



Songs of Seraphina

JUDE HOUGHTON

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Tenebris Books

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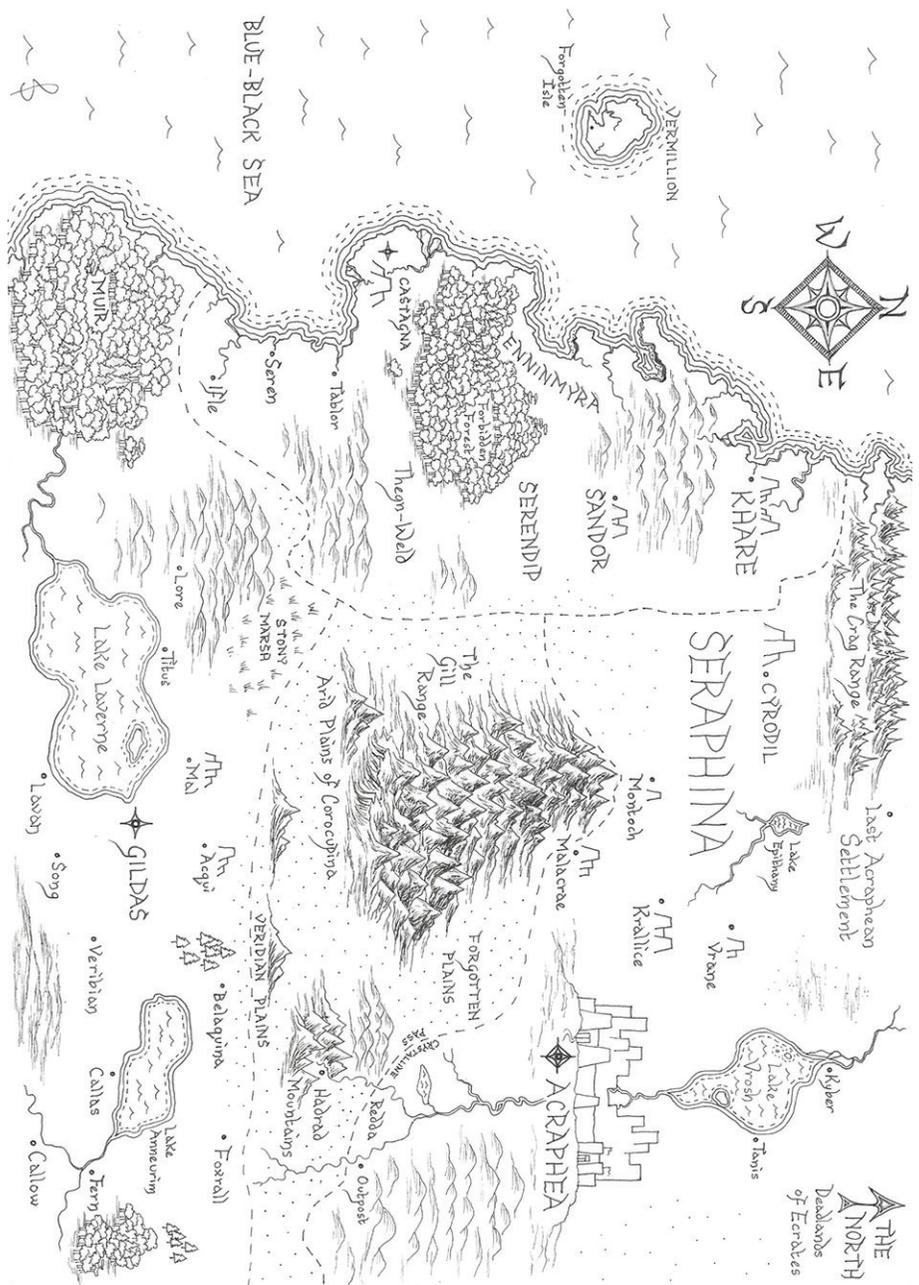
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For my family





OME BATTLES BLEED so much, and for so long, that the earth never truly forgets their dead. Some battles are born of oppression, some of greed, and some simply because it was written in the stars. Some battles begin with a name, a single breath of air, cutting through the night like the sound of dark wings rising.

Annals of Sigon Book IV

One

Hamquist and Crakes



AS THEY EMERGED from the gloom, Crakes thought what a dark, dreadful place this was—and how fitting for their purpose, from the isolated road, to the murky river, to the lines of tall, sickly trees that cast tenebrous shadows in the fading light.

“Athene,” Hamquist said from behind him.

“What about her?” Crakes replied.

“That’s not her real name. The women called her something different.”

The *women*. The word filled him with ice. Crakes didn’t often experience sensations; he didn’t like this one. “It stinks here,” he said.

