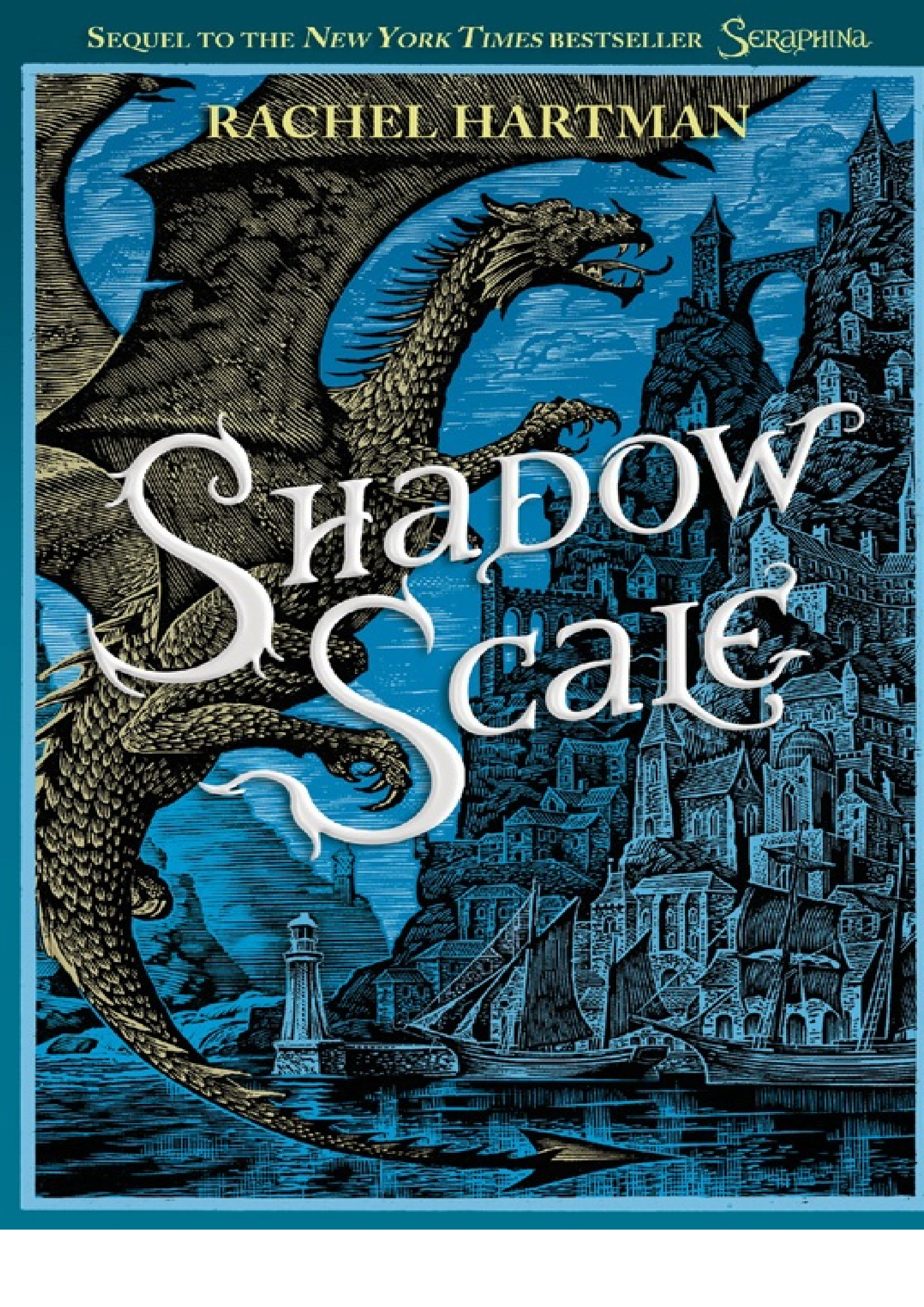


SEQUEL TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *SERAPHINA*

RACHEL HARTMAN

Shadow Scale



Also by Rachel Hartman

Seraphina



Shadow Scale

← RACHEL HARTMAN →

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From Father Fargle's Goredd:

THE TANGLED THICKET OF HISTORY

Let us first consider the role of Seraphina Dombegh in the events leading up to Queen Glisselda's reign.

Nearly forty years after Ardmagar Comonot and Queen Lavonda the Magnificent signed their historic treaty, the peace between dragons and humans was still dangerously fragile. In Lavondaville, the Sons of St. Ogdo preached anti-dragon rhetoric on street corners, fomented unrest, and committed violence against saarantrai. These dragons in human form were easily identified in those days by the bells they were forced to wear; for their own protection, saarantrai and their lizard-like cousins, the quigutl, were shut up in the neighborhood called Quighole every night, but this only served to single them out further. As the peace treaty anniversary—and Ardmagar Comonot's state visit—neared, tensions mounted.

A fortnight before the Ardmagar was to arrive, tragedy struck. Queen Lavonda's only son, Prince Rufus, was murdered in classic draconic fashion: decapitation. His head, presumably eaten, was never found. Had a dragon truly killed him, though, or was it the Sons of St. Ogdo, hoping to inflame anti-dragon sentiment?

Into this thicket of politics and prejudice entered Seraphina Dombegh, newly hired assistant to the court composer, Viridius. The word *abomination* has fallen out of favor, but that is precisely what the people of Goredd would have considered Seraphina, for her mother was a dragon, her father a human. Had this secret been known, it could have meant Seraphina's death, so her father kept her isolated for her own safety. Silver dragon scales around her waist and left forearm might have given her away at any time. Whether it was loneliness or her musical talent that drove her, she took a terrible risk in leaving her father's house for Castle Orison.

