

SMASH
THE
WORLD'S
SHELL

DANIEL FLIEDERBAUM

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

I

ELLEN DELACROIX lay curled up in bed one evening, her nose buried in her phone. “Top Guild Operative Loses Limb to Vicious Dragon; Finds Motherlode of Orichalcum,” declared the *Safe Zone Gazette’s* digital headline in bold black letters. Pausing on a picture of the man, who had a stub where his arm had once been, she made sure to say a prayer to the Goddess — words of gratitude for his sacrifice, and a plea that her father wouldn’t see this headline and double down on his refusal to let her join the Guild.

The room that had been hers ever since she was a small child surrounded her, familiar and cozy. Far beyond the open window, a shimmering silver dome stretched for miles and miles, lending the world a metallic tint. In the daytime, you could see the stygian monoliths that projected the dome looming in the distance, but most people didn’t want to think about the dome or its Generators any more than they had to. Those were what kept the dragons out.

Ellen was not most people. She twisted restlessly beneath her sheets, eyes wide open. When her dad’s snoring at last started to rumble from the next room over, she flung off her covers.

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"C'mon, Delacroix, you can do this," she muttered. A deep breath in. A deep breath out. She lowered herself into a horse stance, arms in at her sides like she'd seen on the dataweb. Then, she struck out with her fist. A weak wisp of wind fluttered through the empty air and dissipated against the wall with a *puff* — her aeromancy. Her air magic.

Again, she punched the air, over and over, never making wind more powerful than a tickle. She grunted, barely resisting the urge to stamp her feet. No dragon would be fazed by spells so feeble — and tonight had been a good night. Tonight, her magic had worked.

What if I never get this right? whispered a traitorous part of her mind. *What if I'm always useless?* Ellen shook her head. Tomorrow would be better.

Hours later, her eyes snapped open in the darkness. The dregs of a strange dream fluttered behind her lids, but already, it was slipping from memory. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, something caught her attention. There, on her shelf. A ring, glinting silver.

Ellen frowned. She didn't own a ring. Even though school was in just a few hours, she climbed out of bed. There was a note next to the ring — and that alone was an oddity, even ignoring how it got there. In this day and age, everything was digital. She picked it up and unfolded it, the paper crinkling loudly in the silence of night. *Use when alone, it read. May you bring peace and love to this world that needs it so.*

Weird, Ellen thought. On a whim, she slipped the ring onto her finger — it was a perfect fit. Mulling over what this could all mean, if it meant anything at all, she fiddled with the ring absentmindedly, twisting it once, then twice, then three times ...

And then her room was gone. In its place, trees upon trees stretched on forever; tall, leafy, ominous, their dim outlines lit by infinite specks from above: stars. The sky above her twinkled with starlight as far as the eye could see.

Ellen's stomach lurched — this shouldn't be possible. The Safe Zone dome blotted out the night sky. If she could see it like this, then she wasn't in the Safe Zone anymore. She was in the Wildlands, beyond the safety of the dome. Every moment she spent here was another moment closer to being scorched to death by dragonfire.

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THE GRADUAL CRESCENDO of wingbeats meant that Keeper was back from his hunting trip — and that Shard’s quiet time was over. The dragonling sighed, but extinguished the torch on the wall, trying to make it seem as if he’d been asleep. In the dark, he put away his easel and paints, hiding them in the usual spot — a hole in the ground. He took one last, lingering look at his creation, a picture of two dragons laughing together, before sealing the hole with a spell.

He braced himself.

The entrance, a slat in the roof enchanted to slide open on command, rumbled as it granted Keeper passage. “This is so awesome,” Shard heard his clutch-twin announce. “I got three deer in one flame breath. That’s gotta be a personal record.” Keeper landed, his beating dragon wings blowing cool air over Shard. With a quick flame breath, Keeper ignited the torch again. “Anyway, I’m back. You cleaned my hunting trophies, right?”

Shoot, Shard thought. He had been so wrapped up in his painting that he’d forgotten. He ambled over to the entrance and kissed the ground at his brother’s claws. “I’m very sorry,” he said

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as he looked up, still pressed against the ground. "It must have slipped my mind."