“It’s just the Mist,” Hamquist replied. “It always makes that smell.”

Crakes remained uneasy. “The sooner we can get this over with and go home, the better,” he said.

“Yes, of course. Athene, then home.”

Crakes shifted uncomfortably. When Hamquist said “home” his voice lacked conviction. What if this was only the beginning, rather than the end? Crakes didn’t understand this world, or its rules, or his place in it. At home, to think of somewhere was to be there. Here, if it wasn’t for the Mist, they would be stranded.

Hamquist pointed to the riverbank. “That’s where we’ll wait for her.”

As they walked, Crakes noticed Hamquist’s usually fluid movements were laboured, as though dragging a weight far greater than the sword that hung from his waist.

“What did she do, anyway?” Crakes asked.

“We weren’t told.”

“I don’t like it.”

“That’s not for you to say.”

“I suppose it makes no difference.” Crakes jabbed at the air with the one fist he had left.

“She won’t go without a fight,” Hamquist said, an edge to his voice.

Did he mean that if the “women” feared her, so should they? Surely not. Whatever else, this Athene was just a mortal.

“I think I can handle her.” He jabbed again, this time making a smacking sound as he landed the imaginary punch.

“She is dangerous, and is more than she seems.”

“Then why send us? What have we to do with it? Why not summon filthy minions from the deep, or whatever they usually do?”

Hamquist pulled back his cloak revealing his huge two-handed sword, the steel glinting naked and blue against his woollen breeches. “Have we ever needed more than this?” Hamquist replied. “Ever?”

That’s not what Crakes had meant, but he played along. “What a big sword you have.”

Hamquist grinned, then suddenly swung around and grabbed Crakes’s throat.

“W-what are you do-ing,” Crakes choked.

“Tonight you reek of carelessness, throwing punches around like some carnival puppet. Fussing about *the stink* as though we’re on a . . . a *sniffing* expedition.” He added in falsetto, “*It’s so smelly here! Oh, where did I put my pomander?*”

“I-I . . .” Crakes couldn’t breathe.

Hamquist let go, and Crakes doubled over choking. “Remember the last time you got careless?”

He tried to nod; speaking was impossible. Humiliated, Crakes studied the ground, but failing to fix on anything, inspected a small clump of mud on the tip of his boot. He picked up a stick and poked at it.

“You lost your hand and that’s why you wave that ugly stump around.” Hamquist pointed at a nearby tree stump. “Oh! Look at that!” he said with sudden alacrity. “Twins!” He laughed manically and slapped Crakes on the back. Crakes found himself laughing too. The joke wasn’t funny, but it broke the tension, a distraction from their real purpose, which they both knew was rotten to the core. Holding his sides, Hamquist was about to make another crack, when suddenly his eyes narrowed and his face

became serious as stone.

“Athene,” he said, sweeping his nose back and forth. “She is coming.”

Headlights appeared around the corner.

“That’s curious,” Hamquist said.

“What?”

“She knows we’re here.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“No.”

Then it was time.

Crakes dropped his cloak, proud of his six-foot-three frame of muscle and sinew, of the scars that covered his chest. He had put some effort into his wardrobe: concentric circles of mustard-coloured leather armour ran up and down his legs in scallops, and at his crotch was a fine codpiece. Crakes adjusted a twisted buckle and then fastened a large iron thimble over his stump. He calculated the distance, speed, and velocity of the car and stepped into the road.

She slammed on the brakes and the smell of burning rubber filled the air. He watched with disappointment as the car skidded to a halt just in front of him. He’d planned to stop the car by smashing his fist into its hot metal grill, crumpling the hood, impressing the woman. Instead he was caught like a startled deer, his codpiece glowing in the halogen.

The woman killed the engine and turned off the lights. The tiny insect motes disappeared and silence filled the night. The door opened and she stepped out of the car. She wore a neat blue coat.

“Well?” she said. The voice was calm but the hands trembled.

“We have come for you,” he replied.

“I see that.”

“Any last words?”

She considered. “Nice pants.”

He fainted one way and swung the other, connecting cleanly with her temple. The haunting green eyes stared at him for a second, then she slumped to the asphalt, unconscious.

Easy, he thought. Was it too easy?

In a blink, Hamquist was beside him, blade out.

“No!” Crakes shouted. “They told us to take her alive! Remember?”

Hamquist shuddered, battling the almost overwhelming urge to separate her head from her neck.

“Please!” Crakes implored.

Hamquist dropped the sword and grabbed Crakes’s shoulders to steady himself. The bones ground together and Crakes bit his tongue. Slowly Hamquist’s eyes turned from crimson to black and the danger passed. Together, they stared at the woman.

“She’s beautiful,” Crakes said.

