"Beautifully written. Some of the most interesting dragons I've read in fantasy."
—Christopher Paolini, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Eragon*
I t is perfectly normal—human, even—to want moral support during a difficult audition. I couldn’t have taken my father. If he’d had any inkling that I wished to become the assistant to the court composer, he’d have tried to stop me, and auditions are arduous enough without climbing out my bedroom window first. My half siblings would have told Papa, and I had no friends to ask. So if I wanted a sympathetic face in the crowd, my only choice was my music teacher, the dragon Orma.

*He’s better than nothing*, I told myself, but that was debatable. He’d spent years in human shape, but inside he was still a dragon: an unemotional, hyperrational being who, hard as he tried, could not quite master manners or understand why blurting out criticisms during my flute performance was utterly unhelpful. By the final day of auditions, I regretted having brought him.

As we climbed Castle Hill that balmy autumn afternoon,
I decided to send him back. It was impossible to hurt a dragon’s feelings, but I still felt guilty. He’d dressed up for our palace visit in a dark doublet and hose, and had even slicked down his shrubby hair, though it was slowly puffing back up as it dried. He sauntered along beneath the golden linden trees, oblivious to my anxiety, probably solving equations in his head.

When we reached the stern shadow of the barbican gate, I stopped him and said, “Thank you for accompanying me to these difficult auditions, Orma. Today I have merely to give Princess Glisselda her music lesson. That won’t interest you. If you’ve been neglecting work at the conservatory, I shouldn’t keep you from it.”

“You’re one of three finalists,” he said, pushing his spectacles up his beaky nose. “You were the most inexperienced and the only female in a field of twenty-seven. I initially put your odds at one in fifteen hundred. The lute master and the troubadour are still in it, though—”

“Get to the point,” I said, glancing over my shoulder at the helmeted guards in the gatehouse. They watched us with detached interest. Orma was exempt from the bell most dragons were required to wear; he looked like nothing more than a tall, gangly scholar. Still, I always worried that men with swords would use them in preemptive self-defense if they worked out the truth.

Orma said loudly, “You have a twelve percent chance of becoming Master Viridius’s assistant.”

My shoulders sagged. “Twelve whole percent? Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”
His incomprehension of my tone nettled me. “And you still want to come?”

“Of course.” He scratched his beard. “These are the best odds you’ve faced yet.”

We walked on. The smile I gave the barbican guards was entirely fake, but I’d worn my best gown, the dark blue merino, and Orma managed to keep quiet. We looked respectable enough. The guards didn’t question us, though their eyes followed Orma. They probably thought he was bothering me; they weren’t wrong.

I was the last finalist to arrive at Master Viridius’s office. The aged composer sat not at his desk but upon a gout couch, with his legs propped up to keep them comfortable. His clawlike hands were wrapped in bandages; his knees and feet were grossly swollen. The sight of him had filled me with horror on the first day of auditions and pity on the second, but had not diminished my determination to be his assistant. I had long admired the old composer’s music. His Fantasias were the first keyboard pieces Orma had taught me, and I’d instantly loved their liveliness and strength.

Master Viridius frowned as I came in. “Maid Dombegh! You deign to join us,” he drawled. “You will go third, as our designated laggard.”

I curtsied, abashed.

He waved a hand irritably. “Wait your turns in the antechamber. I have a fearsome headache and can’t bear the sound of nervous squirming.”

The lute master, whose trial was first, followed a page boy out to wherever Princess Glisselda awaited her lesson. The rest of us
filed into the narrow antechamber. It had a bench along each wall; Orma and I sat opposite the troubadour. Orma put his feet up on the troubadour’s bench, rudely blocking the walkway until I swatted his knees. I kept myself occupied by composing motets in my head and watching the troubadour. He wore silk hose he probably couldn’t afford, held his plumed cap in his lap, and looked anxious. Beside me, Orma jotted notes in a little book. I glanced over. He’d written *Books to Look for in the Queen’s Private Library*.

“You can’t go to the Queen’s private library,” I whispered harshly at him.

“Then this list is for you,” he said, not bothering to whisper. “You’ll have access, surely, when you get the job. I’ll list the books in the order I’d like to read them.”

“When I get the job? Twelve percent, Orma!”

