



*'BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN.  
SOME OF THE MOST INTERESTING  
DRAGONS I'VE READ IN FANTASY'*

*CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI*

# SERAPHINA

RACHEL  
HARTMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

A fragile peace has been achieved in the realm of Goredd, and dragons and humans live together in harmony.

But the truce is shattered when a royal prince is brutally murdered – could dragons be to blame?

Seraphina, a talented court musician harbouring secrets of her own, is drawn into the investigation and uncovers a darker plot, one that threatens the very existence of the kingdom. And soon her own life is in terrible danger as she fights to hide the secret behind her amazing gift . . .

# Seraphina

Rachel Hartman

**RHCP DIGITAL**

In memoriam: Michael McMechan.  
Dragon, teacher, friend.

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## ♪ AT DOMBEGH HOUSE ♪

SERAPHINA DOMBEGH—our charming heroine, often called  
Phina

CLAUDE DOMBEGH—her father, a lawyer with a secret

AMALINE DUCANAHAN—Phina’s counterfeit mother

LINN—Phina’s real mother, alas

ORMA—Phina’s mysterious mentor

ZEYD—Phina’s former tutor, a dragon

ANNE-MARIE—Phina’s not-so-wicked stepmother

TESSIE, JEANNE, PAUL, AND NEDWARD—the moderately wicked  
stepsiblings

## ♪ THE GOREDDI ROYAL FAMILY ♪

QUEEN LAVONDA—a monarch who faces down dragons

PRINCE RUFUS—the Queen’s only son, inexplicably murdered

PRINCESS DIONNE—the Queen’s surly daughter, first heir to  
the throne

PRINCESS GLISSELDA—Princess Dionne’s cheerful daughter,  
second heir to the throne

PRINCESS LAUREL—the Queen’s other daughter, dead of  
elopement

PRINCE LUCIAN KIGGS—Princess Laurel's embarrassing  
bastard, fiance of Princess Glisselda, Captain of the  
Queen's Guard, possessor of too many descriptors

## ♪ AT COURT ♪

VIRIDIUS—the irascible court composer

GUNTARD—a professional musician

SCRAWNY SACKBUT PLAYER—exactly as you imagine

LADY MILIPHRENE—Princess Glisselda's favorite lady-in-  
waiting, called Millie

LADY CORONGI—Princess Glisselda's governess, an antique  
despot

DAME OKRA CARMINE—the Ninysh ambassador, an antique  
darling

JOSEF, EARL OF APSIG—a Samsamese lordling

REGENT OF SAMSAM—the regent of Samsam

COUNT PESAVOLTA—the ruler of Ninys

## ♪ OUR DRACONIC FRIENDS ♪

ARDMAGAR COMONOT—the leader of the dragon world

AMBASSADOR FULDA—the dragon with the best manners

UNDERSECRETARY ESKAR—Fulda's laconic second-in-command

BASIND—a walleyed newskin

## ♪ NOBLE BANISHED KNIGHTS ♪

SIR KARAL HALFHOLDER—obeys the law, even if the infernal  
fiends do not

SIR CUTHBERTE PETTYBONE—his somewhat less humor-  
impaired comrade  
SIR JAMES PEASCOD—once knew General Gann from General  
Gonn  
SQUIRE MAURIZIO FOUGHFAUGH—one of the last practitioners  
of dracomachia  
SQUIRE PENDER—the other one

### ♪ IN TOWN ♪

SONS OF ST. OGDO—unhappy with the treaty  
LARS—the genius behind the clock  
THOMAS BROADWICK—a cloth merchant  
SILAS BROADWICK—the reason they call them Broadwick  
Bros. Clothiers  
ABDO—a dancer in a pygegyria troupe  
A PYGEGYRIA TROUPE—and there's the rest of them now

### ♪ IN PHINA'S HEAD ♪

FRUIT BAT—the climber  
PELLCAN MAN—putting the grotesque in “grotesque”  
MISERERE—the feathery one  
NEWT—the wallowing one  
LOUD LAD—the noisy one  
JANNOULA—too curious for her own good  
MISS FUSSPOTS—the finicky one  
PANDOWDY—the swamp thing  
NAG AND NAGINI—the speedy twins  
GARGOYELLA AND FINCH—mentioned in passing  
FIVE MORE—to be named in a future publication

## ♪ IN LEGEND AND IN FAITH ♪

QUEEN BELONDWEG—the first Queen of united Goredd,  
subject of the national epic

PAU-HENOA—her trickster rabbit companion, also called the  
Mad Bun and Hen-Wee

ST. CAPITI—representing the life of the mind, Phina's  
patroness

ST. YIRTRUDIS—the spooky heretic, Phina's other patroness,  
alas

ST. CLARE—lady of perspicacity, Prince Lucian Kiggs's  
patroness

# PROLOGUE

I remember being born.

