

# Dragon's Ridge

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A Russian Hill Press Book  
United States • United Kingdom • Australia



Russian Hill Press

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ISBN: 978-1-7351763-9-0 (softcover)

ISBN: 978-1-7378246-0-2 (ebook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021917087

Cover art by Cheryl Magellen and Scott Woodruff

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## From Whence the Dragons Came

**S**ome believed dragons descended from the creature slain by Saint George, then came to the Pyrénées with the Moors. Some claimed they were demons that escaped with the ash spewed from Mount Vesuvius in long-gone days when Rome ruled the world. Some swore dragons originated from a band of evil sorcerers who changed themselves into beasts to escape God's justice.

The archbishop declared that dragons were divine retribution for the sins of men.

## A Perilous Act

The small frontier village of Savelle nestled among orchards, bathed in summer afternoon sunlight. Two rows of thatched-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



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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.

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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.

## Marauders

The dragon carried Isodore south, up the river from Savelle, one of many rivers that kept the Independent Duchy of Gascony fertile and green. Savelle was a frontier village. No living settlements stood between it and Dragon's Ridge.

Centuries before, Gascony had faced enemies in three directions. Muslims invaded from the east, Carolingian Franks ruled from the north, and Asturians attacked from the west. The Duchy survived, at times through tenuous alliances with one enemy against another. Seeking security, Lupus, the Duke of Gascony, expanded southward, up to the Pyrénéan foothills. His armies drove the pagan woodlanders from the most bountiful lands by the rivers and brought the Duchy's southern frontier under his rule. Peasants moved in and cleared virgin woods to cultivate farmland, vineyards, and orchards. Generations lived in relative stability.

Then came the dragons.

Villages, rivers, and roads lay exposed and vulnerable, unlike the dense forest canopy, under which the woodland clans lived safely. Dragons inhabited the mountains and terrorized southern Gascony. The infestation grew over the years.

Freeholders abandoned their lands and serfs begged their lords to let them go. But the labor of cutting trees and pulling roots was too great to give up. The noblemen united their armies to counter their common enemy.

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Not a single dragon fell.

The marauders soared overhead with impunity, watching troops by day, raining fire on their camps at night, ambushing them from fog banks. Pastoral fields provided no cover. No armor held against dragon teeth, no arrows could slow them, no lance could come close. Warriors, blinded by flames, were snatched and torn like rag dolls. Knights, the supreme new warriors of men's battlefields, died by the dozens. Infantries scattered, leaving the beasts to feast on the dead in the hellish aftermath.

People suffered and prayed and wondered where their God was.

Airardus, the Archbishop of Auch, responded, pointing his finger and pounding his fist. "God is indeed watching, and He sees everything we do. Every sin, whether it be in the fields or in your cottages, in the light of day or the dead of night. The dragons are divine retribution for all our sins. For your sins! We must all renounce sin in every form and root out evil from Gascony. Else, He will send more of the beasts."

People jailed their thieves and burglars, hanged their bandits and murderers, burned their witches and heretics, stoned their prostitutes and adulterers, and converted pagans at knife point.

But the dragons kept coming.

Settlements closest to Dragon's Ridge suffered the most. Close to the mountains, the marauders killed the most prized animals, horses and cows. Farther away, they took smaller prey that they could carry—goats, lambs, foals, men, women, and children. Fearing their dragon lords more than their noble lords, villagers fled north, risking capture by men to escape beasts. The southern lords abandoned their estates, turning land back to the duke to rule. In truth, no one ruled there but dragons.

The land lay fallow for generations. Trees and meadows reclaimed what the woodlanders once inhabited. Woodlander clans returned and, because they dwelled in forest cover, lived successfully with the dragon threat. Marauders searching for prey often found deer, boars, wolves, bears, and the occasional woodlander before reaching Gascony's villages. But frontier

settlements like Savelle remained easy prey for any dragon that made the long flight over the forests.

THE ARCHBISHOP CALLED for an army of dragonslayers to protect Christendom. The noblemen, still nursing their humiliating defeats, balked.

The Duchy had other threats at hand—real threats—Duke Seguin II argued in quarrelsome meetings with Archbishop Airardus. Upon the death of King Louis the Pious, his sons rushed the Frankish kingdom into civil war, sowing turmoil and deepening the duke's suspicion of them and their endless greed. Danish raiders demolished Paris. Closer to Gascony, they killed the Duke of Bordeaux. The Danish longboats cruised unchallenged up the Loire, Seine, and Garonne Rivers, and the duke was convinced that only the fear of dragons kept them off his waterways.