Keeper shook his head, clicking his tongue. "Wow, seriously?" And though Shard knew it was coming, the swift kick to his jaw didn't hurt any less. He yelped, clutching his snout with his paws.

Keeper flew past his brother to the center of the shelter, red and scarlet scales glistening in the firelight. He dumped the meat from his cloth hunting sack onto the ground, and the delicious scent of fresh-killed deer filled the shelter within seconds. Shard kept his head down, but he could just imagine the amused, self-satisfied look on Keeper's stupid face.

A hot surge flushed Shard's cheeks, but he tamped down on it. Keeper was big and strong, tight muscles rippling up and down his body. With just a little more effort, he could do so much more damage.

When the sounds of eating had died down, Keeper spoke again. "Ugh, what am I going to do with you? I asked you to clean my trophies, and that would have taken like, no time at all? But you couldn't do something as simple as that! I mean, it's not like you even do that much. You get to just sit and meditate all day, then come here and do Agito knows what."

Ah yes, meditating, Shard silently quipped, *by which I'm sure you mean tending to the fields with my magic. Totally the same thing.*

Keeper's eyes narrowed as if realization had struck. "Were you painting again?"

"N-no, I was just ... I was just relaxing." Shard tried his best to sound casual. His legs were starting to ache from crouching so much. Against his better judgment, he chanced standing.

"Bow," Keeper snarled venomously, and Shard immediately prostrated himself again, his heart pounding — he had to avoid another beating. If only there was someone who would take this seriously, someone who would listen to him ...

"Listen," Keeper continued, his iciness gone. "I get that you're different, but you're never gonna get a girlfriend if you keep holing up in the shelter all afternoon."

Hot anger surged in Shard again, tense and dark. *Calm down,* he ordered himself. *Focus on getting through the night.*

Keeper took a deep breath and sighed. "You wanna eat?" Shard's growling stomach answered for him. Keeper laughed. "C'mon, you can stand."

Despite himself, Shard rose to his paws. He had always hated eating meat, but he loved the way it tasted. Yet, as his belly trembled in anticipation, a scene popped into his mind unbidden, the same one that always did when he was encouraged to indulge his carnivorous side: the deer, minding its own business in a lush meadow, when out of nowhere, a stream of fire scorched it to death.

"I think I'm good," Shard mumbled. "I um, I'm not actually all that hungry ... I mean, my stomach hurts, and uh, I'm trying to be less of a glutton anyway, so ..."

He began to back up, not once looking away from his brother.

Keeper sighed. "Sweet Agito, you're always such a bleeding-heart." Shard said nothing. He just had to keep quiet and he'd be free. Then Keeper would forget about him, and he could slip back in later. "What did Mom even do to you to make you so weak?"

Shard froze. "What did you just say?"

"I said you're weak." Keeper shrugged. "I mean, it's true. Mom ruined you. It's like ... we're drakes, not dragonesses. We're not supposed to be so *delicate*."

"I see you've been spending time with Chieftain Inferno," Shard said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah? He's our uncle." Exasperation dripped from Keeper's forked tongue. "Of course I spend time with him. He could probably help you, you know. Fix your nonsense about Mom."

"Our mother is *dead*, Keeper." Shard stomped closer, flaring out his wings aggressively.

"Don't you dare." Keeper growled, deep and throaty, all pretenses of amicability dropped.

"Stop talking about Mom like that!"

"Don't tell me what to do, little brother." Keeper spat the last two words out as if they were obscene. "I could break you if I wanted."

An alarm blared in Shard's mind. Keeper was right — Shard didn't stand a chance. Not unless he used his magic. But to do so would be to betray everything that his mother taught him — use magic to protect, never to destroy. So instead, he bared his fangs and snarled.

Keeper's eyes blazed. In a red blur, the larger dragon twisted around and lashed his tail into Shard's chest. Shard wheezed sharply, landing on his back, pain exploding behind his eyes. Keeper

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tail-whipped him again. Shard's vision went fuzzy, and through the throbs, he heard Keeper cluck disapprovingly.

Shard stayed sprawled out on his back after that. How long exactly, he was unsure. The whole time, he forced himself to stay quiet, refusing to think about the hate boiling inside him.

