

The Old Dragon's Head

by Justin Newland

Prologue

The sweat dripped off his arms, like after bathing. He picked up his brand new kite, all shining, and red, but there was not a breath of wind outdoors. It was just hot, hot. He grabbed his bamboo boat and skipped across the meadow.

"Don't go beyond the stream."

"No, I won't, mother," he said.

The little stream was his friend. He liked the gurgling sounds that it made. He plonked himself down in its midst and splashed the water into the air. He liked seeing the rays of the sun dance in the spray as the droplets cooled his body. He thrust the bamboo boat into the surging stream. It bobbed up and down, cutting a swathe through the great waves.

From the road near his house came the distant sounds of thunder. He ignored them and went back to his boat. He was Captain Gang. His job was to steer the boat through choppy waters and explore the world.

The thunder was closer. The birds in the trees scattered in alarm. Now it carried menace. He had heard it before though. They were riders on stallions. Yesterday, they galloped by, not today. From near his house, his father shouted, disturbing the gentle harmony of stream and sunlight and sky. The horses neighed. The men were yelling.

He grabbed the boat and raced home. He stopped on the edge of the meadow and peered out from behind a big tree. He wiped the sweat from his brow.

The riders wore red bandannas. They leapt from their saddles, unsheathed swords, wielding lances, and bows and arrows. One waved a wicker torch, red flames licking the dry air. His father shook a fist at them. He didn't understand the names they were calling him. His father turned and raced towards the house.

A red bandanna unleashed an arrow at his father. At that moment, everything stopped, the gurgling, the sunlight, the shouting, the cawing birds, the neighing. The arrow span through the air, slowly, endlessly, dancing in the sunlight, the leaves of the trees swaying in the breeze. It was not going to reach his father. It couldn't. Ever. Gang squeezed his hand, crushing the bamboo boat.

The arrow paused just short of his father. Gang prayed for it to retrace its path and return to the bowman. Then, all of a sudden, it rammed into his father's back. Silence fell like a pall. Gang sunk to

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his knees, his prayers lay unheard, buried in the soil. His father thumped to the ground, arms splayed, kow-towing to the warm earth. The air was leaving his lungs just like the spirit was leaving his father. His chest tightened. He couldn't breathe. He took a huge gulp of air.

Moments later, the noises came back to him, loud and ugly. Cheering and laughing, the red bandannas chased his mother and sister into the house. Another prolonged scream.

Mother! Something in him screamed. No! He desperately wanted to run and save them. His legs were stuck. An invisible rope tied them to the spot. If only he could cut it. He wanted to rescue mother and sister. He could hear their screams. The red bandannas were doing horrible things to them.

His mother screamed. His sister screamed. The tree screamed. The meadow screamed. When the stream screamed, he could bear the screams no more. He plugged his ears, but they refused to go away. He lay on his side, ear against the unforgiving earth, listening to the thunder of the horses' hooves, moving farther, farther away.

He stared blankly at the burning flames consuming his precious house, his life, his world, yet the screams persisted. They were inside him now.

He was the scream.