The mission of saving Gascony's Christians from the dragon scourge fell to the Church. Airardus demanded a portion of the Duchy's taxes and fighting men for dragonslaying. Seguin assented, eager to avoid extending his record of losses against dragons and a conflict with the Church, which could weaken his authority. The archbishop levied taxes to train and equip his fledgling corps. After suffering terrible losses, the corps learned and, in time, systematically refined the art of subduing and killing dragons. They began to beat back the marauders. For a time, the future brightened. Regard for the Church rose. Drove of pagans converted, uncoerced. The corps' popularity and the archbishop's influence grew as the displays of Gascony's churches and cathedrals were filled with the skulls of dragons.

## World's End

The land beyond the frontier was a carpet of forest canopy, cut through by meandering waterways and punctuated with the remains of long-abandoned settlements. The black dragon carried Isodore's limp body deep into this territory. It flew over a boat resting on one side, decomposing in the shallow bend of a river. Miles later, it passed the ruins of a village: rows of apple trees choked by brush, the charred husk of a church occupied by grass, and the broken dome of a brick oven. The mountain range, once crowning a distant horizon, now loomed ahead like palisades at the end of the world.

The dragon was breathing hard, grunting, and often peering down at Isodore. It slowed and dropped, skimming the treetops, flying so low at times that Isodore's dangling arms brushed the branches.

The rivers narrowed, then disappeared under a continuous canopy. The plain, too, narrowed as foothills rose on either side, channeling the dragon toward a valley that penetrated the mountain range. Isodore's captor flew along the valley, into the shadows of a towering landscape.

After a half hour in the air, she was cold from the wind and stiff from being claw-bound. Her chest had swelled from the deep wound. Tips of the dragon's claws dug through her skin. A gust

rolled over a hill crest, tossing the broad wings. Startled by the motion, she looked around but, surrounded by mountains, saw only an alien world.

The dragon turned up a smaller, steeper valley. Forced to ascend more sharply, it strained to hold her above the treetops. As it climbed, it became noisier and angrier. It must be very hungry by now, thought Isodore. The end was near.

Grunting, the dragon veered into a slanted, boulder-strewn meadow. It dropped her on the grass just before hitting the ground itself. She rolled to a stop and struggled to her elbows. From behind, she saw the beast's ridged back rise and fall, undulating under deep rasping breaths. It arched its neck and let out a hollow, angry roar that echoed like replies from a line of dragons strung out along the valley.

The dragon's head swung toward Isodore, startling her with menacing red eyes. Turning on all fours, in a posture neither upright like a man nor level like a beast, its body followed. Its chest was a thick knot of muscles anchoring two triangular pectorals that coiled around the bases of impossibly long forelimbs. The limbs reached upward then turned at the elbows to bring its knuckles to ground, where spiny wing fingers swept up along the radius bones, past the high elbows. Thus the enormous wings became its arms and front legs. It rested on its knuckles, leaning forward like a gargoyle, tall as a man at the shoulders.

For an instant, she felt a pulse of hope. A small dragon, perhaps not as fierce, not as quick to anger, not as . . . malevolent. She tried to muster a plea, but it died inside as the beast crouched toward her, full of claws, teeth, and sinew. A big dragon could kill her with a single crushing bite. This one might tear her limb from limb in the effort.

It half walked, half crawled, grotesque in its human likeness. Its neck arched down, holding forth the skeletal, horse-shaped head ringed with horns. A demon in black scales, with eyes of hellfire, black pupils in a crimson sea.

Isodore tried to scoot away, but her body failed her. The beast closed in. Behind heavy breaths, a deep growl rumbled across two



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rows of sharp, discolored teeth. It circled with its head inches from hers.

She buried her head in her arms, shaking. The dragon radiated heat. Hot breaths struck her back, carrying a strange smell—like a warm tavern. She squeezed shut her eyes, hastily crossing herself. The dragon completed its circle and stopped. She suppressed a scream, waiting for the bite.

Suddenly, the seething breaths stopped. The radiant heat faded, leaving her face cool again. The air went still.

