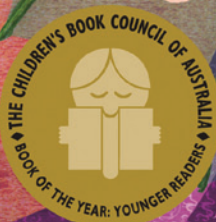


BOOK THREE
DRAGONKEEPER

10 YEARS
OF DRAGONKEEPING
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DRAGON MOON

Carole Wilkinson





*“It’s too dangerous,”
the servant said, clinging
to Ping’s sleeve.*

It was raining hard, but the sky was cloudless. And it wasn’t raindrops that were falling on Beibai Palace, but arrows. They pelted down, bouncing off flagstones and walls. The inner courtyards of the palace were usually quiet, peaceful places, but today the wind brought sounds of war—the battle cries of soldiers, the rumbling of drums, the clash of weapons. People were shouting. Hurried footsteps echoed around the courtyard as a squad of the Duke of Yan’s soldiers ran across the flagstones, trying to buckle their blue and gold tunics

with one hand as they held shields over their heads with the other. Arrows fell around them. Just one managed to hit a target, digging deep into the thigh of a soldier. He fell to his knees clutching his leg.

Ping watched from a doorway as a crossbow bolt tipped with flaming pitch soared across the square of blue sky above the courtyard and struck a watchtower. Flames sprouted from the wooden tower.

It was her fault. She should have left Beibai Palace months ago. Ping tried to run out into the courtyard, but Tinglan held her back.

“It’s too dangerous,” the servant said, clinging to Ping’s sleeve.

An arrow ricocheted off the flagstone in front of them and bounced through the doorway. Tinglan flinched. Ping yanked herself free and ran out into the courtyard. An arrow pierced the hem of her gown.

“Please, Madam,” begged Tinglan. “Come back inside.”

Ping ignored her. She flattened herself against the wall and crept around the edge of the courtyard. She didn’t even glance at the wounded soldier as his companions dragged him into the shelter of the palace. She wasn’t rushing to help them. She moved as fast as she could, inching crabwise along the wall, protected from the rain of arrows by the overhanging eaves.

The flames were spreading. The roof of the dining hall had caught alight. Ping knew how quickly fire



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could spread through a wooden building. She wished she could see how the battle was progressing, but the only place where it was possible to see outside the palace was from the top of the walls.

The shouts of the Duke's soldiers had woken Ping early that morning. She'd thought it was a dream until Tinglan rushed in, tears streaming down her face, babbling about sentries dead on the ramparts.

"Is it the barbarians?" Ping had asked.

"No," Tinglan had sobbed. "Imperial soldiers are attacking us!"

Ping didn't believe her, but frightened kitchen hands and ladies-in-waiting soon confirmed it. Imperial troops *were* attacking Beibai Palace. The Duke of Yan had recently made peace with the Emperor's enemies, the Xiong Nu who lived beyond the Great Wall. He had set up trade directly with them, making it easier and more profitable for the barbarians than trading with the Emperor. But that wasn't what had provoked the attack. Imperial spies had infiltrated the palace and informed the Emperor about the dragon living there that was bringing great good fortune to the Duke. An envoy had arrived two weeks earlier, with a message saying that the dragon was an imperial dragon—and the Emperor wanted him back. The Duke had replied that he would not give up the dragon. Ping imagined the Emperor's fury when he received the reply. Imperial troops had attacked at first light. The fact that his sister

Princess Yangxin was married to the Duke and lived in the palace hadn't stopped the Emperor.

The battle wasn't going well. The Duke's men were outnumbered ten to one. To celebrate the recent peace with the Xiong Nu, the Duke had given most of his soldiers leave to spend the winter with their families. The remaining soldiers had been taken by surprise.

It was too dangerous to climb up to the ramparts to see what was happening, but everyone had seen the dead and the wounded in the Peony Hall. Rumours spread as the palace inhabitants imagined the worst.

"Thousands of soldiers are gathered outside the walls," Tinglan said. "Whole companies of them, so one of the stable boys said."

The Emperor had been unpopular with the people of Yan even before the attack. They didn't like paying higher taxes to fund his expeditions to foreign lands to look for the fungus of immortality and the water of life.

"What sort of person puts his own sister at risk because of one small dragon?" Tinglan said.

"The Emperor will lay siege to the palace," one of the cooks predicted. "He'll slowly starve us to death."

Tinglan shook her head. "The luck of the dragon will protect us."

Ping knew the Emperor wouldn't have the patience for a siege. His attack would be swift and deadly.

"Liu Che wouldn't do this," Princess Yangxin had



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protested as Lady An, her head lady-in-waiting, coaxed her towards the safest part of the palace. “My brother wouldn’t risk harming me.”

