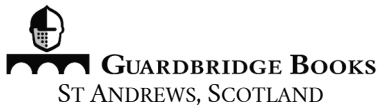


DRAKEMASTER

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CHAPTER ONE

The Year of the Snake, Yin Earth Cycle
1257 AD

The king goes hunting

Dark stars burn

In the next ten days, catastrophe

The characters inscribed on the bone were ancient, hard to decipher, and Zhencai had likely misread them. At least this bone did not suggest the sacrifice of sheep or the beheading of prisoners to remedy the coming catastrophe. No matter. The ten days the bone referred to had passed a thousand years before: either catastrophe had come, or it had not. He crumbled the brittle bone into the mortar on the floor by his knees, and ground it into powder.

Four ascending ranks of dead, gilded monks, each in the lotus position, each with his head slightly bowed, sat before Zhencai. They were dead, he knew, in spite of the abbot's insistence that they had attained a state of sarira: living Buddhahood. All the dead monks had narrow faces and thin arms beneath the layers of gold or red lacquer that coated their stretched skin. Coils of smoke drifted up from the incense sticks Zhencai had lit in their stone

burners and flowers drifted in bowls of water next to the altar. Paintings of the bodhisattvas adorned the crumbling walls, giving signs of blessing, their bellies wrinkled with deprivation, their faces as serene as the dead monks they watched over.

As a child he viewed the ritual of sarira as a pinnacle of spiritual attainment—the elderly monk entering a higher state, eternally meditating; as a young warrior who knew the satisfaction of physical achievement, he suspected the ritual was vanity. Nowadays, the process stank of geomancy, a worldly magical practice that had no place in the Buddha's teachings.

Nonetheless, the sarira tower was a peaceful place to work, especially while the rest of the Cloud Mountain Monastery worried over how soon the Mongols would reach the mountains. The monks gathered in clumps to seek the abbot's reassurance that the khan still favored Buddhism, and they would all be safe. Fuss, worry, crowds—all the things Zhencai became a monk to avoid. Thankfully the sarira tower could only be reached by a very long stair even the most diligent novices hated to climb. Zhencai smiled over his work. Years ago, when he had been the martial master, he made his

pupils climb that stair daily. On their knees.

He took another scapula from his basket of old bones, all riddled with the cracks and inscriptions of ancient prophecies. He broke it up with his hands, then tumbled the pieces into a broad mortar and crushed the prophecies to nothing.

Zhencai's own body revealed age spots, aches, the faltering of the flesh, leaving him with a growing understanding of the impermanence the Buddha spoke of, more fit for the silence of the dead than for the jabber of the living. His methodical grinding became a physical meditation, the work of his muscles with each movement, grinding away his sense of himself, so that he could maintain a detached awareness of the world.

One of the birds who fluttered around the place had taken a liking to Master Liu's stiff, pointed hat. Its pecking had damaged the monk's lacquered coating, a breach that could admit impurities and lead to the rotting of the revered flesh underneath. Zhencai would have to take care of the cracks.

He groaned as his aging bones shifted. Something spattered the dais nearby, a moist, white offering from the frustrated bird. Zhencai wanted to laugh, but reminded himself of his dignity. He

stretched, looking one way over his shoulder, then the other to relieve the strain in his back.

Framed by the bodhisattva paintings, holes pierced through the one plain wall and soft stains of rust marked a pattern on the floor, showing where an old gearwork had been removed when the monastery claimed this place from the geomancers who built it. The floor remained uneven, as if the device's removal had weakened the stone. One of the broad slabs by the feet of the lowest rank of sarira had tipped slightly upward since his last visit.

Rising, Zhencai prowled in that direction, prodding the edge of the stone with his toe. It shifted slightly. He pushed to see if he could force it back into place.

It groaned and settled sharply, with a series of rattles and clicks that startled Zhencai into pulling back his foot. The bird took flight, launching itself from the hat of Master Liu who swayed to the side. Scowling, Zhencai stepped up to fold his waxy, supple arms back into place and adjust the brocade over the dead monk's shoulders.

Something else shifted behind him, and Zhencai turned, prepared to adjust Master Deng, the next sarira along the rank.

Master Deng's bald head nodded upward, and Zhencai retreated, wondering what process of the dried flesh could result in such a motion after more than a hundred years, or if his pressing on the shifted stone had disturbed the body.

Then the dead monk shook back the long fabric from his withered hands and wiped at his eyes, blinking them open.

Zhencai leapt away, hands held lightly before him, balanced on his toes. He felt absurd, preparing to do battle with a dead monk, yet his heart drummed in his chest, suddenly too tight to breathe.