“For a mortal.” Hamquist picked her up and slung her over his shoulder.

Crakes pushed the car off the road and into the ditch. Hamquist spoke a command to the air and the Mist descended, wrapping around their legs. The next moment, they were gone.

Two

Charlemagne



CHARLEMAGNE WOKE WITH a start, her head bouncing on the back of her seat. She had drifted off and had another nightmare about her mother. Unable to sleep at night, dreams came to her in the daytime instead. Had she called out? No. Neither of her sisters were staring at her. Furtively, she wiped a bead of sweat from her brow.

“Afternoon,” Penny said glancing up from her book and smiling. Charlemagne’s little sister looked tired and it wasn’t just the journey. None of them slept well these days.

“Is it past twelve yet?” Charlemagne asked.

“Just.”

“What have I missed?”

“Nothing,” Cairo replied, “just grey sky and green fields followed by more grey sky and more fields. Sometimes there’s a cow, sometimes not.”

“That much?”

Cairo shrugged. “I still don’t know why we had to come here. It’s not fair.”

Cairo hadn’t wanted to come to England, she’d wanted to stay in America and spend the summer with friends, but what any of them wanted didn’t seem to count for much anymore.

Charlemagne could have screamed with frustration, she was so angry with her father. She knew why he had sent them away—it was so he could fall apart in splendid isolation, without the check of his daughters, so he could grieve for their mother alone. It was selfish of him, and now it was Charlemagne, not he, who was responsible for her sisters.

“Do you know, Charlie,” Penny said, glancing up from her book, “that ‘being sent to Coventry’ means that nobody will speak to you.”

Cairo turned from the window, and looked quizzically at Charlemagne.

“I’m sure it doesn’t apply to our grandparents,” Charlemagne said.

Cairo sighed, and resumed her vigil of the fields. It had been a long trip: a taxi to the airport, the “red-eye” flight and then the “Tube,” travelling on which had turned Charlemagne’s tissue black when she blew her nose. Finally, they’d caught the train and emerged from London on a damp, grey, drizzly Saturday. It was the beginning of summer, and judging by the skirts and tank tops of some of the girls in the carriage, it was considered a hot day in England.

A voice broke over the speaker. “The next station is Coventry. The next station is Coventry. Change here for . . .”

Charlemagne had met her grandparents before, but she didn’t remember them. The family had moved to America when she was four and Cairo was just a baby. That was thirteen years ago. There had been some sort of irreconcilable breach, but her parents refused to speak about it.

Charlemagne and Penny once asked their other, American grandparents, what happened—Granny Hickory was a notorious gossip after all. Grandpa would often joke, “I haven’t spoken to my wife in years . . . I don’t want to interrupt her.” But on this subject, and even after too much sherry, Granny would say little.

“Best leave it alone, dears. Too much pain there.”

Poor Granny Hickory died last summer, and Grandpa followed shortly after with a broken heart. The girls had no other family in America, but it was still a shock when their father announced they would spend the summer in England without him, especially after all that had happened. The train slowed, pulling into the station.

“Come on, Cairo,” Charlemagne said, “we’re going to be getting out in a minute.”

Cairo turned from the window, blinking. “I can’t wait.”

“I wonder what they’ll look like,” Penny said. “I hope we’ll recognise them.”

“Of course we will,” Charlemagne said, trying to sound cheerful. “They’ll look like Dad.”

As it turned out, they didn’t have to recognise anybody. As they made

their way through the barrier at the end of the platform, a small, slightly rounded man with a huge white beard and white curly hair called out to them waving. “Ladies! Ladies of the Americas!”

Twenty heads turned to stare at him.

“Please, no . . .” Cairo shrank into her jacket.

Despite his short stature, the man’s head bobbed above the crowd and for a moment it looked as though he were somehow levitating in mid-air. Then Charlemagne realised he was standing on top of a large plant pot so he could see over everyone. He grinned a huge grin and hopped from one foot to the next.

“Our grandfather is a hobbit,” Cairo said.

“Shh!”

In one hand he held an umbrella, straight above his head like some sort of tour guide. With the other he casually flicked a coin up and down, catching it on his wrist.

“Yes, that’s right, over here, ladies,” he called again, motioning with the umbrella. He must have accidentally pressed something because the umbrella suddenly opened, engulfing his entire body. Charlemagne heard a muffled, ‘oh dear, oh dear,’ as he wrestled to pull it down, but instead he lost his balance and fell off the pot with a crash. He landed on his back, the umbrella beneath him, feet flailing in the air. Behind them, people were laughing. The three sisters hurried towards him.

“Are you okay?” Charlemagne asked, helping him to his feet.

“Of course, of course, just err . . . a costume malfunction.” He brushed himself down.