In fact, I remember a time before that. There was no light, but there was music: joints creaking, blood rushing, the heart's staccato lullaby, a rich symphony of indigestion. Sound enfolded me, and I was safe.

Then my world split open, and I was thrust into a cold and silent brightness. I tried to fill the emptiness with my screams, but the space was too vast. I raged, but there was no going back.

I remember nothing more; I was a baby, however peculiar. Blood and panic meant little to me. I do not recall the horrified midwife, my father weeping, or the priest's benediction for my mother's soul.

My mother left me a complicated and burdensome inheritance. My father hid the dreadful details from everyone, including me. He moved us back to Lavondaville, the capital of Goredd, and picked up his law practice where he had dropped it. He invented a more acceptable grade of dead wife for himself. I believed in her like some people believe in Heaven.

I was a finicky baby; I wouldn't suckle unless the wet nurse sang exactly on pitch. "It has a discriminating ear," observed Orma, a tall, angular acquaintance of my father's who came over often in those days. Orma called me "it" as if I were a dog; I was drawn to his aloofness, the way cats gravitate toward people who'd rather avoid them.

He accompanied us to the cathedral one spring morning where the young priest anointed my wispy hair with lavender oil and told me that in the eyes of Heaven I was as a queen. I bawled like any self-respecting baby; my shrieks echoed up and down the nave. Without bothering to look up from the work he'd bought with him, my father promised to bring me up piously in the faith of Allsaints. The priest handed me my father's psalter and I dropped it, right on cue. It fell open at the picture of St. Yirtrudis, whose face had been blacked out.

The priest kissed his hand, pinkie raised. "Your psalter still contains the heretic!"

"It's a very old psalter," said Papa, not looking up, "and I hate to maim a book."

"We advise the bibliophilic faithful to paste Yirtrudis's pages together so this mistake can't happen." The priest flipped a page. "Heaven surely meant St. Capiti."

Papa muttered something about superstitious fakes, just loud enough for the priest to hear. There followed a fierce argument between my father and the priest, but I don't remember it. I was gazing, transfixed, at a procession of monks passing through the nave. They padded by in soft shoes, a flurry of dark, whispering robes and clicking beads, and took their places in the cathedral's quire. Seats scraped and creaked; several monks coughed.

They began to sing.

The cathedral, reverberating with masculine song, appeared to expand before my eyes. The sun gleamed through the high windows; gold and crimson bloomed upon the marble floor. The music buoyed my small form, filled and surrounded me, made me larger than myself. It was the answer to a question I had never asked, the way to fill the dread emptiness into which I had been born. I believed—no, I *knew*—I could transcend the vastness and touch the vaulted ceiling with my hand.

I tried to do it.

My nurse squealed as I nearly squirmed out of her arms. She gripped me by the ankle at an awkward angle. I stared dizzily at the floor; it seemed to tilt and spin.

My father took me up, long hands around my fat torso, and held me at arm's length as if he had discovered an oversized and astonishing frog. I met his sea-gray eyes; they crinkled sadly at the corners.

The priest stormed off without blessing me. Orma watched him disappear around the end of the Golden House, then said, "Claude, explain this. Did he leave because you convinced him his religion is a sham? Or was he . . . what's that one called? Offended?"

My father seemed not to hear; something about me had captured his attention. "Look at her eyes. I could swear she understands us."

"It has a lucid gaze for an infant," said Orma, pushing up his spectacles and leveling his own piercing stare at me. His eyes were dark brown, like my own; unlike mine, they were as distant and inscrutable as the night sky.

"I have been unequal to this task, Seraphina," said Papa softly. "I may always be unequal, but I believe I can do better. We must find a way to be family to each other."