Scales were not her only worry. Seraphina was also afflicted with maternal memories and visions of grotesque beings. Her maternal uncle, the dragon Orma, taught her to create within her mind a symbolic garden wherein she might house these curious beings; only by tending to this garden of grotesques every night did she prevent visions from overtaking her.

Around the time of Prince Rufus's funeral, however, three denizens of Seraphina's mental garden overtook her in real life: Dame Okra Carmine, the Ninysh ambassador; a Samsame piper called Lars; and Abdo, a young Porphyrian dancer. Seraphina eventually realized that these people were half-dragons like herself, that she was not alone in the world. They all had scales and peculiar abilities, mental or physical. It must have been both a relief and an additional worry. None of them were safe, after all. Lars, notably, was threatened on numerous occasions by Josef, Earl of Apsig, his dragon-hating half brother and a member of the Sons of St. Ogdo.

Seraphina might still have kept herself clear of politics and intrigue if not for her uncle Orma. For most of her life, he'd been her only friend, teaching her not merely how to control her visions but also music and draconic lore. Seraphina, in turn, had inspired in Orma an avuncular fondness, a depth of feeling deemed unacceptable by dragonkind. The draconic Censors, convinced that Orma was emotionally compromised, had hounded him for years, threatening to have him sent back to the dragons' homeland, the Tanamoot, for the surgical removal of his memories.

After Prince Rufus's funeral, Orma learned that his father, the banished ex-general Imlann was in Goredd. Orma believed, and Seraphina's maternal memories confirmed, that Imlann was a threat to Ardmagar Comonot, part of a cabal of disgruntled generals who wished to destroy the peace with Goredd. Wary of the Censors, Orma did not trust himself to be impartial and unemotional about his own father. He asked Seraphina to report Imlann's presence to Prince Lucian Kiggs, Captain of the Queen's Guard. Though Seraphina would have liked to remain inconspicuous, she could not refuse her beloved uncle's request.

Did she approach Prince Lucian Kiggs with trepidation? Any sensible person would have. The prince had a reputation for being a perceptive and dogged investigator; if anyone at court was likely to uncover her secret, it was surely he. However, Seraphina had three unanticipated advantages. First, she had already come to his attention, favorably and unintentionally, as a patient harpsichord teacher to his cousin and fiancée, Princess Glisselda. Second, Seraphina had repeatedly found herself in a position to help people at court understand dragonkind, and the prince was grateful for her intercession. Finally, Prince Lucian, being the Queen's bastard grandson, had never felt quite comfortable at court; Seraphina, he recognized a fellow outsider, even if he could not precisely identify why.

He believed her report about Imlann, even as he discerned that she was leaving certain things unsaid.

Two banished knights—Sir Cuthberte and Sir Karal—came to the palace with news that they'd seen a rogue dragon in the countryside. Seraphina suspected it was Imlann. Prince Lucian Kiggs accompanied her to the knights' secret enclave to see if anyone could positively identify the rogue. Ancient Sir James recalled the dragon as "General Imlann" from an attack forty years prior. While they were there, Sir James's squire, Maurizio, demonstrated the dying martial art of dracomachia. Developed by St. Ogdo himself, dracomachia had once given Goredd the tools to battle dragons, but the art was now practiced by only a few. Seraphina realized how helpless humankind would be if the dragons broke the treaty.

Whether Imlann, in all his scaly, flaming horror, actually revealed himself to Seraphina and Prince Lucian on the road home or whether that episode is mere legend and embellishment is still a matter of scholarly debate. It is clear, however, that Seraphina and the prince became convinced that Imlann had killed Prince Rufus. They began to suspect that the wily old dragon was hiding at court in human form. Seraphina's warnings to Ardmagar Comonot, however, fell on deaf ears. The Ardmagar, though he had co-authored the peace, was arrogant and unsympathetic, not yet the dragon he would become in later years.

Imlann struck on Treaty Eve, giving poisoned wine to Princess Dionne, Princess Glisselda's mother. (Though the wine was also intended for Comonot, there is no evidence, contrary to some of my colleagues' assertions, that Princess Dionne and Comonot were engaged in an illicit love affair.) Seraphina and Prince Lucian prevented Princess Glisselda from drinking the wine, but Queen Lavonda was not so fortunate.

Let this be a lesson about the patience of dragons: Imlann had been at court for fifteen years, disguised as Princess Glisselda's governess, a trusted advisor and friend. Seraphina and Prince Lucian, realizing the truth at last, confronted Imlann, whereupon he seized Princess Glisselda and fled.

All the half-dragons had a role to play in Imlann's capture and death: Dame Okra Carmine's premonitions helped Seraphina and Prince Lucian find him; Lars distracted him with bagpipes.

so that Prince Lucian could rescue Princess Glisselda; and young Abdo squeezed Imlann's sti-
soft throat, preventing him from spitting fire. Seraphina delayed Imlann's escape by revealing
the truth about herself, that she was his granddaughter, giving Orma time to transform. Orma
was no match for Imlann, alas, and was badly injured. It was another dragon, Undersecretary
Eskar of the dragon embassy, who finished Imlann off, high above the city.

History has shown that Imlann was indeed part of a cabal of dragon generals determined to
overthrow Comonot and destroy the peace. While he wreaked havoc in Goredd, the others
staged a coup in the Tanamoot, seizing control of the dragon government. The generals, who
later styled themselves the "Old Ard," sent the Queen a letter declaring Comonot a criminal
and demanding that Goredd turn him over at once. Queen Lavonda was incapacitated by
poison, and Princess Dionne was dead. Princess Glisselda, in her first act as Queen, decided
that Goredd would not return Comonot to face trumped-up charges and that, if necessary,
Goredd would go to war for peace.