“But are you hurt?” Penny said, picking up his coin and handing it to him.

“Grrr . . . no. Just my pride, my dear.”

As if to dispel any doubts, he laughed and then, with a flourish, tossed the coin high in the air and caught it on the back of his wrist.

“How did you know it was us when we came through?” Penny said.

“Oh, that was easy,” he said. “One, I could smell that you were from across the great sea. Two, you were the only girls who looked the part, with your fair, dark, and red hair. And three—and the most important, I find—I made a lucky guess.” He looked at the coin, grimaced slightly, and slipped it into his pocket.

Cairo stared at him as though he was completely mad.

“Anyway, come over here and give your grandfather a hug! Grrr!”

Stepping forward, he enveloped Penny in his outstretched arms. Although Penny was only thirteen, and not tall for her age, the two were about the same size.

Cairo leant over and whispered into Charlemagne’s ear, “Did he just growl?”

“Shh!”

“He did!” Cairo continued. “He just *growled!*”

Their grandfather buried his head in Penny’s hair and seemed to sniff her. “Beautiful black hair, little hands, smaller than your sisters,” he said releasing her. He pulled out a worn piece of paper and unfolded it. “Let me see, let me see . . .” He glanced at some notes. “Yes, here we are . . . hair of the obsidian, likes books and . . . and a penchant for pickles, but don’t even think about custard. You must be Penny!”

“Pardon?” Penny said.

“You must be Penny.”

“Yes, but what’s that?”

“What’s what?” He thrust his hand and the paper behind his back, blinked at her and smiled, then turned his attention to Charlemagne and Cairo. “Now for . . .” He flicked his head back and forth between the two of them. “Now for, now for . . .” He trailed off and squinted towards the sky. When Penny looked up, he pulled out the paper again and quickly glanced at it.

“Yes, Charlemagne of the golden tresses, the eldest. We meet again! You haven’t changed a bit you know. Grrr!”

Charlemagne felt a little awkward as he took her in his arms. She was seven or eight inches taller than him—a very self-conscious height for hugging—but he didn’t seem to mind. He held her tight and she could feel his warmth pass through her. It felt good to be held.

Finally he turned his attention to Cairo. He looked at her intently for a moment, obviously trying to think what to say, and then, glancing sheepishly at Penny, read from the paper. “Cairo: red and charming as the night is long, fiery as a mandrake.”

“What?” Cairo snapped.

Their grandfather said nothing further, but pushed the paper into his pocket and stepped forward to give her a hug. Cairo stepped backwards as if to say *no hugging allowed*.

He sniffed. "Yes . . . Cairo, of course." He gave her a stiff little bow instead. Then, in one swift movement, he flicked up the umbrella, closed it, and threw it to Penny, who fumbled a little but managed to catch it.

"Very good," he said, grinning. "Come on then." He picked up Penny's and Charlemagne's suitcases and headed towards the glass doors leading to the parking lot. The bags were heavy, but by the way he carried them they seemed filled with air. Cairo was left to struggle with her own. Charlemagne put out a hand to help, but Cairo shook her head. They hurried to catch up with him.

"What was that paper?" Penny asked as soon as they were level.

"Oh . . . just some notes from the Ogg, so I'd know who's who and wouldn't make a gaff."

"The Ogg?"

"Come to think of it though, she did tell me to memorise it." Turning to them every couple of steps, he rambled on. "Yes, I'm afraid your dear grandmother couldn't be here. She's preparing for the wake this evening. A very important lady, your grandmother."

"Wake?" Charlemagne felt suddenly nauseous. Surely not for their mother? She was missing, but not declared dead. Not yet.

Their grandfather stared at her quizzically. "Yes, for the poor Drakefield boy. Family friend you know. You'll have to come. She won't hear otherwise. I thought you probably wouldn't want to, it being a bit close to the bone and . . . Well, anyway, she said, 'Now don't be a silly Gaffer, they'll love it. Some wine, some singing, some local lads. It's just what those poor girls need.' And she's right you know. She *always* is. When I was your age, I loved a good wake."

"There's no way I'm going," Cairo said in an angry whisper to Charlemagne, and then louder, "I'm a little tired. I was hoping to stay in tonight."

"You'll get bored."

"I could watch TV."

"TV?"

"Yes."

"We don't have one of those."

Cairo looked incredulous. "What?"

Their grandfather didn't reply, as though he hadn't heard.

"Maybe I'll just go to bed early," Cairo said.

But their grandfather didn't seem to hear that either but walked faster across the asphalt towards a beaten-up Volvo that stood nearby. He pressed a button on his keychain but nothing happened. "Damn boot," he muttered, banging his fist on the hood. The trunk sprung open. Inside, junk filled every corner. There were pieces of pipe, a length of rope, four or five long metal rods, a couple of bricks, sacks of sand and sacks of something else Charlemagne couldn't identify.

