



Book One of the Origo Series

By

Keri Brown

Illustrated by:

Phil Eads

Austin Blockson

Keri Brown

Seven Brownies Pub

Origo

Son of Darkness

by Keri Brown

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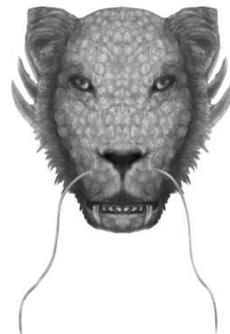
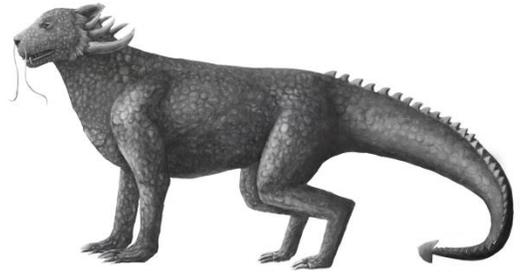
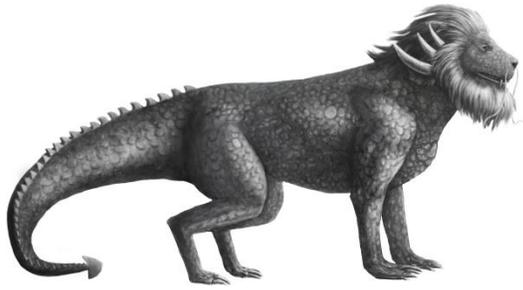
First Printing – February 2021

ISBN: 978-1-7340241-0-4

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Printed in the U.S.A.



In the beginning, the Great Mistress of the Stars was dancing along the cosmos when she discovered the young Earth. Inspired by its beauty, she decided to create a little world of her own. She took a pinch of soil, a drop of water, a gust of wind, and a flicker of fire from Earth, pulled them into space, rolled them together, and sprinkled stardust on them. A unique and powerful scale called a 'Qi' formed on each of them, and they became the first dragons—elemental, immortal, and perfect.

The Mistress pulled a dead star from the heavens, rubbed it against the sun, and then gave it a kiss of life, creating the Magma Heart. She put it between the dragons, and they covered it with soil, water, wind, and lava. The Magma Heart gave life to the lands, creating a diversity of creatures and vegetation in four continents arranged by compass. And thus, Origo was born, an unseen planet that follows closely behind Earth's orbit.

She doted on her creations with pride and love but knew something was amiss. Four powerful dragons ruled over a world of lesser creatures with little to no special powers. Something needed to bridge the gap. After several days of consideration, she came to one conclusion. Only dragons could relate to dragons, and creatures of lesser power could only relate to their own kind. So, she merged the two.

From that point forward, all dragons hatched as creatures of the lands. This would be their Dú. As such, they would grow shoulder to shoulder with other humans, elves, wolves, or whatever their Dú was. Upon maturity, an emerald Qi would appear on their chest, releasing their dragon form to represent and rule their communities as viceroys. Before long, DúHumans, DúElves, DúWolves, and many other types of dragons filled the lands. Origo became a harmonious society of mythical creatures and viceroys under dragon rulers called qings.

Despite the Mistress's best efforts to create a utopia, evil found its way into the heart of one of her qings. He was overpowered but still managed to take half the planet with him and set a path for the Son of Darkness.

Whistling and roaring, the strong autumn winds rushed through the trees. Leaves of red, yellow, and brown danced in swirling spectacles, then descended to create a brittle blanket over the bare soil.

A sharp burst of air shot from the ground, giving a few leaves one last dance. A pair of eyes blinked open from the leafy forest floor. Dark green scales multiplied around the eyes while a large groaning yawn poured thick grey smoke over the ground.

Incognito, known as 'Inco,' was a young-adult DúHuman named for his ability to mimic his surroundings by reflecting them and appearing as an undulating apparition. He rolled his massive, jaguar-like body to an upright position. The rough bark of a fallen tree shifted in appearance, revealing scutes that trailed to the spade-shaped tip of the tree.