If your historian may be permitted a personal note: some forty years ago, when I was but
novice at St. Prue's, I served wine at a banquet our abbot gave in honor of Seraphina, herself
a venerable lady of more than a hundred and ten. I had not yet discovered my historic
vocation—in fact, I think something in her ignited my interests—but finding myself close
to her at the end of the evening, I had the opportunity to ask exactly one question. Imagine,
you will, what question you would have asked. Alas, I was young and foolish, and I blurted
out, "Is it true that you and Prince Lucian Kiggs, Heaven hold him, confessed your love for
each other before the dragon civil war even began?"

Her dark eyes sparkled, and for a moment I felt I glimpsed a much younger woman inside
the old. She took my plump young hand in her gnarled old one and squeezed it, saying
"Prince Lucian was the most honest and honorable man I have ever known, and that was
a very long time ago."

Thus was the opportunity of a lifetime squandered by callow, romantic youth. And yet
I still felt and still feel that her twinkling eyes answered, even if her tongue would not.

I have but skimmed events that other historians have spent entire careers untangling. To
my mind, Seraphina's story only really began when her uncle Orma, assisted by
Undersecretary Eskar, went into hiding to escape the Censors, and when Seraphina, on the
eve of war, decided the time had come to find the rest of the denizens of her mind's garden.
The other half-dragons scattered throughout the Southlands and Porphyry. Those are the
events I will examine here.

I returned to myself.

I rubbed my eyes, forgetting that the left was bruised, and the pain snapped the world into focus. I was sitting on the splintery wooden floor of Uncle Orma's office, deep in the library of St. Ida's Music Conservatory, books piled around me like a nest of knowledge. A face looming above me resolved into Orma's beaky nose, black eyes, spectacles, and beard; his expression showed more curiosity than concern.

I was eleven years old. Orma had been teaching me meditation for months, but I'd never been so deep inside my head before, nor felt so disoriented emerging from it.

He thrust a mug of water under my nose. I grasped it shakily and drank. I wasn't thirsty, but any trace of kindness in my dragon uncle was a thing to encourage.

"Report, Seraphina," he said, straightening himself and pushing up his spectacles. His voice held neither warmth nor impatience. Orma crossed the room in two strides and sat upon his desk, not bothering to clear the books off first.

I shifted on the hard floor. Providing me with a cushion would have required more empathy than a dragon—even in human form—could muster.

"It worked," I said in a voice like an elderly frog's. I gulped water and tried again. I imagined a grove of fruit trees and pictured the little Porphyrian boy among them."

Orma tented his long fingers in front of his gray doublet and stared at me. "And were you able to induce a true vision of him?"

"Yes. I took his hands in mine, and then ..." It was difficult to describe the next bit, a sickening swirl that had felt as if my consciousness were being sucked down a drain. I was too weary to explain. "I saw him in Porphyry, playing near a temple, chasing a puppy—"

"No headache or nausea?" interrupted Orma, whose draconic heart could not be plied with puppies.

I shook my head to make sure. "None."

"You exited the vision at will?" He might have been checking a list.

"I did."

"You seized the vision rather than it seizing you?" Check. "Did you give a name to the boy's symbolic representation in your head, the avatar?"

I felt the color rise in my cheeks, which was silly. Orma was incapable of laughing at me. "I named him Fruit Bat."

Orma nodded gravely, as if this were the most solemn and fitting name ever devised. "What did you name the rest?"

We stared at each other. Somewhere in the library outside Orma's office, a librarian merrily was whistling off-key.

"W-was I supposed to have done the rest?" I said. "Shouldn't we give it some time? If Fruit Bat stays in his special garden and doesn't plague me with visions, we'll be certain—"

"How did you get that black eye?" Orma said, his gaze hawkish.

I pursed my lips. He knew perfectly well: I'd been overtaken by a vision during yesterday

music lesson, fallen out of my chair, and slammed my face against the corner of his desk.

At least I hadn't smashed my oud, he'd said then.

"It is only a matter of time before a vision fells you in the street and you are run over by carriage," Orma said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "You don't have the luxury of time, unless you plan to stay in bed for the foreseeable future."

I carefully set the mug on the floor, away from his books. "I don't like inviting them all into my head at once," I said. "Some of the beings I see are quite horrifying. It's awful that they invade my mind without asking, but—"

"You misunderstand the mechanism," said Orma mildly. "If these grotesques were invading your consciousness, our other meditation strategies would have kept them out. *Your* mind is responsible: it reaches out compulsively. The avatars you create will be a real, permanent connection to these beings, so your mind won't have to lunge out clumsily anymore. If you want to see them, you need only reach inward."

I couldn't imagine wanting to visit any of these grotesques, ever. Suddenly it all seemed too much to bear. I'd started with my favorite, the friendliest one, and that had exhausted me. My eyes blurred again; I wiped the good one on my sleeve, ashamed to be leaking tears in front of my dragon uncle.

He watched me, his head cocked like a bird's. "You are not helpless, Seraphina. You are ... Why is *helpful* not the antonym of *helpless*?"

He seemed so genuinely befuddled by this question that I laughed in spite of myself. "But how do I proceed?" I said. "Fruit Bat was obvious: he's always climbing trees. That dreadful swamp slug can loll in mud, I suppose, and I'll put the wild man in a cave. But the rest? What kind of garden do I build to contain them?"

Orma scratched his false beard; it often seemed to irritate him. He said, "Do you know what's wrong with your religion?"

I blinked at him, trying to parse the non sequitur.

"There's no proper creation myth," he said. "Your Saints appeared six, seven hundred years ago and kicked out the pagans—who had a perfectly serviceable myth involving the sun and female aurochs, I might add. But for some reason your Saints didn't bother with an original story." He cleaned his spectacles on the hem of his doublet. "Do you know the Porphyrian creation story?"