He shrugged. “Twelve percent if you don’t do anything unpredictable. There’s a sixty-eight percent chance that you will surprise me. I can show you my work.”

He turned a page and began calculating. I closed my eyes, exasperated.

An hour and six pages of algebra later, the lute master returned, raging, flailing, and blackened from head to toe. He brushed against the troubadour’s knee in passing, leaving a dark smudge, marched into Master Viridius’s office, and slammed the door. Even so, we heard him plainly: “I will not be humiliated in this manner! I withdraw my name from your consideration, sir!”

He burst open the door and stalked out, shedding a cloud of coal dust behind him. The troubadour, dabbing at his dirtied silk
with a handkerchief, met my eye and smiled weakly. It was down to the two of us now.

The page boy returned with the next summons. The troubadour straightened his doublet, made St. Ida’s sign, and left. The door of Master Viridius’s office opened; I turned to see the old man standing there, propped with two canes, staring after the troubadour. He noticed me watching him and scowled from under his bushy eyebrows. “The lute master is an idiot,” said the old composer gruffly. “Never even gave the brat her lesson, because he got lost down a coal chute. I’m sure you need not worry about a thing.”

I hadn’t been worried until he said that, of course. He pulled his head back into his office like some cranky, liver-spotted turtle and closed the door.

I turned to my moral support, suddenly needing some—but Orma was gone.

Anyone might receive a call of nature, even a dragon; I didn’t require an elaborate narration of where he was going every time he left the room. Anyone else, however, might be relied upon to come straight back. Minutes crawled by, and I grew more convinced that he’d wandered somewhere he shouldn’t.

The page boy skipped back into the room. I thought he was summoning me to the princess’s lesson, but he said impudently, “Are you here with that beardy villain? The one with the nose?”

“Yes,” I said, already on my feet.

“He’s met with a bit of awkwardness; he said you’d help him.”

“Where is he?” I said.

The lad gave me directions—up the stairs, to the right—but
showed no inclination to accompany me. I rushed up the corridor as fast as I dared; the Queen's council had just been dismissed, and the hallway was full of my betters. When I reached the grand marble staircase, I hoisted my skirts and took the steps by twos, earning disapproving looks from descending ladies-in-waiting. My face grew warm with embarrassment and exertion, but I didn’t slow down. At the top, I ducked up the right-hand corridor and ran headlong into a girl standing on a chair.

She screamed, but did not fall or drop the bucket she held, which sloshed alarmingly. “St. Daan in a pan! Are you blind?” she cried.

It took me a second to catch my breath. “Excuse me,” I said. “You are evidently some species of oaf,” she said, sneering at me from her perch. “I suppose you can’t help it.”

She was petite but not much younger than me. I guessed fifteen. Golden curls framed her face like the sun risen above her gown of sky-blue silk. She’d planted her chair before a set of double doors. She tapped her foot on the wooden seat, swirling the chunky liquid in her pail. Whatever it was, it smelled foul.

“Take this.” She thrust the reeking bucket at me. “You may as well help. You’re tall; I can’t quite reach, even with the chair.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t stay,” I said, recoiling from the stench. “My music teacher—”

“That beanpole of a scholar?” she said. “He’s fine. He tripped over me, too, but we made it up and I sent him on his way.”

I looked past her up the corridor. “Where is he?”

She scowled and shoved the pail in my face. “He’s fine. Your assistance, oaf.”
My hands accepted the bucket over the protestations of my nose, which had caught an overpowering whiff of fish. I gazed into the brown ooze. Silver scales winked merrily in the murk; the dark buttons lurking in the depths were surely eyes. I swallowed my revulsion. “What do I do with it?”

“What do I do with it, Your Highness,” she corrected, folding her hands in front of her stomach. Beaded birds frolicked among golden clouds on her bodice.

I fell into my deepest curtsy, awkwardly executed thanks to the bucket in my hands. Your Highness plus her age could only equal the Queen’s granddaughter, Princess Glisselda, although I did not see how it was possible. To my knowledge, she ought to have been at a music lesson with the troubadour at this very moment.

“Rise,” she said. “I did not catch your name.”

“Seraphina Dombegh, Your Highness.” I straightened, holding the fishy ferment away from my body. The smell persisted, undiminished by distance.

The princess hopped down, light as a finch. She barely came up to my shoulder. “Well, Maid Dombegh,” she said, “we are setting a trap for my last prospective music tutor.”

