

And some goodies for you—some free pages from the book to introduce *The Dragon Stone*:

The Dragon Stone

From chapter 1...

The Dragon Head was sixty-two years old, and looked every bit his age.

Although this man was his father, Kai never related to him as such. He wouldn't dare. No one related to a Dragon Head with anything other than formality. Operationally his father held the rank of First Route Marshal in the 14K triad society. The symbol of that rank was a dragon's head. Of course, most people didn't know that and simply referred to him as Mr. K, but those who knew him even slightly were careful to show respect.

Kai stopped six paces from his father's desk, bowed, and waited.

The window shutters were closed, and the room was dark. It was always dark. A pungent, spicy smell filled the air. Joss sticks were burning in the household shrine recessed into the wall. It was lit by a dull read light.

His father looked at him, saying nothing.

It was an old game: one that was designed to put Kai in his place.

Wooden screens stood to the right of his father's mahogany desk. Two armed guards would be behind them, watching through the fretwork. Kai wondered which guards would be on duty today. Probably Ah Fung and Ah Keung. Ah Fung would have a shotgun. Ah Keung didn't need one.

His father spoke in Cantonese. "I am displeased."

Kai lowered his head. It was the right way to signal mortification. "I am sorry sir."

The Dragon Head slapped the desk. "Do not interrupt." His father's blackened teeth snapped shut. Ten years of smoking opium had rotted them. He'd quit the habit many years ago through sheer willpower, but he'd never had his teeth seen to. He hated dentists.

Kai stood stiffly to attention.

The old man pointed to him. "You are *Goko*, a 438, and more is expected of you. Money from your section has plateaued. You have not grown business for nine months. Why is that?"

Kai kept his silence. He was in charge of *Hak Nam*, the 'City of Darkness,' and was therefore responsible for the income it generated for the 14K.

"Are other societies taking our business?" His father's querulous voice whipped at him again.

"No sir. Our enemy, the *Sun Yee On*, have given up trying to infiltrate—at least for now."

"What about the *Ging Yi*?"

"We have had a *gong-sou*, a peace talk, with the *Ging Yi*. It is now agreed where their boundary in the City ends. We can work alongside them."

His father slapped the desktop again. "See that the boundary is policed. I don't want any other triad society encroaching on our territory."

Kai nodded. "The real problem is that the City of Darkness is filled to capacity. The Building Ordinance Office are enforcing the only building code they have insisted on, that no building be allowed to be more than seventeen storeys high." Kai shrugged. "The wheels of the planes flying into Kai Tak airport nearly touch them as it is."

"Is that an excuse?"

"No sir, that is reality. Only so many drug dens and brothels fit on six acres of land."

The old man sneered. "There is always room for more—particularly among the squatters along the edge of the city."

Kai wondered whether the gods in the household shrine were listening to their conversation, and what they were thinking. He glanced at the shrine on the wall. Food

offerings had been placed next to the joss sticks to placate the spirits of his ancestors and to ensure good luck. Kai approved. It was important to venerate the household gods as they had more influence on the day-to-day affairs of life than the big gods. Any favor that could be cajoled from the big gods of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism were simply a bonus.

“Pay attention,” his father snapped. “Where does your mind go?”

“I was thinking about our gods, sir.”

His father grunted and leaned back in his chair.

Nothing was said for a while. But the silence was relative. Kai could hear a cacophony of street noises coming from Nathan Road just outside. It was one of the busiest streets in Kowloon.

His father broke the silence. “I thought I would have to pay a drug addict for his son, so he could become my son and pray for my spirit when I’m dead. But then you were born.” He sniffed. “Just be sure you fulfil your duty.”

“Yes sir.”

His father looked at him balefully and pointed a finger. “I want you to diversify into high end extortion and kidnapping. There is more money in Hong Kong now and more rich people. They need to know of our reputation and fear us to such an extent that even a phone call with a threat will cause them to pay.”

Kai wondered idly what the gods of the rich people would think about that.

His father shouted. “Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“You must show an iron fist.” His father jabbed a finger at him again. “You particularly must work hard at this because you look like an American. That makes it harder for Chinese people to respect you.”