The dead monk stretched out skeletal hands to drag one of the bronze bowls of water from the side of the altar. Sloshing water and flowers over his brocade and down his robe, Master Deng brought the bowl to his lips and drank a few swallows, waited, drank again. At last, Master Deng's black eyes swiveled in their gilded sockets, then focused on Zhencai. The sunken flesh of his face worked hard and tiny cracks formed in the lacquer, then a raspy breath parted his lips.

"What is the year?" Master Deng breathed.

Master Deng spoke an older dialect, but not so different that he could not be understood. Zhencai

wet his own lips and steadied his breathing, "Master, it is the year of the Snake."

The dead monk gave a hollow, hard breath, his bald head swinging about. "Where is the device that should have woken me?"

"Forgive me, Master," said Zhencai, "but we have no devices here."

With a gravelly sound of irritation, Master Deng rose on feeble legs and wobbled. Zhencai, feeling rather wobbly himself, offered himself as a prop. Whatever else the sarira was, he was clearly Zhencai's elder, and his senior monk. The habit of deference took over.

A skeletal hand clutched Zhencai's shoulder with surprising strength, bony fingers digging in, and with a leathery creak, Master Deng stepped down beside him. When the dead monk straightened, his head crested a little below Zhencai's own. The dry, black eyes stared at him.

"Thank you. Your robes suggest you are no senior here, although your age suggests you should be."

"I lack spiritual discipline," Zhencai told him, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "I have been set to learn by your example, Master."

“Ha!” When the dead monk cracked out a laugh, flecks of golden paint fell away. “If you seek enlightenment, ask them.” He thrust a finger toward the remaining sarira. “Year of the Snake. That’s good. Which cycle?”

“The Yin Earth cycle, Master,” Zhencai began, prepared to say more, but Master Deng interrupted.

“Yin Earth?” The barely visible brows leapt. “Bah. Then I am late. Has it already happened?”

“I cannot say, Master, perhaps if you—”

“You’d know! Even if you’d been a hermit here as long as I have, you would know the kind of ruin I’m talking about.” Master Deng pushed off and lurched toward the arch at the front of the pagoda.

Mountains framed the misty distance where the silver thread of the river embroidered the plains beyond. Towering pines shaded the narrow stairs along the pathway to the monastery below. A few peaks distant, the observatory tower showed pale against the blue of the sky, and Master Deng squinted in that direction. “Take my device, would you,” he muttered.

“Please, Master, I have studied in this valley all of my life, but I do not know about your device, or the trouble you mentioned.”

“Su Sung—at least you will have heard of him? He made the emperor’s clock at Kaifeng, its predictions were meant to counter the decadence of the emperor’s children?”

Zhencai gave a short nod. “It was dismantled when the capital moved south, after the Jurchen conquest. One hundred sixty years ago, Master.”

“Dismantled.” The monk ran a hand over his bare scalp, his narrow shoulders sinking. “They dismantled— Buddha’s hand—what wouldn’t they do?” His brows crinkled as if he would weep, but had no tears. “You should have seen it. Three stories high, with figures that played music every hour on tiny drums and clever little flutes. The top story had devices for tracking the stars, bound into a system so the clock moved in perfect time with the heavens.” His hands moved as he spoke, tracing the tower of the clock in the air before him, outlining complex devices and tiny sculptures as if he could pick them up with his thin fingers. “Ah, you should have seen it. It was almost as beautiful as mine.” His eyes tracked a distant cloud with a curious shape, inauspicious and worrisome. “One hundred sixty years.”

“Who are you, Master?” Zhencai asked.

Certainly he was not a former abbot as Zhencai had been told when he first entered the sarira temple.

The monk's lips showed darkly through the broken mask of golden paint. "Forty years a monk, fifty, is it? You might at least have read the scrolls, novice."

Zhencai rejected the sting. "I might, Master, if they had not been taken to the city, to be studied by the scholars there."

"Decadent indeed," Master Deng snorted. "A monastery without any scrolls. A fifty-year novice with no knowledge of the past—and Su Sung's greatest achievement taken to bits by tiny minds. For a moment, I thought the Mandate of Heaven had already brought ruin upon you all. I thought I was too late, novice. Now I see that I am nearly right on time." Master Deng gave a sharp bow and strode away, his steps shaky, but his back as stiff as a warrior's lance. He made for a narrow ledge that used to lead to a hermit's chamber on the other side of the peak.

Zhencai watched his hobbling progress, his awe returning as the sarira monk's prayer beads clinked and his sandals slapped between the bushes toward the ancient way. Swinging back, Zhencai stared at

the empty place among the dead masters, then ran his gaze over those remaining, no longer certain they were dead—no longer certain of anything. He was about to follow the old man, to see where the Buddha's hand might lead him, when from the monastery far below, the great bronze bell rang out, long before dinner. It rang with urgency and Zhencai's heart fell. Catastrophe, the old bone said—and here it was: the Mongols had found them.