

A Perilous Act

The small frontier village of Savelle nestled among orchards, bathed in summer afternoon sunlight. Two rows of thatch-roofed cottages flanked the dirt road running by the lord's bailey on the east end. Halfway through the village, on the north side, the road passed the churchyard and sanctuary. Across the road, two cottages down, a child picked thyme sprigs in the orphanage croft. At the west end, between the last cottage and the first row of peach trees, was a clearing big enough for turning large ox-drawn wagons.

Seven orphans in bare feet and ragged clothing followed a train of laborers along a worn path through the orchard toward the clearing, finishing a long day of climbing trees and picking peaches. One boy guided a donkey hitched to a cart laden with peach baskets. Two lugged a ladder. Others carried baskets and harvesting tools. The youngest, in an oversized tunic made from an old sack, trailed far behind, twisting his forearm to study a fresh scrape oozing blood.

"Xabi, hurry up," called the oldest.

Xabi let his arm drop and trotted forth along the path.

The black dragon left the sun's glare, dove beyond the surrounding hills, and hugged the forest contours toward Savelle. It skimmed the treetops of the orchard, foregoing wing strokes for

stealth. The trees hid it from the villagers and muffled the sound of leathery wings cutting through the air. The size of a yearling horse, it appeared much larger because of its slim, elongated body and wings spanning three rows of peach trees. Approaching the clearing, it rose for a view of the open ground, then pitched into a shallow dive toward Xabi. Hearing the wings at last, the boy turned to look. The dark shape came at him like a hole to swallow him up. He tripped.

Black claws reached down but hooked only threadbare cloth as Xabi fell. The claws yanked him into the air, but the sack ripped. Xabi fell again, tumbling across the dirt, screaming. Unexpectedly light, the dragon swooped sharply upward. A wide shadow passed over the children. They looked up, terror washing over their faces.

“Dragon! Dragon!”

Overlapping shouts and screams carried the alarm down the road. “Dragon to the west! God save us.” People outside ran for their homes, crossing themselves and murmuring prayers. Some barged through the nearest door they could open. Mothers called for their children. A crowd converged on the sanctuary’s door, pushing through. Outside the lord’s home, a pig temporarily escaped slaughter as the butcher brought it back in. Wagons, baskets, planks of wood, heads of cabbage, and bundles of clothing were abandoned in the road. The donkey brayed and ran away with the peach cart.

A young peasant woman ran out of the orphanage. Her eyes went to the sky, then to the returning children. “Quick, quick,” she shouted. “Leave everything. Just drop them!”

Tools clanged, baskets bounced, and peaches scattered on the ground. She dashed toward the panicked Xabi.

“Isodore!” he cried, his face sand-scraped and contorted with terror. Isodore passed four cottages racing to the clearing. She took his hand, eyeing the spinous blot turning overhead.

Still ascending, the dragon bent its neck down, sorting through prey scrambling below.

Isodore crossed herself with one hand and pulled Xabi along with the other. “Hurry!”

Atop its arc, the creature banked then dove along a sickle-blade

Dragon's Ridge

trajectory, swinging back to the cottages for a run at the stragglers.

"It's coming!" Xabi cried again, twisting to look at the approaching monster.

"Don't look. Just run!" Isodore pulled him forward to shield him. She fumbled to untie her dirty apron. Ahead of her, the children dashed through the yard and into their orphanage.

"Faster!" she screamed at Xabi, then brought the crumpled apron up to her mouth, whispering desperately into it. She glanced back and flung it into the air.

The apron sailed toward the dragon, unfurled, and drifted down. The beast rose to pass above the cloth, and reset its aim for Isodore. Its claws opened. Its eyes already had her.

A second later, the apron blew into the dragon's face. The beast whipped its neck backward, shaking its head to let the wind strip the cloth away. But the flimsy cloth had caught fast on a bristling crown of horns.