I stared at him pointedly. "My tutor woefully neglects Porphyrian theology." He was my tutor these days.

Orma ignored the jibe. "It's tolerably short. The twin gods, Necessity and Chance, walked among the stars. What needed to be, was; what might be, sometimes was."

I waited for the rest, but that seemed to be it. "I like that myth," he went on. "It corresponds to the laws of nature, except for the part where there are gods."

I frowned, trying to understand why he was telling me this. "Is that how you think I ought to create the rest of the garden?" I hazarded. "Walk through my mind like a god?"

"It's not blasphemy," he said, replacing his spectacles and peering owlishly at me. "It's a metaphor, like everything else you're building in your mind. It is permissible to be the god of your own metaphors."

"Gods aren't helpless," I said, with more bravado than I felt.

"Seraphina isn't helpless," said Orma solemnly. "This garden will be your bulwark. It will

keep you safe.”

“I wish I could believe that,” I said, my voice frog-like again.

“It would probably help if you did. The human brain’s capacity for belief produces interesting neurochemical effects in the ...”

I ignored the lecture, adjusted my posture, and set my knees akimbo with my hands upon them. Closing my eyes, I made each breath successively deeper and slower.

I descended into my other world.

Queen Glisselda spotted the dragon first. It was a swift-moving patch of darker darkness against the night sky, obliterating stars and birthing them again.

She pointed at it, shouting, “Singleton from the west, St. Ogdo save us!” in imitation of the knights of old. She spoiled the impression slightly by bouncing on her toes and laughing. The winter wind carried the cheerful sound away; far below us the city curled under a quilt of new snow, silent and thoughtful as a sleeping child.

Trained spotters had once scanned the skies for dragon battalions from this selfsame place atop Castle Orison’s Ard Tower. Tonight it was only the Queen and me, and the approaching “singleton” was a friend, thank Allsaints: the dragon Eskar, erstwhile undersecretary at our dragon embassy. She’d helped my uncle Orma evade the Censors almost three months ago, just as the dragon civil war was breaking out.

Ardmagar Comonot, the deposed leader of dragonkind, had expected Eskar to find Orma a safe haven and then return to us in Goredd, where Comonot had established his headquarters in exile. The Ardmagar had intended to make her one of his advisors, or even a general, but months had brought no Eskar and no explanation.

She had contacted Comonot, via quigutl device, earlier this evening. Over dinner, Comonot had informed Queen Glisselda that Eskar would fly in after midnight. Then he had taken himself off to bed, leaving the Queen to wait up or not, as she saw fit.

It was a very Comonot way of dealing with things. The Queen wearied of him.

He’d said nothing about why Eskar had suddenly decided to come back, or where she’d been. It was possible he didn’t know. Glisselda and I had been speculating about it to distract ourselves from the cold. “Eskar has decided the dragon civil war is dragging on too long, and means to end it single-handedly,” was Glisselda’s final assessment. “Did she ever glare at you, Seraphina? She could stop the very planets in their spheres.”

I hadn’t experienced the glare, but I’d seen the way she looked at my uncle three months ago. Eskar had surely been with him this whole time.

Glisselda and I each held a torch, intending Eskar to understand that she should land on the tower top. This was Prince Lucian Kiggs’s idea—something about updrafts and a fear that she’d take out a window trying to land in a courtyard. He had left unspoken the fact that she was less likely to alarm anyone way up here. Goredd had begun to see full-sized dragons in the sky, as Comonot’s allies came and went, but it would be an exaggeration to say people were used to it.

Now that Eskar was approaching, she looked too large to land on the tower top. Maybe she thought so, too; flapping dark leathery wings with a rush of hot wind, she veered south toward the far edge of town. Three city blocks still smoldered there, sending the new snow up as steam.

“What’s she doing, checking out her countryman’s handiwork? Some insomniac is going to see her,” said Glisselda, pushing back the hood of her fur-lined cloak, her earlier merriment already dimming to fretfulness. Alas, this was her usual expression these days. Her golden curls gleamed incongruously in the torchlight.

Eskar soared into the spangled sky and then plummeted back out of the darkness, diving toward the heart of the city like a falcon after a wren. Glisselda gasped in alarm. At the last second, Eskar pulled up short—a black shadow against the new snow—and skimmed along the frozen Mews River, cracking the ice with her serpentine tail.

“And now she reveals how she might breach our defenses, flying so high our missiles and flaming pyria can’t reach her. That’s not how those houses were razed, Eskar!” called the young Queen into the wind, as if the dragon could hear her from such a distance. “He was already inside the walls!”

He had been the third dragon assassin Prince Lucian had flushed out, sent after Comonot by the Old Ard. The saarantras had transformed into a full-sized dragon to make his escape. Comonot had transformed in turn and killed his assailant before he could flee, but five people had died and fifty-six lost their homes in the resulting inferno.

All that destruction, caused by just two dragons. None of us dared to guess how awful the damage would be if Comonot’s Loyalists failed to hold off the Old Ard and war came to Goredd in earnest.

“Lars is designing new war machines,” I said, trying to inject some optimism. “And don’t discount the dracomachists training at Fort Oversea.” The elderly knights of the Southland and their middle-aged squires, hastily promoted to knights, had joined together in this endeavor.

Glisselda snorted derisively, her eyes following Eskar’s second circuit of the city. “Even when our knights were at full strength—and quickly trained dracomachists are not knights—this city was routinely burned to the ground. You and I have never seen the like, having been raised in peacetime.”

The wind gusted, making it hard to forget how high up we were; my palms sweated in my gloves. “Comonot’s Loyalists will defend us.”