Kai knew he didn’t have an ounce of American blood in him, but he didn’t press the point.

Kai could just see enough through the window slats to make out the top of a red and white double-decker bus burrowing its way along Nathan Road. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere. Kai, on the other hand, had no idea where he was going.

“You may go,” barked his father, waving him away as if he were a bothersome insect.

Kai bowed and left.

**And now meet Emma:
From chapter 2...**

The pike rose slowly to the surface of the water, and stayed there, as if wanting to be seen. Emma held her breath. It was at least two feet long. A pike—the hunter, the dominant predator of the River Cherwell. In all the years Emma had been at Oxford, she’d never seen one until now. Its olive brown back moved languidly, keeping it on station against the flow of the current.

Emma lifted her gaze and glanced across the river. The Cherwell was flowing peacefully between the beech trees edging Christ Church Meadow Walk. No one else was on the footpath to share the sight.

When she looked back, the pike was gone.

She shivered. Evidently, today was going to be a day of ‘firsts,’ and she was not sure she was ready for any of them. Emma glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time, willing time to stop: wanting to retreat to the safety of the past.

The second hand of the watch ticked on remorselessly.

It was time to go.

Taking a deep breath, Emma made her way back to St Hilda’s College—and her interview with Professor Harrington.

Forty-five minutes later, her worst fears were realized. Professor Harrington sat in front of her beaming. “You’ve passed, Emma.” Your PhD has been accepted. They don’t even want an edit, let alone a re-write.” He leaned forward to shake her hand. “I must say: you’ve done extraordinarily well.”

She shook his hand mechanically, then leaned her elbows on the professor’s desk and put her head in her hands.

No, no, no!

The professor, all solicitous, walked around the desk and laid a hand on her shoulder. “I know it’s a bit much to take in, Emma, but you’ve finally finished.” He paused before adding, “It must be rather a lot to take in right now. Showing emotion is quite understandable.”

But you don’t understand. Her stomach churned and twisted.

The professor continued on, blithely. “How long have you been a student with us in Oxford?”

Emma swallowed and spoke between her fingers. “Um...seven years. Three for my Bachelor’s degree, and four for the doctorate.”

“Hmm, that’s a long time in anyone’s life.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Now off you go and celebrate.”

She suppressed a sob, stumbled to her feet and found the door.

Professor Harrington called after her. “Oh, Emma, I nearly forgot. Someone wants to meet with you. He’s in town on business and staying at the Randolph Hotel. Evidently, he wants to talk with you about doing some post-doctoral work into the socio-political changes taking place in China. It’s very much your area of expertise.” The professor picked up a folded piece of paper from the desk and held it out to her. “He’s hoping you might be able to meet him at 5pm this today at the Randolph. Is that possible?”

Emma took the piece of paper, nodded dumbly and stumbled out the door.

A minute later, she was leaning on one of the pillars supporting the two archways of St Hilda’s entrance porch. She held a fist against her stomach, bent over, and felt sick. After seven years, it was over. She would have to leave Oxford, the safe womb that had held her, and protected her against the indifference of her parents...

What on earth would she do now? She glanced up at the brick and stone grandeur of South Building with its crenulated bay windows and views across the river to the spires of Oxford.

St Hilda’s was one of only two Oxford colleges that admitted women—and it was the nearest thing she’d ever had to a home. Moves were afoot to have women admitted to some of the men’s colleges, but she suspected that change was still a few years off. Even though it was 1972 and the country was heaving with social revolution, nothing moved quickly at Oxford. It was one of the reasons she loved it. Its colleges gave her a sense of history...and safety.

Get a grip of yourself, girl. She sniffed, then began searching for a handkerchief—an act that reminded her that she was holding the piece of paper given to her by the professor. Emma unfolded it and scanned the contents.

There wasn’t much to read. It was a short note scribbled on some stationary paper from the Randolph Hotel.

Dear Miss Templeton,

My name is John Egerton. I work for a department answerable to the Home Secretary. I would like the opportunity to talk with you about your thesis and perhaps explore the possibility of some post-doctoral work.

I am in town at the Randolph until tomorrow. Can we meet at the Acanthus Restaurant at 5pm?

John Egerton.

...hmm, what happens next?