But it wasn't a tree. It continued to transform until his entire tail was visible. He rose to his feet, stretching his muscular arms and wiggling the five talon-tipped fingers of each paw. He curled his feet, cracking the knuckles of all eight toes.

Finally, the creature stood and shook his body free of the forest debris that had settled on him in his slumber. His majestic, lion-like mane waved back and forth through the air, giving contest to the elegant dance of the surrounding leaves. When he stopped, his dark brown hair fell perfectly into place between the three curved horns on either side of his head and hugged the back of his neck. He pulled a small twig from the hair along his jaw and used it to scratch his scaly chest. His attention turned to the soft, snoring sounds beside him.

There, napping in the leaves, was Gray, who was solid grey from snout to spade, save his emerald green Qi. The dark smoke from Inco's yawn rolled along the ground toward Gray. It crept over his head

like a fluffy black pillow. He let out a cackling cough and quickly pulled his head up and out of the dark smog.

“Which end did that cloud of death come from?”

Inco flashed a grin, then cleared his expression as he stretched out on the ground. As his face passed Gray’s, he puffed another small dark cloud right at him.

“Aw, come on,” Gray complained.

Inco chuckled and used his tail to poke him, waited for him to turn, then tapped him on the back of the head.

Gray winced as he rubbed the spot on his head, not from pain, but a subconscious reflex.

“Challenge accepted,” he declared in a low voice. “When you least expect it. Fear the wrath.”

The wind picked up, lifting the smoke and pulling in the fresh air. The two dragons closed their eyes and raised their chins toward the treetops. They breathed deep, enjoying the coolness against the hot, stuffy autumn air.

The wind carried more than a cool reprieve. It also moved aromas from all around. Grass, flowers, and cattle smells mixed to form enticing scents. Deep breaths turned into sniffing. Inco suddenly had a taste for some beef.

“Stay here. I’m going to get us something to eat. I’ll be right back.”

Gray licked his lips. “A second supper sounds great.”

“You’re always hungry, aren’t you?”

“There’s so much more to choose from here on Earth. I want to try it all.”

“Eat up. We return to Origo tonight.”

He walked away, his nose still up, following the scent of meat. Cow, sheep, and a hint of rabbit all floated on the breeze. Inco’s feet left the ground as he hovered high in the trees, following the strongest

scents carried by the breeze. Not having wings, their flight was like all other dragon abilities: drawn from their Qi. The single scale lent them grace over a winged dragon thrashing about with their large leathery wings.

Inco's nose led him to a grassy field hugging the tree line. It flowed to a small Anglo-Saxon village with grubhouses lining each side of a wide dirt road. The road tapered to a narrow path, leading to an offset dwelling, facing the rest of the village. A tall rickety fence around it penned three horses and several pigs.

"I suppose pork is out of the question," Inco muttered. "Beef it is." He turned to follow the scent of cow when sounds of terror and pain echoed from the village.

Inco returned to the tree line and stood on his hind legs. A violent invasion of the tiny village unfolded before his eyes.

Women and children scurried into their homes at the command of their husbands and fathers just as fourscore of Teulu men merged onto the road that led into the village, stopping just before the first home. There they stood, separated into four groups, waiting for orders.

"Ymosod," a man yelled from horseback at the back of the last group.

The first set of men set forth, carrying their swords and axes. They spread out, making their way through the village, slaughtering everyone in their path. There was no pattern to their savagery as they killed the village men without explanation. They murdered the elderly who were too slow to escape, and the women and children in the street.

A family of five dropped to their knees, the woman and three children huddled behind the husband, who begged for mercy. The assailant hesitated and looked to his fellow marauders, one of whom came to stand at his side. The villager redirected his plea to the second assailant, but before he could say

anything, the savage thrust his sword through the kneeling man's chest.

The second group of invaders followed the first, carrying daggers on their hips. Each man had a large coil of rope hanging from his shoulder and a dog at his side. They went into the dwellings one by one, coming out with women and children bound with the rope.