He kissed my downy head. He'd never done that before. I gaped at him, awed. The monks' liquid voices surrounded us and held us all three together. For a single, glorious moment I recovered that first feeling, the one I'd lost by being born: everything was as it should be, and I was exactly where I belonged.

And then it was gone. We passed through the bronze-bossed doors of the cathedral; the music faded behind us. Orma stalked off across the square without saying goodbye, his cloak flapping like the wings of an enormous bat. Papa handed me to my nurse, pulled his cloak tightly around himself, and hunched his shoulders against the gusting wind. I cried for him, but he did not turn around. Above us arched the sky, empty and very far away.

Superstitious fakery or not, the psalter's message was clear: *The truth may not be told. Here is an acceptable lie.*

Not that St. Capiti—may she keep me in her heart—made a poor substitute saint. She was shockingly apropos, in fact. St. Capiti carried her own head on a plate like a roast goose; it glared out from the page, daring me to judge her. She represented the life of the mind, utterly divorced from the sordid goings-on of the body.

I appreciated that division as I grew older and was overtaken by bodily grotesqueries of my own, but even when I was very young, I always felt a visceral sympathy for St. Capiti. Who could love someone with a detached head? How could she accomplish anything meaningful in this world when her hands were occupied with that platter? Did she have people who understood her and would claim her as a friend?

Papa had permitted my nurse to glue St. Yirtrudis's pages together; the poor lady could not rest easy in our house until it was done. I never did get a look at the heretic. If I held the page up to the light I could just discern the shapes of both saints, blended together into one terrible monster saint. St. Yirtrudis's outstretched arms sprang out of St. Capiti's back like a pair of ineffectual wings; her shadow-head loomed where St. Capiti's should have been. She was a double saint for my double life.

My love of music eventually lured me from the safety of my father's house, propelling me into the city and the royal court. I took a terrible risk, but I could not do otherwise. I did not understand that I carried loneliness before me on a plate, and that music would be the light illuminating me from behind.

## 1

AT THE CENTER of the cathedral stood a model of Heaven called the Golden House. Its roof unfolded like a flower to reveal a human-sized hollow, in which the body of poor Prince Rufus lay shrouded in gold and white. His feet rested upon the House's blessed threshold; his head lay cradled by a nest of gilded stars.

At least, it should have been. Prince Rufus's killer had decapitated him. The Guard had scoured forest and marshland, looking in vain for the prince's head; he was to be buried without it.

I stood upon the steps of the cathedral quire, facing the funeral. From the high balcony pulpit to my left, the bishop prayed over the Golden House, the royal family, and the noble mourners crowding the heart of the church. Beyond a wooden railing, common mourners filled the cavernous nave. As soon as the bishop finished his prayer, I was to play the Invocation to St. Eustace, who escorted spirits up the Heavenly Stair. I swayed dizzily, terrified, as if I had been asked to play flute upon a windy cliff.

In fact, I had not been asked to play at all. I was not on the program; I had promised Papa when I left that I wouldn't perform in public. I had heard the Invocation once or twice, but never before played it. This wasn't even my flute.

My chosen soloist, however, had sat upon his instrument and bent its reed; my backup soloist had drunk too many

libations for Prince Rufus's soul and was out in the cloister garden, sick with regret. There was no second backup. The funeral would be ruined without the Invocation. I was responsible for the music, so it was up to me.

The bishop's prayer wound down; he described the glorious Heavenly Home, dwelling of Allsaints, where all of us would rest someday in eternal bliss. He didn't list exceptions; he didn't have to. My eyes flicked involuntarily toward the dragon ambassador and the goodwill contingent from his embassy, seated behind the nobility but ahead of the common rabble. They were in their saarantrai—their human forms—but were immediately distinguishable even at this distance by the silver bells at their shoulders, the empty seats around them, and their disinclination to bow their heads during a prayer.

Dragons have no souls. No one expected piety from them.

"Be it ever so!" intoned the bishop. That was my signal to play, but at that exact moment I noticed my father in the crowded nave, beyond the barrier. His face was pale and drawn. I could hear in my head the words he'd said the day I left for court a mere two weeks ago: *Under no circumstances are you to draw attention to yourself. If you won't think of your own safety, at least remember all I have to lose!*

The bishop cleared his throat, but my insides were ice and I could barely breathe.

I cast about desperately for some better focus.