My mouth fell open. This bucket of goo was meant for me!

Clearly, the princess didn’t realize who I was. My voice quavered a little as I said, “Is there some particular problem with this tutor, that you feel the need to—”

“Oh no,” she said breezily. “I’ve not met any of Viridius’s finalists. I despise them all equally, on principle. I sent the first
one—that weedy lute master—on a wild-goose chase through the cellars, ending with a special trip down the coal chute.”

Saints in Heaven.

I dreaded to ask but had to know: “What did you do to the troubadour?”

Her eyes lit up; she hopped on her toes. “I’ll show you!”

She pushed open the double doors and led me through a small study, or perhaps a schoolroom, furnished with two tables and a bookcase. A map spread on one table had been heavily annotated; pens, books, and wooden markers were scattered across it. She picked her way across to the windows, which overlooked a walled garden with a hedge maze at the far end. The princess plopped herself down on the embrasure seat and opened the casement. She patted the embroidered cushion beside her. I balanced on its edge, the bucket on my knees.

“Observe: the plume of his silly hat,” she said, pointing. A bracelet of river pearls dangled from her little wrist.

Indeed, I could tell where my comrade-at-musical-arms stood among the box hedges. His feather bobbed dubiously in the autumn sunshine as if he were trying to decide between two directions.

He chose the left-hand path. “Not much further now!” cried Princess Glisselda, pounding the casement with her fist.

“Princess,” I said, my mouth almost too dry to speak, “he sings like an angel. You should have heard his auditions. He’d make a superb assistant to Master Viridius, and an excellent tutor for you, if you would but—”

“Give him a chance?” she said, looking at me sidelong. “I am. The music master and I are at war; I am giving this fellow fair
warning of our vendetta, a chance to learn what a morass he’s walking into before he commits to it. In fact, I’ve had a real morass prepared just for him. I thought a literal approach would make things clearest. There he goes.”

The feather abruptly disappeared. Shouts rose from the center of the maze. I gaped at her, appalled. “He didn’t deserve that,” I said.

“All wars have casualties,” she said, her eyes fixed on the scene below.

I stared into the brown ooze meant for me. “What do you intend to do with this, uh, substance?” I said, tipping it, watching how it clung to the side of the pail.

“Isn’t it gloriously vile?” she squealed, turning away from the window and clapping her hands. “It’s fermented fish heads. It symbolizes how unpalatable I find the idea of music instruction. We shall spill it upon this final villain and be rid of two noxious things at once.

“We must hurry, though,” she fretted, “or it won’t be ready when he walks in.”

*He.* I stared into the mesmerizing ferment and had an inkling of an idea. Maybe I could still salvage this, giving the princess a lesson by stealth and revealing my identity only when the thing was done.

I rose and smiled at her. “If you want to set this up so it falls on his head when he opens the doors, you’ve been going at it from the wrong side.”

She fetched the chair from the hallway; I climbed upon it and showed her how one might balance the pail on top of the double
doors, slightly ajar. The princess laughed and capered, delighted with me, and even I could not help taking a sober satisfaction. I felt safer with the bucket where she couldn’t reach it.

“Of course, anyone might spot the trap through the crack,” I said, stepping down and studying the setup from another angle. “You’ll want to draw your victim’s attention toward something else. What if you sat in his line of sight, playing your instrument?”

She made a rude face. “I think not.”

“You don’t have it with you?” Had I trapped us in here without it?

She scorned to answer, but turned toward a hanging tapestry and pulled it aside, revealing a door. She quit the schoolroom; I hesitated, and then followed her into a much larger salon with tall windows and chairs grouped into conversational clusters.

In front of the windows stood a harpsichord, covered against dust.

“Is that your instrument?” I asked.

She snorted, an unexpected sound from such a highborn girl. “It’s Viridius’s. He doesn’t let me touch it. He has not forgiven me for filling it with frogs.” When I blinked at her uncomprehendingly, she said, “It has been war, Seraphina.”

She turned and flounced off toward the windows. I stared after her.

I was beginning to dread the possibility of getting this job, but it shamed me to think I might be defeated by fear in this final trial, which had nothing to do with my musical abilities. I took a deep breath and whipped the sheet off the harpsichord.