Two horses, each with two guard dogs, stood at the edge of the village facing in. A man led a third horse away, pulling women and children by a rope fastened to the saddle. Another line of women and children screamed while being dragged to the edge of the village. They saw the departing horse and cried louder.

Despite their pleas, many of them followed without a struggle. They feared for the lives of their families if they didn't comply. A few women, bold enough to struggle, were beaten and whipped.

One woman fought the hardest, refusing to comply with any command. After manhandling her, the attacker threw her to the ground and whistled. His dog jumped onto the woman, and viciously tore into her. Her children sobbed while their mother kicked and screamed, but with her hands bound, she couldn't stop the dog. It continued to bite and tear at her flesh. She died within moments. The man untied the rope from her hands and yanked her sobbing children away.

A particular member of the Teulu stood out as he was far larger than all the others. He paced up and down the village road on the back of a massive, long-haired horse. Steering the beast with one hand, he cradled a loaded crossbow tailored to match his enormous size in the other. A strap crossed his chest down to his hip, where it held a quiver of extra-large bolts. Not only was he the biggest man among the Teulu, but he was also the only one armed with a crossbow.

The third group of pillagers led three horses to each end of the village road. They fanned out to search the houses and re-emerged with their arms full of valuables—blankets, clothing, tools, weapons, and anything they could find. They loaded their spoils on the horses, running in and out until nothing

useful remained. With so many raiders, none had to search more than one house.

The last group of six marauders carrying torches split into two groups as they moved down each side of the village road. After the loaded horses cleared, the first invader set fire to the roofs at the front of each grubhouse. The second walked behind, setting fire to the rooftops at the back. The third followed at a distance, placing his torch in various places to ensure the flames didn't go out.

Most of the men from the other groups had gone back to the laden horses, while a small group headed to the last home offset from the rest. Armed with swords, daggers, and rope, they joked among themselves as they reached the head of the path that led to it.

Inside, a woman huddled in a corner with her newborn. Her mussed light brown hair stuck with sweat to her forehead. Blood of childbirth spattered her plain blue dress. A few paces away, her husband peeked through a narrow gap between the door and its frame. When he saw the men approaching, he ran to his wife. He helped her to her feet and rushed her toward the door.

“Are you ready?” The man asked in a hushed panic.

She didn't answer.

“Æmma.”

“No,” she whispered through heavy breathing.

“Come, there's no time.”

He paused to admire his newborn son, his fingertips hovering over the baby's coal-black hair. Holding a memory of the wide-set blue eyes, flat nose, and dimpled chin, he pulled his hand away. He kissed his newborn's frail, reddish-brown forehead as Æmma looked on lovingly. She put her hand on his cheek and rubbed her thumb over his short facial hair.

“Ælwulf ...” she faltered, but in her loss of words, her eyes spoke for her. They radiated with love and fear; her light blue irises seemed to float in the glistening tears that welled below them. She took her

hand off his cheek to wipe a tear before it fell.

He opened the door enough to peer out, then pulled the door open wide.

“Now. On the horse.”

She held her infant close and ran to the horse. He followed and took the baby while his exhausted, aching wife climbed onto the horse. Once his tiny family was secure, Ælwulf lifted himself behind them.

The approaching raiders were talking and joking among themselves and, at first, didn't notice the running couple. As they ascended the hill, coming into the line of sight, one noticed and alerted the others.

“Stop,” they shouted as they ran up the path.

“Hold on,” Ælwulf yelled.

He smacked the horse's rear, and it ran, bursting through the rickety fence.

In the woods, Gray caught sight of a plump deer, munching some greenery. It was an excellent opportunity to practice hunting and show his accomplishment to Inco. He crept forward, close to the ground until he could taste it in the air. As he prepared to strike, a scream echoed from the village, snapping his attention toward where Inco was standing. His sudden movement startled the deer, and it ran off, but he barely noticed. He made his way to Inco's side and watched the couple escape the village with a mounted bowman charging toward them.