Once Keeper started to snore, Shard finally allowed himself to crawl back onto his paws, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up. Painful jolts shot up and down his spine and he winced. Still, he forced his aching wings to carry him upwards, and he emerged into the night.

Outside, he could see more shelters dotting the area, constructions of red dried mud, standing tall against the forest and the moonlight. The dragons of his village slumbered inside each and every one, waiting for the new day.

Shard wound his way through the community. His deep marine-blue and brilliant turquoise scales sparkled ever so slightly as they drew upon the power of the starry heavens above. If he'd wanted, he could have used that cosmic energy to heal his wounds, but what if the glow woke someone up? Besides, storing some more energy never hurt.

When he was younger, he would seek out his mother's embrace after a night this upsetting. His heart ached at the thought of her — her soft, gentle voice, her kind words, her loving smile — but he shook his head. She was gone, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

He thought of his paintings, of dipping a stone into his paint jar and running it across his canvas, leaving behind color, creating the image of a dragon he hadn't met yet — his first friend. What would they be like, he wondered? Would they enjoy his art? Would they be more of a storyteller, perhaps? Maybe they'd be fit and athletic in all the ways he wasn't, and could stand up to Keeper. The possibilities were endless.

After about twenty minutes, the river came into view. Plants sprouted along the banks: vibrant pastel-hued flowers, weeds, grassy green reeds and more. Gingerly, he lowered his front legs into the water and finally allowed himself to truly glow, heaving a relieved sigh as magic from the moon and stars flowed into his wounds, his cut lip sewing itself shut, pain draining from his throbbing sides.

In the river, he could see his reflection staring back at him. Shard was a mere six years old, an adolescent by dragon standards, but he did not have the sheer presence of the other drakes his age. Even now,

he could see how scrawny he was. Where Keeper's body had chiseled muscles, Shard's was smooth and undefined. He didn't have horns yet, either, and he was on the late side for those as it was. Two wings, leathery like a bat's, were folded in at his sides, and his tail, curled in around his body, was rounded at the tip instead of ending in a sharp, threatening point like some of the other dragons in his tribe.

As he looked into the still surface of the water, his eyes stared back at him, one blue and one green. And though he didn't want to admit it, in them, he saw something like fraying threads.

Crack!

Shard snapped to attention at the sound, looking around for its source. And there it was: a human, stepping on a branch. She — he thought it was a she, at least; she was so slender — she froze in place, her blonde hair fluttering to a rest on her shoulders, her green eyes wide.

Shard and the human stared at each other. Neither made a sound. Concern for the tiny creature lurched inside him. She was so small and had no wings or scales to protect her pale skin, exposed on her hands and face where her garments did not cover. How did she go about her day without getting scratched or cut? She seemed so fragile.

But then, he knew his village would expect him to kill her. In the words of his uncle, humans were "thieving little apes." For whatever reason, they wanted a kind of metal called orichalcum. Dragons used orichalcum during funeral rites — at least, Shard's tribe did — but their deposit was so far away that it had been many, many moons since humans had raided the village for it. And what if humans used orichalcum for their funerals, as well? Shouldn't they be allowed to have some?

If he snuffed her out, he would be a hero. The other dragons would all pay attention to him, maybe even more than they did to Keeper. They'd praise him for exterminating one of the pests that invaded their lands and stole their sacred metal. And if he killed her, she would be dead.

Shard sighed. His shining scales probably terrified the creature. *I'd better dim them*, he thought. But before he could, the girl swung her arm forward, her hand closed in a fist. Shard tensed — this was how humans cast spells. He wracked his mind, trying to think of a way to counter it without hurting her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Passionate about stories from a young age, Daniel Fliederbaum spent the entirety of their first-grade year too embarrassed of their bad handwriting to pick up a pencil and actually write. When they finally learned about the wonders of digital word processing, they began a life-long love affair with storytelling, spending their elementary, middle, and high school years working on a novel which will hopefully never see the light of day.

Now that they have a degree in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho, and are earning their Master of Fine Arts, handwriting is far less of an issue. When they aren't writing, Daniel likes to spend time with friends, with their cat, and gorging themselves on a steady diet of young adult fantasy, Japanese anime and *Pokémon* games.