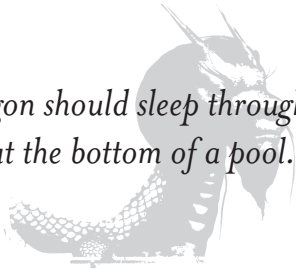


*A dragon should sleep through winter
at the bottom of a pool.*



It was a ghostly dawn. Fog, tinged with the faintest shade of pink, reduced the rising sun to a pale disc on the horizon. It brought no hope of warmth. In every direction the earth was covered with a carpet of white. The clouds were the same colour as the snow, and the fog made it impossible to see where the mountain peaks ended and the sky began. Ice crystals had formed a thin raft on the surface of a pool. One more night and it would freeze over.



Snowflakes settled on Danzi's nose. He had tried to convince himself that winter was still a long way off. He peered into the pool's depths. That's where he should have been. Down there. Asleep. A dragon should sleep through winter at the bottom of a pool. In the icy water, he would enter a state of hibernation. His heart, lungs and liver would slow until they almost stopped. Glands on the side of his neck would extract a tiny amount of air from the water—just enough to survive. But hibernation didn't work for Danzi. It never had.

He'd tried counting bubbles as he sat on the bottom of the pool, but lost count somewhere beyond ten thousand. He'd tried reciting poetry—both his own and the lines of more celebrated poets. He'd imagined peaceful scenes of night falling, birds with their heads tucked under their wings, rabbits curled up in their burrows. It was no use. While other dragons slept, Danzi was still wide awake. At his last attempt, he'd tried humming a restful song—the one about the frog in the moon. He'd taken a deep breath ready to sing the chorus. A big mistake. He wasn't supposed to breathe



while he was underwater, not in the regular way anyway. He'd swallowed a lot of water, and had to swim to the surface as fast as his four paws would allow.

Danzi walked over to a snow-covered mound. In previous years, the sleepless winters had passed quickly and pleasantly. He'd had the company of his Dragonkeeper, Chen-mo. They had sat around a cheerful fire, composing poetry, playing chess and reading from the one bamboo book that the Dragonkeeper had owned. This year, Danzi would spend the winter alone.

He'd enjoyed all his friendships with his human companions, but they were such frail creatures. Even if they survived wounds and didn't injure themselves in the mountains or succumb to one of the many human diseases, their lives were so short. No sooner did he get to know them, than he was burying them in the earth. Chen-mo had lived a long life, much longer than humans normally lived, but to Danzi it seemed like a brief time since they had first met.

There was one black shape in the landscape. It was the entrance to a cave. Inside, a nest of dried



grass provided a bed where Danzi slept when he needed just a night's rest. It was also where he kept his winter food-store—dried mushrooms, berries, nuts—wrapped in bamboo leaves. Not a very appetising selection, but all that was to be found on the bleak white peaks of Tai Shan. He went to the back of the cave and found his food packages had been gnawed open. Half-eaten nuts and mushrooms were scattered on the cave floor among rat droppings.

Rats. There was no other creature Under Heaven that Danzi disliked more. Apart from centipedes of course. Now that he hadn't the prospect of even a pawful of nuts or a dried mushroom to eat, he was suddenly very hungry. And there was only one thing that would satisfy his hunger—roasted bird. He decided to go down the mountain and catch a bird.

In fact, he would forget about hibernation entirely. He had an old friend who lived in the warmer south, a venerable tortoise whom he hadn't seen for two or three hundred years. He would visit the old crawler. Danzi felt pleased with himself. Dragons were known to be slow to



make decisions, sometimes taking weeks. He'd just made three decisions before breakfast.

But before Danzi could start his journey to somewhere where the sun was shining, there was one thing he had to do. He had promised to take his old Dragonkeeper's possessions to his family who lived in Gaoping, a village in the State of Wei. Chen-mo hadn't done his duty as a loyal son. He had abandoned his family to become a Dragonkeeper. His parents and even his brother would be long dead, but his nephews should still be alive. The old Dragonkeeper had feared that his souls wouldn't go to Heaven if he didn't make amends to his family.

Danzi reached up to a ledge hidden in the shadows and felt along it. He pulled down the Dragonkeeper's meagre possessions and took them outside into the light to inspect them. It wasn't much to show for a lifetime—a single gold coin, a small jade ornament in the shape of a winged horse, a bronze dagger and a circular mirror.

One side of the bronze mirror had a design etched into it—a dragon coiled around a raised



sphere that acted as a knob or a handle. Danzi turned the mirror over. The other side was undecorated. He polished the tarnished surface on one of the tufts of hair that sprouted behind his knees and peered at his reflection.

He was a handsome dragon, if he did say so himself. His green scales glistened with melted snow. He'd lived through many adventures, but he bore few scars. His horns were both intact, his mane lustrous. The spines down his back were erect. His wings had grown early, well before the 1000 years that was usual for dragons. He was still a few years short of his first millennium.

There was no reason why Danzi must have a human companion. It was just a custom, a habit that some dragons had acquired over the centuries—along with a taste for roasted birds, philosophical debate and pleasant music. He was a wild dragon, not one of those unfortunates who had been captured as a king's trophy or, worse still, bred in captivity never knowing freedom. He put the mirror back on the ledge. He didn't need another Dragonkeeper.



Danzi wrapped the Dragonkeeper's possessions in a scrap of silk and walked over to the edge of a cliff. The snow was becoming heavier, but his tough overlapping scales didn't allow moisture to penetrate. Some snowflakes did find their way into his ears, however, which was annoying. He opened his wings and launched himself into the air, heading west.

Danzi soared higher and higher. It was hard work because he hadn't flown for a long while. In his final years, Chen-mo's fingers had become too arthritic to hold on to the dragon's mane as he flew. Instead, they had wandered the remote peaks of the Tai Shan mountain range on foot.

The clouds closed around Danzi like a damp, grey shroud. The cold penetrated his lungs, ice crystals formed on his wings, and the turbulence buffeted him as if he were an autumn leaf. He worked his wings harder, making deep, firm flaps.

He broke through the clouds and was bathed in sunlight. Gliding on a light breeze, the rays warmed his scales. He couldn't remember the last time he'd flown. He flapped his wings harder

to gain speed, then suddenly dived down, startling an unsuspecting hawk. It felt good to be flying again. He soared up again and did a sideways roll. That would have been impossible to do with a human clinging onto his back. He executed a triple somersault. Then he had to glide again because he'd made himself dizzy.

Beyond the band of snow clouds, he could see soft green hills on the horizon. A good place to find a bird. That would be his first destination.