"How are we going to fit our bags in there?" Cairo asked.

"Easy," he said, and with incredible speed began hauling everything out. He then picked up all the cases and squashed them in.

"Are you allowed to do that?" Cairo said.

"Allowed to do what?"

"Leave things dumped in the parking lot."

"Umm . . ." He paused and stared up at the sky. "Yes!" He flashed a smile, took the umbrella from Penny, tossed it on top of the cases and slammed the "boot" shut.

"Really?" Cairo said.

"Someone will pick them up. Find them useful, too."

"I doubt it."

Charlemagne tensed. This was just like Cairo. Either she was moping around, or being breathtakingly charming, or doing this third thing, the not letting go thing, like a dog with a smelly rag.

Their grandfather said nothing.

"I really doubt it," she repeated.

"How do you know?" Their grandfather folded his arms. "Someone could see this stuff and think, well, if that's not just what I need to finish my bathroom! Something to caulk the walls, lay the pipes, I can even prop up the heater with a couple of bricks. Christmas will have come early for them. Yes it will indeed."

"Er . . . okay, Granddad," said Cairo, opening the door to the back seat.

"Don't call me Granddad," he snapped.

They all got in. There was an awkward silence. Their grandfather went to put the key in the ignition, then stopped and sighed. He tapped his fingers on the dashboard and then turned around. "Everyone calls me Gaffer," he said. "Or *the* Gaffer on account of my old job . . . glass, you know. 'Granddad' is too, too . . ." He didn't finish the sentence but instead

seemed to drift off. Again there was a pause. “Ah, yes, where were we?” he said suddenly. “The car.” He reversed out, manoeuvring around the pile of junk. Charlemagne noticed the car had been in a space reserved for handicapped parking.

Thankfully it was a short ride, and they only drove for about twenty minutes before Gaffer turned left into a secluded entrance that was almost like a hole in the hedgerow. Sweeping poplars and elms lined the drive for about five hundred yards, opening out to a large pond circled with weeping willows. Behind the pond was a pointy, Gothic-looking mansion with high, irregular arches, ornate stone overhangs and flying buttresses. Anyone could see it was in need of repair. Wisteria covered the whole façade, but Charlemagne couldn’t tell if it was helping to hold up the house, or pull it down. The paint around the windows was flaking, the roof was missing tiles, and the house seemed to sough under its own weight. The rusticated stone of the walls was weathered and cracked, and missing chunks in certain areas. Mossy, misshapen stone steps led up to the front door.

“Before you say anything,” Gaffer said pulling up, “I know, *I know*.”

“Know what?” Penny said.

“That this old lady’s seen better days.”

“The house?” Penny looked around.

“Well I don’t mean Ogg, although that may well be true of her too.” He chuckled. “I didn’t say that, no, no I didn’t.”

Cairo, who had been curled up with her headphones and music, opened her eyes. She looked at the house, looked at Charlemagne, and slowly shook her head.

“A couple of years ago, it was even worse. The lead peeled off the roof in the heat of ’78. Vandals got the rest. The whole place was flooded and mouldy, so I got it for a song.”

“A couple of years? Thirty more like,” whispered Cairo to Charlemagne.

“What’s a ‘song?’” asked Penny.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Gaffer said, beaming, and spontaneously broke into a ditty about a golden girl who found a golden pearl, all the while tapping his feet so that the car kept shuddering forward and then violently stopping.

Penny stared at him wide-eyed. Cairo arched her eyebrows at Charlemagne, and Charlemagne tried not to giggle. When they were

younger, whenever Cairo disapproved of something she would arch her eyebrows and say ‘bad cheese.’ Cairo always claimed it wasn’t her, but her imaginary friend, Song, who came up with the derogatory term. Even though Cairo hadn’t said it for years, Charlemagne knew exactly what she was thinking. This house, indeed the prospect of the next nine weeks, was *very* bad cheese indeed.

“Did you get the mould out?” Penny asked when he’d finished.

“The mould? I’m not sure. How do I smell to you?” Gaffer lifted his arm and had a sniff.

Cairo shook her head but Penny was lapping it up. This man, with his strange charm and stranger humour, was winning her over. He whispered something to Penny and they both broke out in peals of laughter.

As the car pulled up in front of the house, the front door opened and two dogs came flying out. They jumped up excitedly as the sisters got out of the car.

“What are they?” asked Penny.

“Brindle lurchers, my dear. The chocolaty one is Cowper, the lighter one is Siam.”

“Do they shed?” Penny asked.

“Do they what?”

“You know, do they shed hair and skin and stuff?”

Gaffer frowned. “Change their skin? They’re not one of those.”