Princess Glisselda turned at the sound and raised an eyebrow
at me. I sat at the keyboard and let my fingers say hello, thrilling at the texture of the notes.

“What instrument does Viridius have you playing?” I said. “Dulcimer?”

“How did you know?” she asked.

“That’s the usual first instrument for fashionable young ladies,” I said, indulging in a few arpeggios. “But there’s a reason it’s called the dull-cimer.”

“That’s what I said! I made that exact joke!” she cried. “And the old tyrant barked at me that it was the easiest instrument to learn and I was tone-deaf as a boiled beet.”

Ouch. Clearly, both sides fired volleys in this war.

Glisselda crossed the room, her arms folded and a scowl crumpling her elfin face. “I know what you’re up to, and it isn’t going to work,” she said.

I looked up from the keys. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“You’re just like the rest of them,” she cried. “Grandmamma, and my mother, and everyone. Music is supposed to teach me discipline, they say! The dullness of the dulcimer will make me mild and discreet and dispassionate!”

I put my hands on my knees, facing her. “You’re not interested in music even a little.”

“Absolutely not,” she said fiercely.

I tried to smile, but my heart was sinking. “So what are you interested in?”

I had her answer narrowed down to three before she even opened her rosy mouth. She would say gowns or balls or boys. I was already thinking of ways to relate any of these three to mu-
“sic—gowns was hardest—and so I didn’t hear her answer at all. “I’m sorry, what?” I said stupidly.

She glared poison at me but repeated her answer: “Statecraft.”

We stared at each other a long moment, Princess Glisselda’s mouth a tense line, her fingers worrying a bead on her bodice. I sensed I had been handed a bright pebble of truth and that she was waiting to see what I would do with it.

Statecraft. Statecraft.

“You know,” I said, speaking slowly so my thoughts could get a sufficient head start on my speech, “music is not as irrelevant to statecraft as you might suppose.”

She rolled her eyes theatrically.

I pushed on. “No, really. Music teaches you about harmony, about resolving tension and finding balance—and that’s just the notes. The kind of negotiation one must undertake with one’s instrument, well. A diplomat could only hope to listen so closely and respond with such sensitivity.”

I turned from her and played a few experimental chords. “If you’re too timid with your instrument, it takes advantage. The notes will sound incompetent even if you play them right. If you are too harsh”—this seemed a likelier problem for our princess; I slammed out a few samples—“it exacts a subtle revenge in timbre. Sometimes an unsubtle revenge, depending on the instrument.”

I looked at her sidelong; she was staring at the harpsichord lid, her gaze unfocused.

“Any instrument would wish to be spoken to respectfully,” she said quietly.

I nodded. “And authoritatively. It’s a balance. Luckily for the
beginner, the harpsichord is a forgiving, easygoing partner. You may hit the wrong key, but it won’t be out of tune, and the timbre is fairly constant no matter how much you bang on it.”

The princess seated herself beside me on the bench, watching my hands work, her brows drawn in thought. “Forgiving and easy-going are qualities one misses in Viridius,” she said at last. “And—and quite possibly myself.”

The chords were transposing themselves toward a piece I knew, though I wasn’t sure of it yet. Princess Glisselda kept watching my hands as the song revealed itself to be Viridius’s Suite Infanta, which he’d written in her honor when she was just a toddler. I’d always thought it a strange piece, all merriment on the surface with a hidden sharpness underneath, like a knife wrapped in ribbons, but as I played it now I began to understand. Princess Glisselda recognized it, of course, and sat up a little straighter.

At last she interrupted me: “Show me what you’re doing.”

“Of course,” I said, and began to show her the basic melody with the right hand. She didn’t catch on right away, but she worked at it, brow furrowed and tongue protruding in concentration. I’m not even sure how long we sat there, going over that line, but when she got it, she looked up at me in triumph.

And then said, incongruously, “Here he comes.”

There was a crash and a shout from the next room. The princess leaped to her feet and bolted through the tapestry into the little schoolroom; I followed right on her heels. I’d been so engrossed in teaching that I’d forgotten all about Orma.

