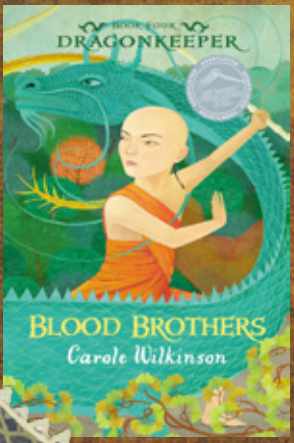

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