Penny looked puzzled. “No, I mean do they cause allergies?”

“Ah! Don’t worry, these two dogs don’t know what an allergy is. Come on. Down Cowper! Down Siam! You’ll have to excuse them. They’re not used to visitors, and I’m not much of a fancier, so they run a bit wild.”

Cairo arched her eyebrows again and Charlemagne giggled. She couldn’t help it.

“Well,” Gaffer said, misinterpreting Charlemagne’s mirth, “you try finding time for training wild things when you have a house and land to look after, and . . . and other things, the Ogg for a start.” Gaffer looked up and then chuckled nervously. “Grrr, and here she is.”

“Come here, my dears, come here! I am your grandmother!” said a woman stepping out of the house to meet them. “But *please* call me Ogg.”

Ogg was as huge as Gaffer was tiny. Six foot at least and with the girth to match. She was striking, with deep blue eyes and a gigantic swirl of white hair that made the top of her head look like a softy ice cream.

Wearing what seemed to be a purple velvet bath robe she hopped down the steps in two strides. Charlemagne dared not look at Cairo to see what face she was pulling.

Charlemagne was about to put out her hand and say a stiff, "Very pleased to meet you," but Penny beat her to it, throwing her arms around their grandmother and squeezing her tight. At the same time, Cowper and Siam jumped up on Penny, making one happy Penny-doggy-oggy-group-hug.

"Bad cheese," muttered Cairo.

"Ah, my children, it has been too long," Ogg said, still holding Penny but looking over her head at Charlemagne. "The unfortunate loss of your mother has brought us all together."

"Loss!" Cairo said, indignant. "We don't know it's a *loss*."

"And *you* must be *Cairo*," Ogg said with a peculiar smile.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Cairo snapped.

"Yes, fiery as a mandrake, charming as the night is long. Of course. Come and give Ogg a hug."

"She is a fire brand," joined in Gaffer, "I didn't need your note to tell me that."

As Ogg stepped towards her, Cairo stepped back in the same way she had with Gaffer, but Ogg was quick and had her arms wrapped around Cairo in the wink of an eye. Cowper and Siam followed, and Gaffer put his hand on her back.

To Charlemagne's relief, Cairo allowed herself to be embraced, even if she did stand a little rigid. Again, Gaffer appeared to sniff Cairo's hair, almost as though he was trying to detect something. Finally Charlemagne too was hugged by "the Ogg" while Cowper and Siam licked her jeans, hands, boots and anything else they could reach.

"We are very much honoured to have you *all*," Ogg said, bowing low. Penny bowed back. Charlemagne nodded her head and Cairo stood awkwardly. "Now let's not dawdle, I've got some hot scones and a nice cup of tea on. Just the thing after a long journey." She smiled and gestured for them to come in.

The sisters moved to collect their bags from the trunk but Gaffer waved them on with an, "I've got those, dears."

The entranceway was a long, narrow corridor with polished wooden floors. The walls were oak-panelled and decorated with starkly framed photographs. At first, the black-and-white pictures seemed to be relatively

conventional portraits, but closer inspection revealed that all the poses were slightly off.

Charlemagne paused to study them. There was a boy with a bow and arrow, just about to let loose the shaft, except that the camera had caught the string breaking; the face was one of pain as the shoulder extended backwards, the resistance suddenly gone. There was another, this one a triptych of three poses of a woman in the act of throwing a pair of strangely shaped dice on a table. In the first frame she was smiling, in the second puzzled, and in the third her expression was one of deep dismay as the objects came to rest. Finally, there was one of an old crone, her confused eyes staring into the lens as she let out a silent scream.

“Come on, come on. Don’t dilly-dally!” Ogg called from further down the corridor. “The tea will get cold. I will give you the full tour when you’ve had a cuppa.” She nodded to Gaffer who took the bags upstairs while she led the girls into what she called “the lounge.”

The room, plush with gilt cornices, thick velvet curtains, and dark damask wallpaper, seemed to press its opulence in on them. A huge candelabrum sat in the middle of a polished mahogany table. Outside the huge bay windows was a beautiful garden, enclosed in tall evergreens, stretching away from the house for at least an acre.

“Gaffer’s pride and joy,” said Ogg. “He spends more time with the garden, mowing grass and counting flowers, than he does with me. There are so many things to fix around the house, but he’s too busy pottering about outside. He tells people he bought this house because it has character, but really it was for the land. The house could have been falling down for all he cared, and it was.”

“It’s beautiful,” Penny said.

“Is that a forest beyond the garden?” Cairo said.

“Yes, an ancient one. You should go and explore if the weather’s nice tomorrow.”

