

DRAGONKEEPER

Lost Letter from Ping



It is a long time since I was a dragonkeeper. So long ago it seems like a dream I once had. I no longer know how old I am. I remember my 140th year, but some years have passed since then. I have clung to life well past my natural span, waiting for another dragonkeeper to appear, but I cannot wait any longer.

I watched each of my children as they grew, hoping that one of them would show signs that they were meant to be a dragonkeeper. But none of my children were left-handed. I had many grandchildren. I watched them too as they grew, but none were left-handed. It was the same with my great-grandchildren. I have lived to see the children of my great-grandchildren, and one or two of their children as well. There have been many sons born to my family and their parents rejoiced, but not one of them has favoured the left hand. I gave up hope. I stopped watching. It seemed that no other dragonkeeper's would come from my line. I would be the last.

I lost my second sight long ago when I said goodbye to Kai, but a year ago, I touched my piece of dragon stone, the shard that I keep in my sleeve at all times, and an image appeared in my mind. It was just a flash, but it was clear and strong. I have forgotten much, but I remember this. I saw Kai. Not as a dragonling as he was when I was with him, but fully grown as I

have never seen him. It was a premonition. There was a young man standing beside him, a staff in his hand. I knew what that vision meant. I am not the last dragonkeeper. There will be another. But not within my lifetime. It is you, my descendant. You are that special one, as yet unborn.

I will never meet you and I doubt that this letter will ever fall into your hands, but I will continue writing, even though my old fingers are stiff and aching from holding the brush for so long. It will be the last thing I do.

I am not alone and yet I am alone. I keep to myself. My family care for me, but they are remote from me. I was old when they were born, very old. I can still tell a good tale and, even now, the young ones like to hear my stories. My children and grandchildren knew that my stories were true. They all saw the black dragon come to bring me news. But these youngsters have never seen a dragon. They grow out of their belief early. They lose their faith and think that I make up the stories to amuse them.

I have lived too long. This is the blessing and the curse of a dragonkeeper. My dear husband died so long ago, I have trouble recalling his face. We had a happy life together here in Lu-lin, but that was eighty years ago or more. I had seven

children, four boys and three girls, but though all but one lived to old age, they are gone too. I have outlived my grandchildren.

I have little connection to my family members who live in the house now. Someone built this pavilion for me. I cannot remember if I requested it or if they wanted me out of the way, but I like it up here, high on a hill where I can see the mountains. They are not the mountains where Kai lives, but when the black dragon comes to bring me news he comes from that direction. The young women who have to climb the path to bring me food and to air my bedding complain that I live so far from the main house. They grumble about me as they do their duties, as if I cannot hear them. They do not feel like my family.

I regret nothing about my life. Nothing. It has unfolded as it should. But now I am close to death, I find I am thinking more about Kai than about my own flesh and blood. After I left the Dragon Haven, Hei Lei used to come to see me regularly. Every ten years or so, I would see what looked like a huge black bird circling above the house and I would climb this hill and meet the black dragon among the trees where no one would disturb us. Hei Lei was Kai's main rival for leadership. He fought with Kai and would have killed him if he could. He was not friendly to me at first, but, like me, he grew to understand that he had

a different role. We are alike in that, Hei Lei and I. The roles fate has given us are not the ones we would have wished for perhaps, but we have important roles nonetheless.

It is nearly 20 years since Hei Lei last brought me news. Kai would be more than 130 now, for a dragon that is still young, but dragons must mature early. And though it will be another 300 years at least until he grows his horns, he should be showing signs of leadership. Yet when Hei Lei last visited, he was concerned that Kai was not taking up his responsibilities as he should.

I worry that I left Kai too early. He was so young then, still a baby. And yet, he had already proved himself. He was marked as a leader. I sometimes think that I should have stayed with him until he was 50, the age when a dragonling leaves the protection of the female dragons and takes up a position in the cluster. But if I had done that, I would have been too old to have children and I am certain that I was meant to continue my bloodline. Since my vision, I have started watching my descendants again. Looking out for you. Waiting for you to be born, so that I can prepare you for your role. Nevertheless, I should have stayed with Kai a little longer, another ten years or so.

I have only two keepsakes to remind me of Kai – one of his scales and a piece of his dragon stone. The dragon-stone shard is a pretty thing and it has power. People want to own it. I will give it to the elder of my family, with instructions that it must be passed down from generation to generation. This letter, with its poorly written characters and meandering words, I will bind to the shard in the hope that it will not be separated from it. Kai's scale I will keep for myself and request that it is buried with me.

I had hoped that I would live to meet you, so that I could pass on my knowledge to you, but that is not to be. My time has come to an end. You must make do with these few lines.

Tell Kai that he must pay attention to his duties. He likes to enjoy himself and there should be time for him to do that, but he must also accept his responsibilities.

Keep an eye on his ears. He tends to get grass seeds caught in them, and I am afraid his attention to hygiene is not always what it should be. His ears will get waxy and smelly if neglected. I always tried to get him to mind his manners when eating. I know the other dragons do not want him to learn human habits, but even if he must eat with his paws when he is with the other dragons, make sure he does not forget how to use

chopsticks. One day he may be called on to eat with emperors – he has in the past. He should drink from a bowl held in his paw, not slurp from a pool. And make sure he cleans out his reverse scales every once in a while. He has a habit of storing snacks behind them, and sometimes he forgets them and they go bad. And don't let him eat too many worms.

Laugh when he makes a joke. Play with him when he is bored. Tell him stories. He loves to hear stories. I know I write about him as if he is a baby even though he is now fully grown, but he is still young, and until his wings grow, he does not have much to amuse him within the confines of the Dragon Haven.

Most important of all, be his friend. The other dragons are suspicious of him because he was reared by a human. And he is their leader, none of them will deny that. He is superior to them, and that will keep them distant from him. He will be in great need of friendship.

Last night, I dreamed of Kai's father, Danzi. It is the first time he has been in my dreams for many and many a year. It is a sign that my life is coming to an end. You will be the next dragonkeeper, my descendant. It will not be easy, but you will fulfil your task well I am sure. If my vision is correct, you will become a dragonkeeper when you are young. Not as young as I

was, but still young for such a heavy responsibility. Be strong. Be courageous. Be proud of who you are.

If you receive this before you have met Kai, you might think that these are the ramblings of a wild-haired old woman, but I hope that your own second sight will tell you that there is truth in my words.

When you do meet Kai, as I know you will, give him my deepest love. Tell him that I thought of him every single day of my life. And that, at the end, he was foremost in my heart.

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