

Dragon Charmer

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Dragon Song

She looked like an ordinary librarian: tall and thin with rimless glasses and wisps of silver-white hair escaping from the bun at the back of her head. So I asked politely, “Please, ma’am, can you tell me if you have any *new* vox-books on dragons?”

I had only half an hour to find all of the books on dragons I could to bring home with me.

Since my father had died the December before, I had become Mother’s “right-arm girl.” I was named for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the strongest nineteenth-century woman Father had ever read about. I was trying to be as strong as Mrs. Stanton, but it wasn’t easy.

It seemed the only time I wasn’t worrying about my mother or my four-year-old sister, Sara, or myself was when I was reading or dreaming about dragons. And the only opportunity I had to gather dragon material was once a week while Sara attended library story time.

The woman peered at me through ancient eyes. “What do you know of dragons?”

“Everything. I’ve heard all of the dragon books here. These are my favorites.” I tipped my stack of vox-books titles out for her to touch.

“*Here Be Dragons, A Book of Dragons, St. George and the Dragon, The Legend of King Arthur.*” The titles read themselves aloud in a pleasant, neutral voice.

The woman drew her hand away from the last book. “King Arthur? Humph. He was a fine one. Nearly robbed the world of dragons—he and his knights.” She jabbed a strand of silvery hair back into the bun on her neck. Immediately another sprang loose.

“If people knew how long it takes to grow dragons or how much care they need, if they knew how rare and beautiful dragons are and how they must struggle to survive, I doubt they would sing the dragon killers’ praises quite so loudly.” The woman took off her glasses and pointed the earpiece at me. “We’d see then who shouted ‘Hurrah, Hurrah,’ when a cruel knight plunged his sword into a dragon’s breast.”

“I would never shout hurrah,” I said.

“You wouldn’t?” The woman perched her glasses back on the bridge of her nose.

“No. I love dragons. They are fierce and brave and beautiful. I’d give anything to live in the time of knights and

dragons. Not to kill the dragons, just to see them. To watch one blaze across the sky. To hear a dragon's song."

I clamped my mouth shut. I'd said too much. "Dragon's song? How do you know about the dragon's song?" The woman leaned closer to me. "You didn't hear about *that* in your books."

"No, ma'am."

I wondered if it was safe to tell her. I had never told anyone how much I knew about dragons that did not come from books but instead came from the sort of waking dreams I dreamt almost every day.

I wanted to tell. It would be such a relief not to feel so odd and alone. But the woman was a grownup. Wouldn't she think I was making it up? Yes, and then she would laugh.

"Please, ma'am," I said, "if you could tell me where there are any other vox-books, I'll—"

"Have you *heard* a dragon's song?"

"Well..." I had, of course, in my dreams. How else could I have known?

Their song was like a wind sighing high in the trees. It brushed against my skin like velvet rainbows and smelled of poppies. It piped notes that the purest angels could not sing and the keenest ears could not hear.

The woman wrapped her arms around herself, cocking her head like a listening bird.

Watching the woman, I heard a single note from a dragon's song. Goosebumps prickled my arms. Here, in the middle of the library, on an ordinary Thursday, at four o'clock in the afternoon, I heard the song.

I glanced around at the children seated at low tables on brightly colored chairs, listening to books and working puzzles. But they seemed not to have heard. Or, if they had heard, they had not believed.

"Have you," I asked the woman, "heard the dragon's song?"

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "I was thirteen the first time. About as old as you, I'd judge."

I nodded.

"The song was so sweet that I never wanted to live without its sound echoing inside my chest. My poor mother thought I'd gone a little crazy." The woman drew a circle in the air with her finger at her temple. "Small wonder. I walked around in a daze for weeks afterward waiting for the song."

"I know." I looked for my own mother. There she was, sitting on a purple grownup chair outside the children's story room, listening to a book on quilt making.

"Truth is," the woman said, "I thought Mother might be right; there might actually be something wrong with me. That's why it was so good to meet a Dragon Charmer."

I felt as if my ears had blinked. “Excuse me, but who did you meet?”

“A Dragon Charmer. He was a wonderful old man—very special. Unique, you might say.” The woman smiled. “I guess he should have been. Only a handful of Dragon Charmers are born in each generation.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Dragon Charmers are very important, you know. We’re all that stands between dragons and their extinction.”

“Are you a Dragon Charmer?” My head felt dizzy.

“Yes,” said the woman. She laid one pale, crooked finger on each of my shoulders like a queen bestowing knighthood. “And so are you.”

Arson Welles

I took a step away from her. My heart was beating loudly inside my ears. I was not sure I wanted to hear anything more this strange woman had to say.

I clutched my vox-books to my chest and looked again to my mother. She glanced up from her quilt-making book and smiled.

“Of course, you may choose not to accept the job,” the Dragon Charmer said.

“I may?”

“Oh, yes. Others have refused before you.”

“Really?”

“Three others before you, as a matter of fact, in my lifetime.”

“What happened to them?” I had read everything I could, so I knew that terrible curses often befell people who tried to run away from magical callings.

“Nothing much. They’re quite nice people, actually. One became a bank president, one played golf, and the third was student speaker for her high school graduating class.”

“That’s it? Their noses didn’t fall off? They weren’t sentenced to eating broccoli for the rest of their lives?”

“Certainly not,” the Dragon Charmer said. “I do believe, though, that they may have lost a bit of specialized hearing. Nothing drastic. Nothing that would affect their everyday lives.”