Explore? thought Charlemagne. Did she think they were ten? Enid Blyton’s adventurous three. But then she checked herself. Their grandmother was only trying to be a good host.

Ogg pulled a big flowery tea cosy off a big flowery teapot that sat on the table. The scent of honey and spices filled the air. To the left of the pot were scones, preserves, and clotted cream, to the right, a stack of cucumber sandwiches. It was all so . . . English.

“Mmm that looks lovely,” Penny said.

Cairo wrinkled her nose. “Excuse me, but do you have any coffee?”

Ogg poured the tea into four cups. “Just try this,” she said when she was finished. “If you don’t like it, I’ll make you some coffee. But please try. It’s a special home brew.”

Cairo let out a silent sigh and Ogg passed around the drinks.

“Help yourselves to scones and jam, won’t you?”

Cairo piled three scones onto her plate and a generous helping of cream. She then sniffed the tea and took a small sip. Charlemagne had a scone with just a touch of jam, Penny, a couple of sandwiches. They hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast on the plane seven or so hours ago, and no real food since leaving America. Mouths watering, they ate in silence.

Charlemagne noticed how the cups and plates matched the pattern on the pot and tea cosy. It made her feel happy somehow, as though everything was going to be just fine. Ogg smiled warmly at her, as if reading her thoughts, and in that moment Ogg became more radiant somehow, younger than her seventy-something years. Charlemagne returned the smile and leant back on the couch, taking a bite of a second scone and washing it down with the hot tea.

Charlemagne, like Cairo, was not a fan of tea; she found it too bland. But, unlike Cairo, she was too polite to say anything. This tea was a pleasant surprise, however, sweet with honey and something else she couldn’t place. The hot liquid passed through her, relaxing and refreshing. Ogg poured some of the tea into a saucer and put it on the floor. Eagerly, Cowper lapped it up.

“This is great!” Penny said.

“Yes,” Cairo said. She paused as if searching for the words. “Delectable,” she said finally.

Cowper wagged his tail.

“If there is one thing I know how to do well, it is a decent cuppa,” Ogg said.

“I’m sure there’s more than that,” Penny said.

Ogg smiled, but her eyes flashed with irritation, as though Penny had somehow offended her.

“What’s in it?” Charlemagne asked hurriedly. “The tea, I mean. What gives it that flavour?”

“Manderlay,” Ogg said, “my secret ingredient.”

Charlemagne was about to ask what that was, when a loud, low groan reverberated around the house. Again Charlemagne experienced that strange sensation, as though the walls were pressing in, the damask swimming in front of her eyes. Cowper’s brown ears pricked up.

Ogg held her teacup suspended and stared out the window. When the noise stopped she put her teacup back on the saucer and smiled at them all again.

“What was that?” Penny asked.

“It’s just the house,” Ogg said casually. “It moans and groans like an old lady. The ancient wood shifts in the wind, and in the sun, and in the cold. You don’t get houses this old in America, do you?”

“How old is it?” Penny said.

“Too old.”

Gaffer shouted something from the top of the stairs. It sounded like he was asking which room to put the girls in.

“Useless creature,” muttered Ogg finishing her tea in a single gulp. “Please excuse me.” She got up and Cowper trotted out after her, wagging his tail.

For the second time Charlemagne admired how quickly Ogg moved for a large woman. Up and out in a flash. No arthritis in those knees. She was incredible for her age. Nothing like Granny Hickory had been, all bent at the waist, moving in pained, stiff steps.

“What a queer noise,” Penny said, taking a bite of her third cucumber sandwich.

“What queer inhabitants,” replied Cairo, standing up and walking to the window. She turned back to them, her white teeth flashing in a broad grin. “Although I have to say, I feel a lot better for that tea. It picks you up, doesn’t it? I feel like going for a walk down the garden right now. Anyone want to come?”

“Actually I feel pretty beat.” Penny nestled on the couch. “If we’re going out tonight I need to rest first.”

“Charlie?” Cairo said, raising her eyebrows.

“You’ve certainly perked up,” replied Charlemagne.

“Don’t get excited, I’m sure I’ll be back to my miserable self again shortly.” She flashed another smile and helped herself to another scone.

That’s her fourth, thought Charlemagne, *but at least she’s eating.*

“So anyway, what do you think of our crazy grandparents?” Cairo said, her mouth half-full.

“I think they’re lovely,” Penny said.

“You would,” Cairo replied, laughing.

“They’re not what I expected,” Charlemagne said.

“Better or worse?”

“Neither . . . and both, I guess. I don’t know. I expected them to be highly strung somehow, and yet more . . . normal. They just don’t seem the type to have not spoken to Dad for almost fifteen years.”