Ælwulf steered the horse in a zig-zag pattern through the field. Crossbow bolts hissed around them. He didn't know it, but he was headed straight toward Inco and Gray, concealed in the tree line.

The baby screamed in protest at the vigorous handling. Æmma yearned to soothe him but needed to hold on for balance. She tightened her arm around the baby, hoping to make him feel more secure.

A bolt struck the horse. It reared and twisted with a screaming neigh. The momentum of running

caused it to fly through the air before landing on its side.

Æmma and Ælwulf hit the ground and rolled several times. Æmma lost her grip, and the infant flew from her arms, landing nearby. It let out a bloodcurdling, high-pitched scream. She struggled to crawl toward the infant, but the impact of the fall had rendered her breathless. She rolled in anguish, her mouth agape, unable to breathe.

Ælwulf scrambled toward her on his hands and knees. As he rose to his feet, a bolt shot through his neck. It pierced just under the jawline and protruded from the other side below the ear. He jerked up and fell backward.

Æmma finally drew in a deep breath and screamed. “No, no, no, no, no!” She cupped his cheeks in her palms, rubbing her thumbs gently under his eyes.

“Run,” he choked.

Ignoring the risk, she leaned in for a kiss. In her mind, she knew it would be the last time their eyes would meet, the last time their lips would touch, and the last time she would feel his facial hair against her cheeks. In her heart, however, she knew nothing of the sort.

“My love,” she cried as she pulled herself away.

Frantic with fear for her child, she followed the sounds of her screaming baby through the tall grass, scooped him up, and ran. Exhaustion of childbirth slowed her. The attackers gained ground with every laborious stride she took. She pressed on, stumbling. A stream of blood rushed down her leg. She slowed her pace to look. A sudden, sharp pain consumed her upper body.

The dragons watched in horror as a bolt shot through the woman’s back and emerged above her left breast. It barely missed the baby’s head. She fell to the ground and crawled on her knees with one hand, holding her baby in the other.

Inco usually avoided getting involved in anything human, ignoring even the most horrible deeds of man. This senseless slaughter, however, was more than he could stand to watch. He'd had enough. Anger boiled. His face grew hot. His lungs quivered. He stepped out from the shelter of the trees and into the field, his eyes fixed on the men. In his peripheral vision, he watched Æmma.

She gasped in shock at the sight of Inco. She tried to scream, but the sheer force of terror held it in her throat. As she stared in horrified awe, she noticed that his attention was directed elsewhere. Death seemed to be coming from every direction, but the Teulu had shown aggression. The dragon had not. She slowly crawled out of his way and moved behind him, intending to continue into the woods. As she did, she found herself face-to-face with Gray.

"It's all right," he whispered. "We won't hurt you. Come, get behind me."

Æmma sensed no danger from Gray and was instantly compliant. She watched from behind his tail as Inco released a burst of flames over her assailants, scorching their hair.

Only singed, the men turned and ran. Inco assumed that would be the end. He sighed in relief as the men ran toward the village. It had worked better than he thought it would, but he didn't take time to wonder why. He turned to check on Æmma. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the Teulu regroup. His relief now short-lived, he braced himself for the men charging toward him, now thirty strong. The bowman kicked his horse and galloped through the crowd, taking the lead.

"I'm Gray. He's Inco." He lowered his body to be closer to Æmma.

She looked up at him, pain and astonishment pulling her expression in different directions. "Ah ..." She choked. "Ah-ma."

"Whoa, whoa. Don't speak. Here, Æmma, is it? Rest over here." He guided her to a hollowed log

with one paw behind her in case she fell.

A bolt flew in, headed directly at Inco's face. He saw it and sidestepped the impact. Time seemed to slow as the bolt drifted past his face towards Gray, then sped up before he could react. The broadhead wedged into the scales of Gray's leg.

He let out a pain-filled grunt and looked at Inco, who sighed in relief that the injury was minor. The two dragons shared silent expressions of anger, then turned their sights back to the attackers.

Gray was furious. His leg hurt, Æmma was injured, and the baby was now fatherless. He set his sights on the men who were fast approaching. His face twisted with anger as he rose to his feet.