“I believe they will defend our people, but the city itself doesn’t matter a jot to them. Lucian says we must focus on making the tunnels livable again. We survived there before and we can always rebuild.” She raised an arm and dropped it, as if she found it futile even in gesture. “This city is Grandmamma’s legacy; it has blossomed in peacetime. I hate that we might have to let it go.”

Eskar was returning, catching an updraft on the eastern side of Castle Hill. Glisselda and I pressed back against the parapet as the dragon came in to land. Her dark, laboring wings blasted sulfurous air, extinguishing our torches. I bent into the wind, terrified of being gusted over the edge. Eskar touched down on the tower top and paused with wings extended, a living shadow against the sky. I had dealt with dragons—I was half dragon—but the sight still raised hairs on the back of my neck. Before our eyes, the fangy, scaly darkness furled and contracted, cooled and condensed, folding in upon itself until all that remained on the tower top was a statuesque naked woman.

Glisselda gracefully swept off her fur cloak and approached the saarantras—the dragon in human form—holding out the warmed garment. Eskar bowed her head, and Glisselda draped the mantle gently across her bare shoulders.

“Welcome back, Undersecretary,” said the young Queen.

“I’m not staying,” said Eskar flatly.

“Indeed,” said Glisselda, no trace of surprise in her voice. She’d only been Queen for three

months, since her grandmother had fallen ill from poison and grief, but she'd already mastered the art of appearing unflappable. "Does Ardmagar Comonot know?"

"I'm more useful to him where I've been," Eskar said. "He will understand when I explain. Where is he?"

"Asleep, to be sure," said Glisselda. Her smile covered a spectacular annoyance that Comonot could not be bothered to stay up and greet Eskar himself. Glisselda saved her complaints about Comonot for her harpsichord lessons, so I routinely heard how inconsiderate he was; how she tired of apologizing to human allies for his boorish behavior; how ready she was for him to win his war and go home.

I understood dragons reasonably well, thanks to my uncle Orma and to memories left me by my mother. Comonot could not offend Eskar, whatever he did. Indeed, the Undersecretary was probably wondering why we hadn't gone to bed ourselves. While Glisselda had feigned propriety demanded a welcoming party, I was so thirsty for news of Uncle Orma that I leaped at the opportunity to greet Eskar myself.

I felt a little overcome, seeing her again. I'd last glimpsed her protectively holding my injured uncle's hand at St. Gobnait's Infirmary; it felt like an age ago. I reflexively extended my hand to her now and said, "Orma's well? You're not here with bad news, I hope."

Eskar looked at my hand and cocked an eyebrow. "He's fine, unless he's taking advantage of my absence to do something inadvisable."

"Please come inside, Undersecretary," Glisselda said. "It's a bitter night."

Eskar had brought a bundle of clothing clasped in her talons; she picked it out of the snow and followed us down the narrow stairs. Glisselda had cleverly left another torch burning below us in the belfry, and she collected it as we spiraled down the tower. We crossed a small courtyard, ghostly with snow. Most of Castle Orison was asleep, but night guards watched us pass through a back corridor into the palace proper. If they'd been alarmed by the late-night arrival of a dragon, they were too professional to show it.

A page boy, so sleepy he seemed not to register Eskar at all, held the door of the new Queen's study. Glisselda had left her grandmother's book-filled chamber alone, almost superstitiously, and had chosen another salon for herself, airier, more parlor than library. A broad desk loomed before the dark windows; rich tapestries cloaked the walls. At the hearth to our left, Prince Lucian Kiggs prodded the fire industriously.

Kiggs had arranged four high-backed chairs before the fire and started a kettle warming. He straightened to greet us, smoothing his crimson doublet, his expression neutral but his dark eyes keen. "Undersecretary," he said, giving the semi-naked saarantras full courtesy. Eskar ignored him, and I suppressed a smile. I'd hardly seen the prince these three months, but every gesture, every dark curl on his head, was still dear to me. He held my gaze briefly, then turned his attention to Glisselda. It would not do for him to address the second composer before his cousin, fiancée, and Queen.

"Do sit, Selda," he said, brushing imaginary dust off one of the middle chairs and offering his hand. "I should think you're half frozen."

Glisselda took his proffered hand and let him seat her. There was snow around the hem of her woolen gown; she shook it onto the painted hearth tiles.

I took the chair nearest the door. I had been invited here for news of my uncle and should leave if the conversation turned to state secrets, but I was also, unofficially, a translator of

sorts, helping smooth out dragon-human interactions. That Glisselda hadn't thrown Comonot out of the palace yet was due in part to my diplomacy.

Eskar dumped her bundle onto the seat between mine and Glisselda's and began untying it. Kiggs turned determinedly back to the fire, placing a new log with a cascade of sparks. "Have you come with good news about the war, Eskar?" he said.

"No," said Eskar, locating her trousers and turning them right side out. "I've been nowhere near the front. Nor do I intend to go there."

"Where have you been?" I blurted, entirely out of order but unable to contain myself. Kiggs met my eye, his brows bowed sympathetically.

Eskar tensed. "With Orma, as I'm sure you guessed. I don't like to say where. If the Censors learn his whereabouts, his mind is forfeit. They will strip his memories bare."

"Obviously none of us would tell them," said Glisselda, sounding affronted.

Eskar shoved her head and arms into her tunic. "Forgive me," she said as her head popped out. "Caution becomes a habit. We've been in Porphyry."

Relief rushed through me, as if I'd been underwater for three months and could finally take a breath. I was seized with an impulse to hug Eskar but knew better than to try. Dragons tend to bristle when embraced.

Glisselda was watching Eskar through narrowed eyes. "Your loyalty to Orma is admirable but you owe even more to your Ardmagar. He could use a smart, strong fighter like you. I saw you bring down the dragon Imlann."