My eyes lit upon the royal family, three generations seated together before the Golden House, a tableau of grief. Queen Lavonda had left her gray locks loose around her shoulders; her watery blue eyes were red with weeping for her son. Princess Dionne sat tall and glared fiercely, as if plotting revenge upon her younger brother's killers, or upon Rufus himself for failing to reach his fortieth birthday. Princess Glisselda, Dionne's daughter, laid her golden head

upon her grandmother's shoulder to comfort her. Prince Lucian Kiggs, Glisselda's cousin and fiancé, sat a little apart from the family and stared without seeing. He was not Prince Rufus's son, but he looked as shocked and stricken as if he'd lost his own father.

They needed Heaven's peace. I knew little of Saints, but I knew about sorrow and about music as sorrow's surest balm. That was comfort I could give. I raised the flute to my lips and my eyes toward the vaulted ceiling above, and began to play.

I began too quietly, unsure of the melody, but the notes seemed to find me and my confidence grew. The music flew from me like a dove released into the vastness of the nave; the cathedral itself lent it new richness and gave something back, as if this glorious edifice, too, were my instrument.

There are melodies that speak as eloquently as words, that flow logically and inevitably from a single, pure emotion. The Invocation is of this kind, as if its composer had sought to distill the purest essence of mourning, to say, *Here is what it is to lose someone.*

I repeated the Invocation twice, reluctant to let it go, anticipating the end of the music as another palpable loss. I set the last note free, strained my ears for the final dying echo, and felt myself crumple inside, exhausted. There would be no applause, as befit the dignity of the occasion, but the silence was itself deafening. I looked across the plain of faces, across the assembled nobility and other guests of quality, to the crushing mob of common folk beyond the barrier. There was no movement but for the dragons shifting uneasily in their seats and Orma, pressed up against the railing, absurdly flapping his hat at me.

I was too drained to find him embarrassing. I bowed my head and retreated from view.

I was the new assistant to the court composer and had beaten out twenty-seven other musicians for the job, from

itinerant troubadors to acclaimed masters. I was a surprise; no one at the conservatory had paid me any heed as Orma's protégée. Orma was a lowly music theory teacher, not a real musician. He played harpsichord competently, but then the instrument played itself if he hit the right keys. He lacked passion and musicality. Nobody expected a full-time student of his to amount to anything.

My anonymity was by design. Papa had forbidden me to fraternize with the other students and teachers; I saw the sense in that, however lonely I was. He had not explicitly forbidden me to audition for jobs, but I knew perfectly well he wouldn't like it. This was our usual progression: he set narrow limits and I complied until I couldn't anymore. It was always music that pushed me beyond what he considered safe. Still, I hadn't foreseen the depth and breadth of his rage when he learned I was leaving home. I knew his anger was really fear for me, but that didn't make it any easier to bear.

Now I worked for Viridius, the court composer, who was in poor health and desperately needed an assistant. The fortieth anniversary of the treaty between Goredd and dragonkind was rapidly approaching, and Ardmagar Comonot himself, the great dragon general, would be here for the celebrations in just ten days. Concerts, balls, and other musical entertainments were Viridius's responsibility. I was to help audition performers and organize programs, and to give Princess Glisselda her harpsichord lesson, which Viridius found tedious.

That had kept me busy for my first two weeks, but the unexpected interruption of this funeral had piled on additional work. Viridius's gout had put him out of commission, so the entire musical program had been left up to me.

Prince Rufus's body was removed to the crypt, accompanied only by the royal family, the clergy, and the most important guests. The cathedral choir sang the

Departure, and the crowd began to dissipate. I staggered back into the apse. I had never performed for an audience of more than one or two; I had not anticipated the anxiety beforehand and the exhaustion afterward.

Saints in Heaven, it was like standing up naked in front of the entire world.

I stumbled about, congratulating my musicians and supervising their removal. Guntard, my self-appointed assistant, trotted up behind me and clapped an unwelcome hand upon my shoulder. "Music Mistress! That was beyond beautiful!"

I nodded weary thanks, twisting out of his reach.

"There's an old man here to see you. He showed up during your solo, but we put him off," Guntard continued. He gestured up the apse toward a chapel, where an elderly man loitered. His dark complexion meant he'd come from distant Porphyry. His graying hair was done in tidy plaits; his brown face crinkled in a smile.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Guntard tossed his bowl-cut locks disdainfully. "He's got a mess of pygegyria dancers, and some daft notion that we'd want them dancing at the funeral." Guntard's lips curled into that sneer, both judgmental and envious, that Goreddis get when they speak of decadent foreigners.