“You mean they can’t hear the dragon’s song anymore?”

“I’m afraid not,” the Dragon Charmer sighed. Suddenly she seemed much older than when I’d first seen her. She took a few steps to a nearby table and sank onto a too-small chair.

“Oh, I don’t say I blame them,” she said, resting her elbows on her knees. “It’s a difficult thing, being a Dragon Charmer. There are no vacations, no dragon-sitters listed in the picto-phone directory when you feel more like cruising the Bahamas than taking care of your dragon.”

I laid my vox-books on the table and sat down opposite her.

“You mean, you actually have a dragon of your very own?”

“Well, I’m never quite sure who has whom, but yes, Arson is with me now.”

“Arson?”

“That’s what I call him. Arson Welles. *Arson* because of his, er...talents and Welles because I had rather a crush on the twentieth-century actor Orson Welles when I was young—long before your time. In my opinion, there was never anyone quite like Mr. Welles, and there’s no other dragon quite like Arson. So that’s what I call him. You could change it, I suppose.”

I swallowed the lump of excitement in my throat. “Do you think I could see him? Arson, I mean.”

“I can show you only you *after* you have chosen.”

“And if I choose *not* to be a Dragon Charmer? Will you still show him to me?”

“Yes, but I can’t promise that you’ll be able to see.”

“All right,” I agreed. “Please, tell me everything.”

The Dragon Charmer settled her long skirts about her knees and patted the pockets of her bright green jacket as if reassuring herself that everything was in its place. Then she began.

“As you know, the world used to be full of dragons—glorious creatures of all colors and shapes and with all sorts of talents. Unfortunately, only the ones who caused mischief showed up in legends.”

“I’d hardly call eating babies for breakfast ‘mischief,’” I protested.

“That old tale? Everyone’s heard that one (and it’s highly exaggerated, I must say). But even if it were true down to the last infant, that was only *one* dragon, just as Jack the Ripper was only *one* man. You wouldn’t go around trying to kill all men because one turned out to be Jack the Ripper, would you?”

“No, I see what you mean,” I said.

“At any rate, people began to think that the mean dragons were the only kind of dragons there were. No one stopped to think about the dragons that kept the clouds moving along with the breeze from their wings or the ones that melted winter snows with fire from their nostrils. And they never considered how lonely and silent the world would be without the dragons’ songs.”

“So people like St. George and King Arthur and the rest set out to rid the world of dragons?” I asked.

“Precisely. And they very nearly got the job done. But there was one far-sighted wizard who could see where all the dragon prejudice was leading. That wizard established the Society for the Preservation of Dragons in the sixth century, also known as Dragon Charmers.”

“Merlin?”

“No, his apprentice, Maxine.”

I shook my head. “I never heard of her.”

“No one has. And for good reason. In Maxine’s time, Dragon Charmers had to keep low profiles or else knights ran them through with swords.” The Dragon Charmer pretended to thrust a sword at me. A quick, sharp pain pierced my chest.

“Later, when we came to the new world, Puritans drowned us in dunking buckets,” the woman continued, “or burned us at the stake when they suspected who we were and what we were protecting.”

A small bubble of fear formed in my stomach. “Is it still dangerous, being a Dragon Charmer?”

“Dangerous? Yes, I suppose it is. Not because of knights or witch hunters. No, those have been replaced by laws and public officials. The ‘no pets’ law, for instance: a million-dollar fine and three years in prison for keeping a pet. Preposterous. Truly. Not that one would ever consider Arson a pet. Of course not. He’s a completely independent being. Except for a few minor details, that is. But also because ordinary people—otherwise perfectly nice people—cannot hear the dragon song nor see the dragon for what it is. Those people don’t understand when we stop to listen. Sometimes, while we’re listening, we appear lazy to them or irresponsible.”

I thought of a time I’d stopped to listen. “I heard the song at school once. Mrs. Kinsey sounded the buzzer on

my desk because she thought I was sleeping. I had to serve a detention.”

The Dragon Charmer smiled. “And then there are the things we feel like doing *after* we’ve heard the song. People almost never understand those. We seem foolish.”

“Yes,” I said knowingly. “At lunch recess I sat by Willie Raimer. No one ever sits by him—they say he stinks. But he didn’t smell so bad to me. It’s only the garlic necklace he wears under his uniform to ward off vampires and the like.”

“Very sensible of him,” the Dragon Charmer approved. I wasn’t in the mood to get into Willie and his theories on vampires.

“I shared my sandwich with him.”

“You did?” asked the Dragon Charmer. “What day was that?”

“It was Thursday last week,” I said.

The Dragon Charmer took out an old-fashioned red leather book from an inside breast pocket of her jacket. On the front cover of the book in large, fancy, gold letters was written *Official Dragon Chart Book*. She opened it and ran a finger along an intricate diagram of a fabulous-looking dragon.

“Ah, here it is. Arson gained a feather scale on his left wing that day at 12:17 p.m. Would that be your lunch hour?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And would your name happen to be Elizabeth Cady DuLac?”

“Yes.”

“A strong name after an excellent woman! Delighted to meet you, Elizabeth.”

“I’m called Cady,” I said.

“Cady it is, then. I’m Natalie Mondieu.” The Dragon Charmer held out her long-fingered hand.

“Nice to meet you, too.” I shook her hand, which felt light enough to be made of bird bones. “But I don’t understand. How did my sandwich and Willie Raimer get Arson a new feather scale?”

“Dear me. Here I’ve rattled on and on and haven’t told you the most important part!”