There was a long pause. Imlann, my dragon grandfather, had struck at midwinter, killing Glisselda's mother, poisoning her grandmother, and attempting to assassinate Ardmagar Comonot. Orma had battled Imlann in the sky and been gravely injured; Eskar had arrived in time to finish Imlann off. Meanwhile, a cabal of dragon generals, the Old Ard, who deplored Comonot's Treaty with Goredd, had led a coup in the Tanamoot. They'd seized the capital and declared Comonot an outlaw.

If Comonot had been killed, the Old Ard might simply have swooped down upon Goredd, reigniting the war Comonot and Queen Lavonda had extinguished forty years ago. Comonot lived, however, and he had Loyalists willing to fight for him. The war had so far stayed in the mountains to the north, dragon against dragon, while Goredd watched warily. The Old Ard wanted Comonot, an end to peace with humankind, and their southern hunting grounds back; they were coming south eventually if the Loyalists couldn't hold them.

Eskar combed her fingers through her short black hair, making it stand on end, and shook her head down. "I cannot be Comonot's general," she said bluntly. "War is illogical."

Kiggs, who had taken the kettle off the fire and begun filling cups with tea, overfilled a cup and scalded his fingers. "Help me understand, Eskar," he said, shaking his hand and frowning. "Is it illogical for Comonot to want his country back, or to defend himself—and Goredd—against the Old Ard's aggression?"

"Neither," said Eskar, accepting a cup of tea from the prince. "Comonot is right to resist. But it's a reactive stance, answering aggression with aggression."

"War begets war," I said, quoting Pontheus, Kiggs's favorite philosopher. He met my eye and risked a quick smile.

Eskar turned her teacup in her hands but did not drink. "Reactivity makes him nearsighted. He focuses upon immediate threats and loses sight of the true goal."

“And this true goal is what, in your estimation?” said Kiggs, passing a cup to his cousin. Glisselda accepted it, never taking her eyes off Eskar.

“Ending this war,” said Eskar, staring back at Glisselda. Neither of them blinked.

“That’s what the Ardmagar is trying to do,” said Kiggs, his eyes darting toward me with an unspoken question. I shrugged, having no insight into Eskar’s argument.

“No, the Ardmagar is trying to win,” said Eskar, glaring down her nose.

When we did not appear enlightened by this distinction, Eskar clarified: “Dragons lay one egg at a time, and we grow slowly. Each death is significant, and so we settle our differences with litigation, or with an individual combat at most.

“It has never been our way to fight on this scale; if the war continues, our whole species loses. Comonot should return to our capital, the Kerama, take up the Opal of Office, and argue his case, as is his right. If he can get there, our laws and traditions dictate that the King shall hear him out. The fighting would cease at once.”

“You’re certain the Old Ard would accept this?” asked Kiggs, handing me the final cup of tea.

“There are a surprising number of dragons in the Tanamoot who haven’t taken sides,” said Eskar. “They will come down on the side of order and tradition.”

Glisselda tapped her foot on the hearth tiles. “How is Comonot to get there without fighting every ard along the way? There’s a whole war’s worth of enemies in his path.”

“Not if he follows my sensible plan,” said Eskar.

We all leaned in. Surely this was why she’d come back. But she scratched her chin and said nothing.

“Which is what, exactly?” I prompted, as designated dragon-prodder.

“He should return with me to Porphyry,” said Eskar, “and enter the Tanamoot from the other side, via the Omega River valley. The Old Ard won’t anticipate an incursion from that direction. Our treaty with the Porphyrians is so ancient that we forget it’s not a law of nature but a document that can be changed or disregarded at need.”

“The Porphyrians would allow this?” said Kiggs, swirling his tea.

“The Ardmagar would have to bargain,” said Eskar. “And I expect that there might still be fighting along this route, so he can’t go alone.”

Queen Glisselda looked up at the shadowed ceiling, thinking. “Would he take an ard with him?”

“That would alarm the Porphyrians and make them uncooperative,” said Eskar solemnly. “Porphyry has its own ard, a community of dragon exiles who’ve chosen a circumscribed life in human form over excision by the Censors. It’s a provision of our treaty: Porphyry keeps an eye on these deviants in exchange for our leaving their precious valley alone. Some exiles might accompany Comonot if he’ll pardon them and let them come home.”

“How many is some?” asked Kiggs, spotting the weak link at once. “Enough?”

Eskar shrugged. “Leave that to me.”

“And to Orma,” I said, liking the thought of him helping the Ardmagar’s cause.

At this mention of my uncle’s name, Eskar lowered her gaze for a second and her lower lip twitched. I saw—or maybe felt—the smile lurking below the surface. I glanced at the royal cousins, but they seemed not to have registered the expression at all.

She was fond of Orma. I knew it. For a moment I missed him terribly.

Eskar fished in a deep pocket of her trousers and extracted a sealed letter. "For you," she said. "It isn't safe for Orma to send anything through the post, or use thniks. I enforce her safety tyrannically, he tells me."

The letter's wax seal, brittle from the cold, shattered under my fingers. I recognized the handwriting, and my heart beat faster. Leaning toward the wavering firelight, I read the dear familiar scrawl:

Eskar will tell you where I am. You and I spoke of it often enough; I am pursuing the research I proposed. You will remember. I've been unexpectedly lucky, but I cannot put my findings here. I only risk writing you (despite Eskar's admonitions) because I have learned something potentially useful to your queen.

I have reason to think that you and other half-dragons can thread your minds together. "Like beads on a string," it has been described. In so doing, you will find you can make a barrier in the air, an unseen wall, strong enough to stop a dragon midflight. "Like a bird against a window," according to my source, who has more flair for description than I. You will be astonished to learn who it is.