I would never have considered pygegyria for the program; we Goreddis don't dance at funerals. However, I couldn't let Guntard's sneering pass. "Pygegyria is an ancient and respected dance form in Porphyry."

Guntard snorted. "*Pygegyria* literally translates as 'bum-wagging!'" He glanced nervously at the Saints in their alcoves, noticed several of them frowning, and kissed his knuckle piously. "Anyway, his troupe's in the cloister, befuddling the monks."

My head was beginning to hurt. I handed Guntard the flute. "Return this to its owner. And send away this dance troupe—politely, please."

"You're going back already?" asked Guntard. "A bunch of us are going to the Sunny Monkey." He laid a hand upon my left forearm.

I froze, fighting the impulse to shove him or run away. I took a deep breath to calm myself. "Thank you, but I can't," I said, peeling his hand off me, hoping he wouldn't be offended.

His expression said he was, a little.

It wasn't his fault; he assumed I was a normal person, whose arm might be touched with impunity. I wanted so much to make friends at this job, but a reminder always followed, like night after day: I could never let my guard down completely.

I turned toward the quire to fetch my cloak; Guntard shuffled off to do my bidding. Behind me, the old man cried, "Lady, wait! Abdo has to coming all this way, just for meeting you!"

I kept my eyes straight ahead, ducking up the steps and out of his line of sight.

The monks had finished singing the Departure and begun it again, but the nave was still half full; no one seemed to want to leave. Prince Rufus had been popular. I had barely known him, but he had spoken kindly, a sparkle in his eyes, when Viridius introduced me. He'd sparkled at half the city, to gauge by the loitering citizens, speaking in hushed voices and shaking their heads in disbelief.

Rufus had been murdered while hunting, and the Queen's Guard had found no clues as to who'd done it. The missing head would suggest dragons, to some. I imagined the saarantrai who attended the funeral were only too aware of this. We had only ten days before the Ardmagar arrived, and fourteen days until the anniversary of the treaty. If a dragon had killed Prince Rufus, that was some spectacularly unfortunate timing. Our citizens were jumpy enough about dragonkind already.

I started down the south aisle, but the southern door was blocked by construction. A jumble of wooden and metal pipes took up half the floor. I continued down the nave toward the great doors, keeping an eye out lest my father ambush me from behind a column.

"Thank you!" cried an elderly lady-in-waiting as I passed. She put her hands to her heart. "I have never been so moved."

I gave half courtesy as I walked past, but her enthusiasm attracted other nearby courtiers. "Transcendent!" I heard, and "Sublime!" I nodded graciously and tried to smile as I dodged the hands that reached for mine. I edged my way out of the crowd, my smile feeling as stiff and hollow as a saarantras's.

I put up the hood of my cloak as I passed a cluster of citizens in homespun white tunics. "I've buried more people than I can count—sit they all at Heaven's table," declaimed a large guildsman with a white felt hat jammed onto his head, "but I never seen the Heavenly Stair until today."

"I never heard nobody play like that. It weren't quite womanly, do you think?"

"She's a foreigner, maybe." They laughed.

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself and quickened my pace toward the great doors, kissing my knuckle toward Heaven because that is what one does when exiting the cathedral, even when one is . . . me.

I burst out into the wan afternoon light, filling my lungs with cold, clean air, feeling my tension dissipate. The winter sky was a blinding blue; departing mourners skittered around like leaves in the bitter wind.

Only then did I notice the dragon waiting for me on the cathedral steps, flashing me his best facsimile of a proper human smile. No one in the world could have found Orma's strained expression heartwarming but me.

ORMA HAD A scholar's exemption from the bell, so few people ever realized he was a dragon. He had his quirks, certainly: he never laughed; he had little comprehension of fashion, manners, or art; he had a taste for difficult mathematics and fabrics that didn't itch. Another saarantras would have known him by smell, but few humans had a keen enough nose to detect saar, or the knowledge to recognize what they were smelling. To the rest of Goredd, he was just a man: tall, spare, bearded, and bespectacled.