Inco stepped aside, nodding in reverence. Gray took in a deep breath and released a massive, rolling cloud of dark and heavy smoke into the meadow. A charcoal fog engulfed the bright yellow grass, rising as its reach spread over the field.

Three men in front of the Teulu merged with the cloud. The others slowed to a stop and shuffled backward. The bowman's horse reared and let out a panicked whinny before turning and slamming back down to all fours. Struggling to stay mounted, the bowman unintentionally released a bolt from his crossbow. It zipped through the smoke and shattered through a branch near Inco's head.

An attacker hurtled from within the cloud and plummeted to the ground behind his brothers. Another screamed as he flew from the smoke in a different direction. He silenced with a crunch as he landed on his head. The attackers huddled together. Blood sprayed them from one side to the other, then doused them from the opposite direction. They wiped their eyes and gawped at the smoke, recoiling in shock. A limp, tattered body spun through the air over them.

Gray emerged from the smoke. Blood covered his snarling mouth and dripped from his mane onto his chest. He scanned the enemy and took in another deep breath, his mouth wide, displaying a bright grey glow within his throat. He released the breath: a thundering roar of smoke. Orange and red flecks danced

in the cloud. He took another quick breath and freed it with another roar.

The smoke burst into grey flames that covered the advancing enemy, incinerating everything and everyone it touched. The blaze cut a wide swath through the grass, taking on a life of its own, spreading in all directions before thinning to a snuff.

Gray ended his fiery breath and glared at the bowman, who stared back through the aim of his crossbow. The rest of the men seemed to be following his lead. Gray realized that if he took out the bowman, perhaps the others would flee, but as another deep breath filled his lungs, the bowman released the bolt. It pierced Gray's neck, and he fell.

Inco felt a thud echo shake the ground. Knowing it could only have come from something the size of a dragon, he looked at the cloud of smoke that was dissolving in the light breeze. Panic and rage shook him to the core as the fog gave way to the shape of a collapsed dragon. He shot from the forest and used all four limbs to scoop Gray from the ground, then turned back into the cloud to place him behind the hollowed log. He would be safe there.

The remaining attackers gathered around the bowman and howled in victory, believing the dragons to be in retreat.

“Cadfael! Cadfael! Cadfael!” They chanted, waving their weapons in celebration. The horseman spread his arms, welcoming the praise of his fellow men. His celebration was brief as he saw a dragon-shaped apparition move through the waning smoke cloud.

“Ysbryd,” he shouted, yanking on the reins of his horse to turn and run. A few attackers followed while the others huddled in fear and confusion, watching the haziness above.

Inco descended over their heads and crushed them with his feet. A bolt shot into the bony flail at the end of his tail. He pressed a scaly finger against one nostril and shot a melon-sized ball of fire from

the other. It landed at the feet of the horse, causing it to rear up.

The bowman fell to the ground and tried to get back on the horse. It protested with a groaning neigh and galloped away. The rider crouched and scurried to a patch of extra tall grass. It failed to conceal him. He reached for a bolt, only to find an empty quiver.

Inco carefully blew a circle of fire around the patch of tall grass.

“You there. You have nowhere to run. Tell me, why are you terrorizing this village?”

“The land,” he answered timidly. “It’s rightfully ours. They took it from us, and we’re here to take it back.”

“And the prisoners?”

“We were going to let them go.”

“The truth,” Inco snapped.

“Slaves ... a-and workers for the fields. We would’ve treated them well, I swear. Please,” he choked, “let me go.”

“Very well.” He walked away. “You may go.”

The man rose to his feet, the grass at chest height. He swatted at the air, trying to clear the smoke, only to see the flames drawing closer. A breeze lightened the density of the smoke, and he looked around in a panic. Flames grew closer from every direction.

“Wait,” the bowman screamed, “help me!”

Inco stared straight ahead with glazed eyes as he headed toward the village. He listened with indifference as the man screamed for help, then screamed for mercy until he could scream no more.