The process will require practice. The more ityasaari on your string, the stronger the barrier. The uses should be obvious. I urge haste in finding your fellows before the war comes south. Unless you give up prematurely, your search will bring you here.

*All in ard,
O*

While I read, Eskar proclaimed herself tired. Glisselda escorted her to the anteroom and aroused the dozy page boy, who led Eskar to her quarters. I was hazily aware of this, and of Lucian Kiggs watching me while I read. When I finished the letter, I looked up and met the prince's dark, questioning eyes.

I tried to smile reassuringly, but the letter had produced such a riot of emotions in me that I felt only the struggle between them. It was bittersweet hearing from Orma, all my love bound up in sorrow for his exile. His proposal, on the other hand, fascinated and horrified me. I had longed to find the others of my kind, but I'd had a frightening experience early on with another half-dragon invading my mind. Just the idea of another mind threaded to mine made me squirm.

"I'll be interested in what Comonot makes of her plan," said Queen Glisselda, returning to her seat. "Surely he's thought of this and rejected it. And there is still a great deal of risk to Goredd if he pleads his case and fails." Her blue eyes darted back and forth between Kiggs and me. "You're making strange faces. What did I miss?"

"Orma has had an idea," I said, handing her the letter. Glisselda held the page, and Kiggs read over her shoulder, their dark and golden heads together.

"What is he researching?" said Kiggs, looking at me over Glisselda's bowed head.

"Historical references to half-dragons," I said. "My strangeness, in part, got him obsessed with learning whether there had been others." I'd told them about my garden of grotesque things they had some idea what I meant by strangeness.

"In part?" asked Kiggs, catching the qualifier at once. He was too sharp by half; I had to look away, or my smile was going to reveal things it shouldn't.

"Orma also found it irritatingly illogical that there are no records of interbreeding in the

dragon archives and no mention in Goreddi literature. The Saints mention ‘abominations,’ and there are laws forbidding cohabitation, but that’s it. He thought surely someone, somewhere would have tried the experiment and recorded the results.”

Talk of dragon “experimentation” produces an odd facial expression in humans, halfway between amused and appalled. The Queen and prince were no exceptions.

I continued, “The Porphyrians have a word for what I am—ityasaari—and Orma had heard rumors that Porphyrians might be more open to the possibility of ...” I trailed off. Even now when everyone knew about me, it was hard to talk about the practical mechanics of my parentage. “He hoped they might have some useful records.”

“He seems to have been right,” said Glisselda, scanning the letter again. She turned to me and smiled, patting Eskar’s empty chair. I shifted one seat closer to the royal cousins. “What do you make of this ‘unseen wall’ idea?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. I can’t picture it.”

“It would be like St. Abaster’s Trap,” said Kiggs. I stared at him incredulously; he smiled, enjoying that. “Am I the only one who reads scripture? St. Abaster could harness the fires of Heaven to make a shining net with which he pulled dragons out of the sky.”

I groaned. “I stopped reading St. Abaster when I got to ‘Women of the South, take not the worm to thy beds, for thusly wilt thou bear thine own damnation.’ ”

Kiggs blinked slowly, as at a dawning realization. “That’s not even the worst thing he says about dragons or ... or ...”

“And he’s not alone,” I said. “St. Ogdo, St. Vitt. Orma once extracted the worst parts and made me a pamphlet. Reading St. Abaster, in particular, is like being slapped.”

“But will you attempt this mind-threading?” Queen Glisselda said with barely concealed hope. “If there’s any chance it could spare our city ...”

I shuddered, but covered it with exaggerated nodding. “I’ll talk to the others.” Abdo especially had some unique abilities. I’d start with him.

Glisselda took my hand and squeezed it. “Thank you, Seraphina. And not only for this.” Her smile grew shy, or perhaps apologetic. “It’s been a hard winter, with assassins burning down neighborhoods, Comonot being Comonot, and Grandmamma so ill. She never intended me to be Queen at fifteen.”

“She may yet recover,” said Kiggs gently. “And you’re not much younger than she was when she and Comonot authored the peace.”

Glisselda extended her other hand toward him; he took it. “Dear Lucian. Thank you, too.” She took a deep breath, her eyes glittering in the firelight. “You’ve both been so important to me. The Crown consumes me, I sometimes feel, until I am only Queen. I don’t get to be Glisselda except with you, Lucian, or”—she squeezed my hand again—“at my harpsichord lesson. I need that. I’m sorry I don’t practice more.”

“I’m surprised you’ve had time enough for the lessons,” I said.

“I couldn’t give them up!” she cried. “I have few enough chances to take off the mask.”

I said, “If this invisible barrier works—if Abdo, Lars, Dame Okra, and I can thread other minds—then I want to search for the other half-dragons.” Glisselda had proposed such a journey at midwinter, when she’d first learned there were others, but nothing had come of it.

Glisselda blushed furiously. “I’ve been reluctant to lose my music teacher.”

I glanced at Orma’s letter and knew just how she felt.

“Still,” she continued stoutly, “I’ll bear it if I must, for Goredd’s sake.”

I met Kiggs’s eyes over the top of Glisselda’s curly head. He nodded slightly at me and said,

“I believe we all feel the same way, Selda. Our duties come first.”

Glisselda laughed lightly and kissed his cheek. Then she kissed mine.

I left shortly thereafter, retrieving Orma’s letter and bidding the cousins good night—good morning. The sun was just rising. My mind was all abuzz; I might soon go in search of my people, and that eagerness had begun to triumph over every other feeling. Beside the door the page boy dozed, oblivious to all.