The beard was false; I pulled it off once when I was a baby. Male saarantrai could not grow beards under their own power, a peculiarity of transformation, like their silver blood. Orma didn't need facial hair to pass; I think he just liked the way it looked.

He waved his hat at me, as if there were any chance I didn't see him. "You still rush your glissandi, but you seem finally to have mastered that uvular flutter," he said, dispensing with any greeting. Dragons never see the point.

"It's nice to see you too," I said, then regretted the sarcasm, even though he wouldn't notice it. "I'm glad you liked it."

He squinted and cocked his head to one side, as he did when he knew he was missing some crucial detail but couldn't work out what. "You think I should have said hello first," he hazarded.

I sighed. "I think I'm too tired to care that I fell short of technical perfection."

"This is precisely what I never comprehend," he said, shaking his felt hat at me. He seemed to have forgotten it was for wearing. "Had you played perfectly—like a saar might have—you would not have affected your listeners so. People wept, and not because you sometimes hum while you play."

"You're joking," I said, mortified.

"It created an interesting effect. Most of the time it was harmonious, fourths and fifths, but every now and then you'd burst into a dissonant seventh. Why?"

"I didn't know I was doing it!"

Orma looked down abruptly. A young urchin, her mourning tunic white in spirit if not in fact, tugged urgently at the hem of Orma's short cloak. "I'm attracting small children," Orma muttered, twisting his hat in his hands. "Shoo it away, will you?"

"Sir?" said the girl. "This is for you." She wormed her small hand into his.

I caught a glint of gold. What lunacy was this, a beggar giving Orma coin?

Orma stared at the object in his hand. "Was there some message with it?" His voice caught when he spoke, and I felt a chill. That was an emotion, clear as day. I'd never heard the like from him.

"The token is the message," recited the girl.

Orma raised his head and looked all around us, sweeping his eyes from the great doors of the cathedral, down the steps, over the peopled plaza, across to Cathedral Bridge, along the river, and back. I looked too, reflexively, having no notion what we were looking for. The sinking sun blazed above the rooftops; a crowd gathered on the bridge; the garish Comonot Clock across the square pointed to Ten Days; bare trees along the river tossed in the breeze. I saw nothing else.

I looked back at Orma, who now searched the ground as if he'd dropped something. I assumed he'd lost the coin, but no. "Where did she go?" he asked.

The girl was gone.

"What did she give you?" I asked.

He did not reply, carefully tucking the object into the front of his woolen mourning doublet, flashing me a glimpse of the silk shirt beneath.

"Fine," I said. "Don't tell me."

He looked puzzled. "I have no intention of telling you."

I inhaled slowly, trying not to be cross with him. At that very moment a commotion broke out on Cathedral Bridge. I looked toward the shouting, and my stomach dropped: six thugs with black feathers in their caps—Sons of St. Ogdo—had formed a semicircle around some poor fellow to one side of the bridge.

People streamed toward the noise from all directions.

"Let's go back inside until this blows over," I said, grabbing for Orma's sleeve a second too late. He'd noticed what was happening and was rapidly descending the steps toward the mob.

The fellow pinned against the bridge railings was a dragon. I'd discerned the silver glint of his bell all the way from the steps of the cathedral. Orma shouldered his way through the crowd. I tried to stay close, but someone shoved me and I stumbled out into open space at the front of the throng, where the Sons of St. Ogdo brandished truncheons at the cringing saarantras. They recited from St. Ogdo's Malediction Against the Beast: "Cursed be thine eyes, worm! Cursed be thy hands, thy heart, thy issue unto the end of days! Allsaints curse thee, Eye of Heaven curse thee, thine every serpentine thought turn back upon thee as a curse!"

I pitied the dragon now that I saw his face. He was a raw newskin, scrawny and badly groomed, all awkward

angles and unfocused eyes. A goose egg, puffy and gray, swelled along his sallow cheekbone.

The crowd howled at my back, a wolf ready to gnaw whatever bloody bones the Sons might throw. Two of the Sons had drawn knives, and a third had pulled a length of chain out of his leather jerkin. He twitched it menacingly behind him, like a tail; it clattered against the paving stones of the bridge.

Orma maneuvered into the saarantras's line of sight and gestured at his earrings to remind his fellow what to do. The newskin made no move. Orma reached for one of his own and activated it.