Of course, it wasn’t Orma. It was Master Viridius, red-faced and shouting. The fermented fish had spattered his bald head,
doused his ample stomach thoroughly, and drenched the bandages on his hands. In his confusion at being attacked from above, he had landed hard on the floor. Princess Glisselda was extending her slender hand to him, trying to help him up, her lips pressed tightly together in a vain attempt to disguise her amusement. He lashed out with his canes whenever she got near him. I darted around behind him and propped him up to sitting.

“Well?” he sputtered, brushing me off. “How was she?”

I stammered, “Sh-she—”

“Superior to you, you old walrus,” Princess Glisselda cut in, as if the question had been directed at her.

From the way they were glaring at each other, I suddenly realized it had.

“Your exacting standards were met, one hopes?” he sneered at her, accepting my silently proffered handkerchief and dabbing at his doublet with it.

“She let me play your harpsichord,” she said sweetly, batting her eyes at him. He paused in his dabbing and glowered at me. The little princess hopped around the puddle of fish ooze on the floor, making her way toward the door.

“You knew,” I called after her before she disappeared completely. “You knew I was the candidate all along.”

She paused in the doorway and smiled. “Well, of course I did. Diplomacy is only part of statecraft, Seraphina. There’s also spying. Besides,” she said, drawing a curlicue in the fish sauce with the toe of her slipper, “did I ever explicitly state otherwise?” She flashed me an impish smile and took off down the hall, skipping by the sound of it.
I helped Master Viridius to a chair, my mind racing. He met my eye, looking unexpectedly sheepish. “She told me this morning,” he said. “You were the only one who would be given a chance, and even then she made no promises. I had no idea what idiocy she had in store for the others, or what games she would play with you, and I am sorry. Unfortunately”—he sighed heavily—“she’s part of the job. I can’t teach her anymore; it raises my pulse and gives me palpitations.”

“She is a spirited individual,” I said, measuring my words in case she had tiptoed back and was listening to us. I would have put nothing past her at that point.

Master Viridius was trying to stand; I helped haul him to his feet. He propped himself upon his canes and said, “Congratulations, Maid Dombegh. Report to me in three days. I shall arrange your quarters by this evening; move in when you like. We’ll see to it that your door locks.” He smiled mirthlessly. “That brat once filled my harpsichord with frogs. You never know what she’s capable of.”

*Capable* was an apt description of this princess. I wouldn’t forget.

I tried to help him to the stairs, but he waved me off. As I watched him hobble away, I heard steps behind me and turned to see a page boy—the same impudent rascal who’d directed me upstairs—leading Orma toward me.

“Here you go, Scholar,” said the lad, holding out an arm as if formally presenting me. “Your student, whole and unharmed.”

“I wasn’t worried,” said Orma.

The boy laughed. “More fool you,” he said, turning on his heel and scampering off.
I met Orma’s eye. “Princess Glisselda sent that page boy to call you away, didn’t she. And then she lured me up here after you.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I received a personal invitation to the Queen’s private library. It was quite a fortuitous coincidence.”

Quite. The princess must have been listening to our conversation in the antechamber.

Orma’s nostrils flared; he had a keen nose. “Did your audition involve fermented fish sauce? That’s quite an expensive delicacy in—”

“Yes,” I said, laughing at him. “The princess learned so much from me that she required a light snack.”

“You got the job, then?”

I met his eyes. He wasn’t happy—dragons don’t work that way—but there was something there, something I wasn’t imagining. Some satisfaction, maybe, that he had taught me well. “I got the job,” I said, my voice breaking a little.

If he was surprised by the emotion, he gave no indication. He said, “I’m perplexed that my calculations were so far off. I’m missing something obvious. If I can predict that you’ll surprise me with such consistency, then surely—”

I felt an unaccountable surge of affection for the old dragon then, and I threw my arms around him, even though I knew he hated being touched. He couldn’t quite get used to having non-scaly skin. He tensed and held very still, waiting for me to release him.

“Speaking of surprises,” I said, smacking him on the chest.
where I’d felt an odd flatness under his doublet, “you’re unexpectedly rectangular just now.”

A human might have been sheepish about it, but Orma simply shrugged. “I didn’t have a chance to finish the book I started. But it’s not a problem—you got the job. You can bring it back for me when I’m done.”

I laughed, disinclined to be cross with him, and together we left the castle. Golden leaves drifted around us down the long hill into town, and our shadows stretched before us across the surface of the world.
Can ONE GIRL unite TWO WORLDS?

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