I closed the shutters of my suite against the impending dawn. I'd told Viridius, the court composer and my employer, that I might be up till all hours and not to expect me until the afternoon. He hadn't objected. Lars, my fellow ityasaari, lived with Viridius now and was effectively his assistant; I'd been promoted to second court composer, which gave me some autonomy.

I flopped down on my bed, exhausted but certain I wouldn't sleep. I was thinking of the ityasaari, how I would travel to exotic places to find them, how long it might take. What would I tell them? *Hello, friend. I have dreamed of this—*

No, that was stupid. *Have you felt deeply alone? Have you longed for a family?*

I made myself stop; it was too embarrassing. Anyway, I still had to visit my garden of grotesques; I had to settle the denizens before I slept. I would get terrible headaches or even a resumption of visions if I didn't.

It took some time to slow my breath, and longer to clear my mind, which kept insisting on holding imaginary conversations with Orma. *Are you sure this mind-threading is safe? You can remember what Jannoula did to me? I wanted to ask. And: Is the Porphyrian library as amazing as we always dreamed?*

Enough mind chatter. I imagined every thought encapsulated in a bubble; I exhaled them into the world. Gradually the noise ceased, and my mind was dark and still.

A wrought-iron gate appeared before me, the entrance to my other world. I grasped the bars with my imaginary hands and said the ritual words, as Orma had taught me: "This is my mind's garden. I tend it; I order it. I have nothing to fear."

The portal opened soundlessly. I crossed the threshold and felt something in me relax. I was home.

The garden had a different layout every time, but it was always familiar. Today I had entered at one of my favorite spots, the origin: Fruit Bat's grove. It was a stand of Porphyrian fruit trees—lemon, orange, fig, date, and gola nut—where a brown-skinned lad climbed and played and left fruit detritus everywhere.

All the denizens of my garden were half-dragons, although I'd only learned that a few months ago when three of them walked into my life. Fruit Bat was really a skinny twelve-year-old named Abdo. He claimed the sound of my flute had called him from afar; he sensed the connection between us and came looking for me. He and his dance troupe had arrived at midwinter and were still here in Lavondaville, waiting for the roads to thaw so they could travel again.

Fruit Bat was freer than some of my garden denizens, able to leave his designated area perhaps because Abdo had unusual mental abilities of his own. He could talk to other ityasaari with his mind, for instance. Today Fruit Bat was in his grove, curled like a kitten in a nest of furry fig leaves, sound asleep. I smiled down at him, made a blanket appear, and tucked it around him. It wasn't a real blanket, and this wasn't really Abdo, but the symbol meant something to me. He was my favorite.

I moved on. Loud Lad's ravine opened up before me, and I yodeled down it. Loud La

blond and burly, yodeled back from below, where he seemed to be building a boat with wings. I waved; that was all the settling he ever required.

Loud Lad was Lars, the Samsamese bagpiper who now lived with Viridius; he had appeared at midwinter just like Abdo. I had envisioned each grotesque to look like the person I'd seen in my visions. Beyond that, each avatar had developed quirks, traits I hadn't consciously given them but that corresponded to their real-life counterparts. It was as if my mind had intuited these qualities and given an analogous trait to their avatars. Loud Lad was a noise putterer; real-world Lars designed and built strange instruments and machines.

I wondered whether this would hold true for the ones I hadn't met yet, if the oddities they displayed in my garden would translate into life. The fat, bald Librarian, for example, sat in a shale quarry, squinting at fossil ferns through square spectacles and then tracing the same shape in the air with his finger. The fern lingered in the air, drawn in smoke. Glimmerghosa painted pale and ethereal, folded butterflies out of paper, and they fluttered in huge flocks around her garden. Bluey, her red hair standing straight up like a hedge, waded in a stream, eddies of green and purple swirling in her wake. How would these characteristics translate into real life?

I chatted soothingly to each one, squeezed shoulders, kissed foreheads. I had never met them but felt we were old friends. They were as familiar as family.

I reached the sundial lawn, ringed by a rose garden, where Miss Fusspots presided. She was the third and final half-dragon I'd met so far, the Ninysh ambassador to Goredd, Dame Okra Carmine. In my garden, her double crawled on hands and knees between the roses, digging up weeds before they had a chance to sprout. In life, Dame Okra had an idiosyncratic talent for premonition.

In life, she could also be a cranky, unpleasant person. That would be a potential hazard when gathering everyone together, I supposed. Some were surely difficult people, or had been hurt, just struggling to survive. I passed the golden nest of Finch, an old man with a beaked face; he must have been stared at, scorned, threatened with harm. Would he be bitter? Would he be relieved to find a safe place at long last, a place where half-dragons could support each other and be free from fear?

I passed several Porphyrians in a row—the dark, slender, athletic twins, Nag and Nagin, who raced each other over three sand dunes; dignified, elderly Pelican Man, who I was convinced was a philosopher or an astronomer; winged Miserere, circling in the sky. Abdo had hinted that in Porphyry, ityasaari were considered children of Chakhon, a god, and were revered. Maybe the Porphyrians wouldn't want to come?

Some of them might not, but I had a hunch some would. Abdo did not seem keen on the reverence, wrinkling his nose when he spoke of it, and I had firsthand knowledge that Master Smasher had not always had it easy.

I was approaching Master Smasher's statuary meadow now, where eighty-four marble statues jutted out of the grass like crooked teeth. Most were missing parts—arms, heads, toes. Master Smasher, tall and statuesque himself, picked through the weeds, collecting broken pieces and reassembling them. He'd made a woman out of hands and a bull entirely of ears.

"That finger-swan is new, isn't it?" I said, picking my way toward him. He didn't answer. I'd have been alarmed if he had. Just being this close to him brought it back, though, the memory of the terrible day I'd first seen him, when I had still been seized by involuntary

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