Dragons' earrings were wondrous devices, capable of seeing, hearing, and speaking across distances. A saarantras could call for help, or could be monitored by his superiors. Orma had once taken his earrings apart to show me; they were machines, but most humans believed them to be something far more diabolical.

"Did you bite Prince Rufus's head off, worm?" cried one of the Sons, a muscled riverman. He grabbed the newskin's twiggy arm as if he might break it.

The saarantras squirmed in his ill-fitting clothes, and the Sons recoiled as if wings, horns, and tail might burst out of his skin at any moment. "The treaty forbids us biting off human heads," said the newskin, his voice like a rusty hinge. "But I won't pretend I've forgotten what they taste like."

The Sons would have been happy with any pretext for beating him up, but the one he'd handed them was so horrifying that they stood paralyzed for a heartbeat.

Then with a feral roar, the mob came alive. The Sons charged the newskin, slamming him back against the railing. I glimpsed a gash across his forehead, a wash of silver blood down the side of his face, before the crowd closed ranks around me, cutting off my view.

I pushed through, chasing Orma's shrubby dark hair and beaky nose. All it would take for the mob to turn on him was a gashed lip and a glimpse of *his* silver blood. I shouted his name, screamed it, but he could not hear me above the commotion.

Shrieks arose from the direction of the cathedral; galloping hooves rang out across the plaza. The Guard had arrived at last, bagpipes brawling. The Sons of St. Ogdo flung their hats into the air and disappeared into the crowd. Two threw themselves over the bridge railing, but I only heard one splash in the river.

Orma was squatting beside the crumpled newskin; I rushed toward him against the current of fleeing townspeople. I dared not embrace him, but my relief was so great that I knelt and took his hand. "Thank Allsaints!"

Orma shook me off. "Help me raise him, Seraphina."

I scrambled to the other side and took the newskin's arm. He gaped at me stupidly; his head lolled onto my shoulder, smearing my cloak with his silver blood. I swallowed my revulsion. We hauled the injured saar to his feet and balanced him upright. He shrugged off our help and stood on his own, teetering in the biting breeze.

The Captain of the Guard, Prince Lucian Kiggs, stalked toward us. People parted before him like the waves before St. Fionnuala. He was still in his funeral weeds, a short white houppelande with long dagged sleeves, but all his sorrow had been replaced by a spectacular annoyance.

I tugged Orma's sleeve. "Let's go."

"I can't. The embassy will fix on my earring. I must stay close to the newskin."

I'd glimpsed the bastard prince across crowded halls at court. He had a reputation as a shrewd and dogged investigator; he worked all the time and was not as outgoing as his uncle Rufus had been. He was also not as handsome—no beard, alas—but seeing him up close, I

realized that the intelligence of his gaze more than made up for that.

I looked away. Saints' dogs, there was dragon blood all over my shoulder.

Prince Lucian ignored Orma and me and addressed the newskin, his brows drawn in concern. "You're bleeding!"

The newskin raised his face for inspection. "It looks worse than it is, Your Grace. These human heads contain a great many blood vessels, easily perforated by—"

"Yes, yes." The prince winced at the newskin's gash and signaled to one of his men, who rushed up with a cloth and a canteen of water. The newskin opened the canteen and began pouring the water straight onto his head. It trickled down his scalp in ineffectual rivulets, soaking his doublet.

Saints in Heaven. He was going to freeze himself, and here were Goredd's finest just letting him do it. I snatched the cloth and canteen from his unresisting hands, wet the cloth, and demonstrated how he was to dab at his face. He took over the dabbing and I backed away. Prince Lucian nodded cordially in thanks.

"You're rather transparently new, saar," said the prince. "What's your name?"

"Basind."

It sounded more like a belch than a name. I caught the inevitable look of pity and disgust in the prince's dark eyes. "How did this begin?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Basind. "I was walking home from the fish market—"

"Someone as new as yourself should not be walking around on your own," snapped the prince. "Surely the embassy has made that abundantly clear to you?"

I looked at Basind, finally taking stock of his clothing: doublet, trunk hose, and the telltale insignia.

"Were you lost?" probed Prince Lucian. Basind shrugged. The prince spoke more gently: "They followed you?"

"I do not know. I was cogitating upon preparations for river plaice." He flapped a soggy parcel in the prince's face. "They surrounded me."