The truth was that she didn’t know what to make of them. Gaffer was friendly, strangely comforting and familiar, but Ogg . . . There was something about her, something that demanded attention, and something else too, a sort of otherworldliness. It was probably just being with different people in a different place. Perhaps all elderly English couples were this eccentric. Even their names were strange. But that ran in the family.

The three sisters had eventually grown into their names, but Cairo, Pendragon and Charlemagne Agonistes? She often wondered what her parents were thinking. Try to order anything on the phone and it took three hours. Pendragon was the worst, but everyone called her Penny.

“Maybe ask me about them again, after the wake,” Charlemagne said.

Cairo tapped on the glass and peered out over the back garden. “Yes. After tonight.” She cocked her head and ran a hand through her long auburn hair. “I’m still not going you know,” she said, sashaying slightly as she spoke.

Charlemagne smiled. She knew Cairo *was* going to go, and deep down, for whatever reason, she was looking forward to it. Whenever Cairo was happy, she unconsciously danced on the spot—subtly, but enough to notice. She had done it since she was a small child, charming everyone she met.

The three-year-old Cairo had told Granny Hickory matter-of-factly that she was dancing to the song in her head. Granny Hickory then repeated this story to everyone else. But even at the age of five, Charlemagne knew Granny Hickory had it wrong. Cairo meant she was dancing *with Song*, who lived in her head, her imaginary play fellow, with whom she had talked, played, and shared secrets throughout her childhood.

Cairo tapped the window again. “Look at those oak trees in the distance. They’re huge. They must be a hundred years old.”

“They’re much older than that, my child,” Ogg said, appearing behind them, Cowper at her heels. She had come into the room so silently no one had heard her. Charlemagne felt herself flush. How long had she been there? And how did a six-foot, two hundred pound lady move so quietly? At least they hadn’t said anything awful. Cowper trotted over to Penny and nuzzled her hand. Penny sneezed.

“How old?” Cairo asked.

“A thousand years if a day,” Ogg said. “They’re even bigger than they look. Farther away, too. There are three fields between the end of our garden and where the forest begins.” She looked at their plates. “Now, if you’ve finished with your tea, I’ll clear up.” Ogg put the teapot and remaining scones and sandwiches on a tray. The sisters carried over their empties.

“Thank you, dears,” she said. “Just so you know, I serve tea at three o’clock sharp every day. It’s a tradition. I always make a cuppa for myself and Gaffer, and we always have a sandwich or something small with it. So if you want tea, just come down at three, but never afterwards or you’ll spoil your dinner. Call it a house rule.”

“Where is Grand— uh, I mean Gaffer, now?” Penny said.

“Oh, he’s got his cup of tea upstairs. He’s taking care of something,” Ogg said dismissively. “Now, while we’re on house rules, there are just a couple of others. Firstly, *please* treat the house as if it were your own. When you get up in the morning and want breakfast, help yourselves, don’t wait to be asked. If you get cold, turn up the heat. If you want to go out for a walk, just go. I can’t stand people who dither, wondering if they can do this or that.”

Cowper wagged his tail at the word “walk.”

“Number two, I don’t care what you youngsters get up to, but while you’re here, you need to be home before dark so we don’t worry. We lock the doors at night. We’ve never had anyone break in, but one can’t be too careful.”

“What time does it get dark?” Cairo asked, scooping up the last scone before the dish was taken away.

“About ten. So let’s say be back by then.”

Ten o’clock, thought Charlemagne. What did she expect them to do? They were in the middle of the countryside and Penny was only thirteen. She wasn’t allowed out alone at home.

“Now, talking of locked doors brings me to rule number three. When I take you around the house, I’ll show you the door to a room. It’s on the third floor on the left hand side of the staircase. You can’t go in and I’d prefer it if you didn’t go up there at all.”

“Oooh, how very mysterious,” gushed Penny.

Ogg smiled thinly. “Actually, it’s not safe. The ceiling is coming down. Plaster comes loose all the time and hits the floor with an almighty thump. That’s another noise you might hear. I’ve told Gaffer a hundred times we have to get it fixed, but he insists on doing everything himself. He always has, which is why everything is such a shambles. In and out he goes, inspecting the room, making plans, but the hole in the roof doesn’t get any smaller.” Ogg shook her head. “Anyway, apart from that, you may do as you please.” Cowper and Siam barked and thumped their tails on the carpet.

“Oh yes. The dogs. If you go out, try to take them with you. They’ll get in a dreadful sulk otherwise.”

“That all sounds very reasonable,” Cairo said pleasantly.

“Yes, now if you’ll just excuse me, I’ll put away the tea things and Gaffer will show you to your room. Get some rest and then tidy yourselves up a little bit. The wake is a rather formal affair, and it’s important to me that my grandchildren look the part.”



Songs of Seraphina

JUDE HOUGHTON