The Emperor had recently sent his sister a gift—a gilt statue of a horse almost two feet high. The Princess was convinced this was a sign of his love for her. She was sure that the attack was the work of a rebel general. The passage of time had made her forget how her brother had ill-treated her—sending her away from her home to be the Duke’s wife in order to keep the peace with Yan. But Ping hadn’t forgotten. She hadn’t forgotten what he’d done to her either. He had imprisoned her and sentenced her to death. Yet that wasn’t his worst offence. She didn’t believe he’d suddenly changed.

Ping knew she should have been helping care for the wounded, but she had another priority. She finally arrived at the doorway on the opposite side of the courtyard and ducked inside. The sharp smell of dried fish mingled with the aroma of honey. Baskets of vegetables were piled high alongside sacks of grain. But Ping hadn’t come to check on the state of the palace stores either.

In the centre of the storeroom there was a well about four feet wide, the one well in the palace that didn’t freeze in winter. She leaned over the low wall that surrounded it, peering into the water even though there wasn’t enough light in the storeroom to allow her to see below the surface. She took a mirror from the



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sleeve of her gown. One side was polished bronze, the other had an etched image of a dragon circling a raised sphere that served as a handle. Ping angled the mirror so that it collected the rays of morning light that reached inside the doorway, and reflected a beam of pale light into the well.

The water began to ripple. The ripples became waves. A paw broke the surface and then another, each armed with four sharp talons. The paws felt around the edge of the well until they found a grip. Two sturdy legs clambered up. A head emerged, covered in dark purple scales. It had a long snout, drooping ears and brown eyes that blinked away the water. A purple body with a row of spines down its back followed, and was heaved out of the well onto the storeroom floor with the aid of two powerful hind legs. Water ran off the creature, splashing Ping's gown and soaking her silk slippers. She touched the dragon's purple head, and heard a sound like tinkling bells.

“Is it spring?” said a voice in Ping's mind.

“Almost,” she replied.

The dragon shook himself. Now Ping was wet from head to foot.

He looked around the storeroom. “Did Ping bring birds?”

Ping laughed and scratched the dragon around the bumps on his head where, one day, his horns would grow.



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“No, Kai, I didn’t bring you anything to eat.”

The dragon’s brow creased.

“Why did Ping wake Kai?”

Her smile faded and she put an arm protectively around his scaly shoulders.

“The palace is being attacked. It’s Liu Che. He’s found out that we’re here.”

“Does Ping’s second sight warn of danger?”

Ping shook her head. “No, but the palace is on fire. We must get to safety.”

It was more than two weeks since Ping had last seen the dragon. He stretched to his full height. He’d grown. His head came up to her waist. She tried to pick him up. He was now about the size of a goat—a rather fat goat. She couldn’t lift him.

Angry shouts came from outside the palace walls.

“Quick, Kai.”

She tried to push him towards the doorway.

“Dragons don’t have good hearing,” he said, refusing to move. “But Kai knows those aren’t the cries of imperial soldiers.”

Ping went to the doorway. The shower of arrows had stopped. Kai was right. The shouts were in a language Ping didn’t understand. Men were clambering onto the roof with buckets of water to put out the blaze. The flames died down as she watched, until a few plumes of smoke were all that remained of the fire. Other voices rang out from within the palace. It was the Duke’s

soldiers cheering. Ping ventured out into the courtyard, keeping close to the walls in case another volley of arrows rained down. Lady An ran towards Ping, her face beaming.

“The Xiong Nu have come to our aid,” she said. “The imperial troops are retreating!”

“Can we trust the barbarians?” asked Ping.

“They’re better friends to us than the Emperor,” Lady An replied. Ping had never heard her speak so sharply.

Ping wanted to see for herself. She climbed up a flight of steps that led to the ramparts on top of the outer palace wall. Kai followed her. Others had had the same idea. Ping pushed to the front of a crowd of cheering people. A band of perhaps a hundred barbarians was gathered outside the palace, together with the Duke’s foot soldiers. The barbarians were dark, rough-looking men wearing clothes made of leather and fur, but the Duke’s men were mingling with them, raising their spears and bows, and shouting in triumph. To the west, a cloud of dust was all that could be seen of the retreating imperial army. Several men on horseback rode out of the palace gates towards the soldiers. One was the Duke.

Kai looked at Ping, his eye-ridges wrinkling in a frown.

“Did Ping sense that Kai was in danger?”

“No, I had no sense of foreboding. I just wanted you to be safe.”



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“Kai *was* safe.” The dragon’s voice was stern. “The well was the safest place.”

Ping lowered her eyes so that she didn’t have to meet the dragon’s gaze. He was right. She’d panicked. The well would have hidden him from imperial soldiers and protected him from fire. If there had been a real threat, she would only have led him into danger.

“Is it dinner time?” Kai asked.