Blinded, distracted, and facing backward, the dragon dropped too low. Its right wing clipped and shattered an abandoned wagon. Its elongated body cranked to one side, and crashed, bounced, then tumbled on the dirt road. Wings folded, it passed Isodore. Its spinning tail swept her legs out and she too went down.

The beast spread its limbs to stop. It pushed itself upright. Still blinded by the apron, it roared and snapped its neck side to side.

Isodore's dark hair had fallen out of its bun and whipped across her face. She shook it off, took one look at the black-scaled creature next to her, and choked. She scrambled away, gathering the long tunic in her hands, and ran.

The maddened beast hooked a wing claw on the apron to pull it off. The fabric tore but held. The dragon roared again, pointed its muzzle at the ground, and sent a burst of fire through the apron. The flame deflected off the ground and incinerated the middle of the cloth. The creature flung off the burning hem and looked for Isodore.

She ran for the orphanage, into which Xabi had dashed. Another boy was holding the door ajar for her, fear on his face and courage draining away.

The dragon vaulted into the air, driving hard to catch up, but it had lost too much time. It cocked back its neck, chin to its shoulders, then threw the head forward and spat. A barrage of fireballs whirred over Isodore. The boy slammed the door shut an instant before burning dragon mucus splattered across it. Flames licked at the thatch overhang.

Isodore angled toward the church on the other side of the road. If she could make the dragon overshoot it, she could escape. By the time it circled around to look for her, Father Serafin would have let her in. Even if the dragon burned down the sanctuary, she would be safe, for beneath the structure, the villagers had dug an underground chamber to shelter from dragons.

To trick the beast, she swerved right before turning sharply left, aiming for the alley between the church and parsonage. The beast took her feint, then corrected, throwing one leg out to catch her. A hooked claw whipped down her shoulder, plunged into her chest, and yanked her backward. Long, thick toes wrapped under both of her arms. The dragon pitched up. She swung under it, dragging her feet across the dirt, and was lifted into the air, while her shadow continued down the road, attached to the dragon's.

A sharp pain wrenched her above the right breast. A talon longer than her hand had stabbed her below the collarbone. The toe's grip pressed the entire length of its hook into her. She screamed and grasped the beast's ankle with both hands to take some of her weight off the claw. The creature's other foot reached down and hastily wrapped around the first to secure the tenuous hold. Broad, leathery wings swept down, striking her flailing legs, dragging her into the sky. The dragon ascended fast, flapping with such power that wind swirled and ripped each time the wings came down. The beast turned from the village as it rose, escaping to the south with Isodore dangling below, her tunic fluttering in the wind.

She struggled to keep her weight off the claw in her chest. The beast struggled as well, trying to secure the grip of its first foot, but that foot was trapped under the more secure second grip. Each time it shifted, she felt the claw move deeper inside her, and she screamed.

Dragon's Ridge

Finally, the dragon swooped upward and lurched to a midair stop. It swung her forward and released her. She gasped as her body came free and spun in the air before the beast. For an instant, she came face to face with it—two searing, crimson eyes and a breeze of warm air from a mouthful of sharp teeth. Then she dropped.

But she wasn't free.

It caught her again as she fell, one foot around her thighs and the other around her chest. The dragon pitched into a steep dive. Its long neck stretched earthward. The wind rose again past them, and giant wings opened, swinging the beast back into level flight with such a pull that she thought she would slip out of its hold. Blood leaked from the wound below her collarbone and seeped into her muddy, soot-smearred tunic.

Behind them, the village of Savelle shrank away. The dragon climbed out of range of archers' arrows. But there were neither archers nor dragonslayers in the area. The attack had been a complete surprise, leaving the village littered with the stuff of daily life but devoid of people. The only signs of the dragon's attack were a shattered wagon and the burning thatch of the orphanage.

A whimper came up through Isodore's chest as she watched her village shrink away. "No."

When the rhythm of the dragon's wings steadied, she turned her head forward, shaking windblown hair out of her eyes. Ahead, to her horror, was a ragged horizon: the Pyrénées range, known for centuries as Dragon's Ridge.