Prince Lucian dodged the fishy packet, undeterred from questioning. "How many were there?"

"Two hundred nineteen, although there may have been some I couldn't see."

The prince's mouth fell open. He was unused to interrogating dragons, evidently. I decided to bail him out. "How many with black feathers in their caps, saar Basind?"

"Six," said Basind, blinking like someone unused to having only two eyelids.

"Did *you* get a look at them, Seraphina?" asked the prince, clearly relieved that I'd stepped in.

I nodded dumbly, a light panic seizing me at the prince's speaking my name. I was a palace nobody; why would he know it?

He continued addressing me: "I'll have my boys bring round whomever they've nabbed. You, the newskin, and your friend there"—he indicated Orma—"should look them over and see if you can describe the ones we've missed."

The prince signaled his men to bring forth their captives, then leaned in and answered the question I hadn't asked. "Cousin Glisselda has been talking about you nonstop. She was ready to give up music. It's fortunate you came to us when you did."

"Viridius was too hard on her," I muttered, embarrassed.

He flicked his dark eyes toward Orma, who had turned away and was scanning the distance for embassy saarantrai. "What's your tall friend's name? He's a dragon, isn't he?"

This prince was too sharp for my comfort. "What makes you think so?"

"Just a hunch. I'm right, then?"

I'd gone sweaty, despite the cold. "His name is Orma. He's my teacher."

Lucian Kiggs scrutinized my face. "Fair enough. I'll want to see his exemption papers. I've only just inherited the list; I don't know all our stealth scholars, as Uncle Rufus used to call them." His dark eyes grew distant, but he recovered himself. "Orma has hailed the embassy, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Bah. Then we'd best get this over with before I have to go on the defensive."

One of his men paraded the captives in front of us; they'd only caught two. I'd have thought the ones who jumped into the river would have been easily identified when they came out soaking wet and shivering, but maybe the Guard hadn't realized . . .

"Two of them leaped the bridge railing, but I only heard one splash," I began.

Prince Lucian apprehended my meaning immediately. With four swift hand gestures, he directed his soldiers to both sides of the bridge. On a silent count of three, they swung themselves underneath the bridge, and sure enough, one of the Sons was still there, clinging to the beams. They flushed him out like a partridge; unlike a partridge, he couldn't fly even a little. He splashed down in the river, two of the Guard leaping in after him.

The prince cast me an appraising look. "You're observant."

"Sometimes," I said, avoiding his eye.

"Captain Kiggs," intoned a low female voice behind me.

"Here we go," he muttered, stepping around me. I turned to see a saarantras with short black hair leap down from a horse. She rode like a man in trousers and a split caftan, a silver bell as large as an apple fastened ostentatiously to her cloak clasp. The three saarantrai behind her did not dismount, but kept their eager steeds at the ready; their bells jingled a disconcertingly merry cadence on the wind.

“Undersecretary Eskar.” The prince approached her with an outstretched hand. She did not deign to take it, but strode purposefully toward Basind.

“Report,” she said.

Basind saluted saar fashion, gesturing at the sky. “All in hand. The Guard arrived with tolerable haste, Undersecretary. Captain Kiggs has come directly from his uncle’s graveside.”

“The cathedral is a two-minute walk from here,” said Eskar. “The time differential between your signal and the second one is almost thirteen minutes. If the Guard had been here at that point, the second would not have been necessary at all.”

Prince Lucian drew himself up slowly, his face a mask of calm. “So this was some sort of test?”

“It was,” she said dispassionately. “We find your security inadequate, Captain Kiggs. This is the third attack in three weeks, and the second where a saar was injured.”

“An attack you set up shouldn’t count. You know this is atypical. People are on edge. General Comonot arrives in ten days—”

“Precisely why you need to do a better job,” she said coolly.

“—and Prince Rufus was just murdered in a suspiciously draconian manner.”

“There’s no evidence that a dragon did it,” she said.

“His head is missing!” The prince gestured vehemently toward his own head, his clenched teeth and windblown hair lending a mad ferocity to the pose.

Eskar raised an eyebrow. “No human could have accomplished such a thing?”

Prince Lucian turned sharply away from her and paced in a small circle, rubbing a hand down his face. It’s no good getting angry at saarantrai; the hotter your temper, the colder they get. Eskar remained infuriatingly neutral.