A man just outside of town kicked his horse to a gallop. The rope attached to the saddle jerked the line of women and children off their feet, dragging them by their bound hands.

Inco rushed to their aid, landing in front of the horse. It reared, then stomped its front legs

nervously. The rider jumped down and ran into a field of crops. Inco used his claw to cut the saddle's mounting straps. The now bareback horse ran free, and the prisoners worked themselves loose.

Inco returned to the village to set the remaining prisoners free. They screamed in fear at the sight of the dragon.

“I won't hurt you.”

He broke the rope just behind the horse, then used a nail to loosen the knot on the first woman's wrist. “You can untie the others. I can't fix your village, but you're free.” He lifted off the ground and turned back toward the woods.

Gray opened his eyes to find himself beside a hollowed log in the forest. Æmma lay against the other end of the log. He shuffled toward her, grimacing at the pain until his nose was a breath away from the newborn, which lay silent and still in its cloth wrappings. Unsure if it was dead or sleeping, he nudged it with his nose. It squirmed and cried.

Æmma opened her eyes to a sliver. The dragon no longer alarmed her. Her only concern was for her baby's comfort. She tried weakly to adjust the baby in her arms but lacked the strength. She embraced him, and the crying calmed to a quiet whimper. She tried to sit up, gasping with every movement, crying with every exhale. Her hopeless eyes found his.

A single tear rolled from his eye as he rested his head near her arms. She empathized with his despair. Knowing he wouldn't hurt her or the baby, she felt an emotional connection to him. She glanced at each of his wounds—wounds received in his attempt to protect her. She couldn't summon enough air to speak, so her eyes spoke for her. She rested a hand on his scaly nose. Her eyes locked with his, expressing her gratitude for the pain he suffered on her behalf.

Inco approached. His gaze swept over the woman and baby, taking in their poor condition. Gray

had bolts in his neck, leg, and chest. Both of them were near death.

“My people.” Æmma struggled. “They’ll never be safe. Please—” She heaved several times, trying to speak. She stopped and took a deep, deliberate breath. “My baby.” The words came more clearly. “Make sure he knows we loved him. His father was Ælwulf, son of Rædwald, and I—I am Æmma, daughter of Æthelric. Find someone to take—take care—of—” she faltered in her pain and inability to draw breath.

She lowered her head, holding her infant close, and gently sang to him. Gray, in great pain himself, moved closer to the sound of her voice, pressing lightly against the arm that held the baby. She caressed his face between his nose and mouth. Her words were cracked and broken, but her tone was soothing.

“Slāp slāp, Lýtla bera, þū eart gēsund mid mē.”

Her melody softened until it stopped. The life in her eyes faded, and her body sank in submission to death, but death would not yet take her. She’d merely lost consciousness, as had Gray.

Inco pulled Gray’s Qi from his chest. He removed the bolts in his leg and neck and squeezed the Qi over each wound. A single green drop of xenum fell from the Qi and instantly healed the leg. Another droplet repaired the neck. He pulled the last bolt from Gray’s chest, and blood rushed from the open wound. Inco pulled him away from Æmma and rolled him onto his back. He placed two green drops into the chest wound, watched it congeal and close up, and then returned the Qi to Gray’s chest.

He nudged Æmma gently to loosen her grasp on the infant. The arm fell back lifelessly, but her fingers twitched. He stared at the shallow rise-and-fall of her chest until her heartbeat echoed faintly in his ears. His male xenum would be toxic to her female blood. There was no way to save her here, but he hoped to find someone who could, with speed and a little luck.

Picking up the infant carefully with his rough, scaly paw, it looked at him, cooing. He gently

closed his fingers around the baby and lifted Æmma with his other paw. He stood tall with the baby to his chest and rose to hover just above the ground. Wrapping both of his back legs around Gray, he rose higher in the air as he flew over the trees. The baby was quiet as Inco soared over the woods and meadows. Soaring higher to cross the Sud Sæ, he made for the dragon cave at the highest peak of the Alpes Penninae.