When she opened her eyes, the dragon had withdrawn. It retreated to settle at a mass of boulders twenty paces away. Its neck stretched toward her, watching, breathing. She turned away, feeling strangely violated by the stare, as though it could reach into her mind.

Foreboding mountains loomed over the valley, unlike anything she had ever seen in a life in the lowland. They were majestic and frightening, compounding her despair with their grim presence.

She thought of her betrothed. Surely he would come searching for her once he learned of her abduction. He was brave, and it was his bravery that moved her to action when the dragon attacked, his bravery that she felt when she ran out to help her children.

But she knew he would never come. It wasn't a question of his courage but of futility. Even dragonslayers do not venture into the mountains the beasts made their home. Anyone taken is presumed dead and devoured.

She would be dead by morning. She should be dead already.

The sun went down. Everything before her dimmed: the meadow, the mountainsides, the sky, hope. Bats fluttered. Wolves howled. Owls crossed overhead. Harbingers of death, they seemed to come for her this night.

She worried about her children and felt their distress weighing down on her own. The puncture in her chest had stopped bleeding and her arm still functioned, but the sharp, pulsing pain was there to stay.

Cold descended. It bit at her fingers and toes, touched her through her clothes, and worked into her bones. She pulled her legs

into her tunic and wrapped her arms around them to keep warm. Her body shivered. Her teeth chattered.

A shadow stirred by the boulders. A broad, dark shape rose from the ground and approached her, crouching on tall spidery forelimbs. The dragon stopped face to face with her. She closed her eyes, crossed herself again, and prayed. Ironically, its heat momentarily dampened the cold.

A sudden gust hit her, tossing her hair and tunic. Another blew down from above. She opened her eyes to find the beast had taken flight. It hadn't gone far before she lost it against the dark mountainside. She didn't wonder long about why it had left her but looked for an escape. There was no moon, but she could see enough to go, step by step. She rose halfway to her feet, then paused. Could it be so easy?

The dragon had flown, which meant it could see. Many animals were at home in the dark. Dragons could see through fog and mist; that was well known. Could the creature be watching her still?

Out of the darkness came a creaking sound, pulsing louder and louder. A tree was bending. Pops and cracks preceded the crescendo of a large branch breaking under unrelenting force. It wasn't far. The sound of those enormous wings returned, beating closer and closer, fast and hard.

A whistle ended with a crack, as a stiff branch crashed down from the night sky. Dead and brittle, it shattered against a boulder. The dragon landed, facing her, watching her. It pinned the branch under its hind legs and tore limbs off with its jaws. It swung thick branches into the boulder, breaking them. Sharp cracks echoed in the night.

The creature gathered some of the wood into a big pile. It drew a deep breath, worked its muzzle down to the bottom of the pile and exhaled. A yellow glow shone through the lacework of branches, growing brighter as the dragon breathed. Orange sparks flitted through the air. A fireball engulfed the wood. The beast drew up slowly, lingering as if it enjoyed the flames against its scales. It moved its head aside and turned its fearsome eyes to hers. Flames curled up around its jaw while remnants of the fiery breath glowed

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behind silhouettes of pointed teeth.

The dragon retreated to the mass of boulders. In time, Isodore moved to the flames for warmth. She fed the fire with the remains of the shattered branch. The dragon's head rose each time she stood, discouraging any hope of escape.

She couldn't sleep or lie down, because the grass was wet and cold. But she survived to dawn, while the owls and their premonitions were nowhere to be seen. In their place, birds twittered gaily. When the sun peered over the mountains into the meadow, Isodore was hungry, thirsty, and anxious. The dragon's eyes were on her while she stood by the bed of embers to let the sun warm her.

Scanning her surroundings in the fresh light, her eyes fell on a line of brush cutting through the meadow. There was a stream. She looked to the dragon, to the stream, back to the dragon.

"I'm thirsty," she said. "I just need . . . some water."

It made no move, and she felt foolish. She made her way to the stream, looking back every few steps to ensure it wasn't coming after her.

On a flat rock by the bank, she dropped to her knees and scooped handfuls of cold water to drink, then dried her hands on her tunic. She lifted the blood-stained neckline of the tunic to examine the wound on her chest, a swollen, purple mound around a dark, glistening hole. The beast had had its claw in there—the entire claw, pressing into her chest.

She shuddered and looked back at the dragon. Why had it not killed her? Mercy? Or was it saving her for something else? A clutch of baby dragons? Was she to be offered to a mate? A greater dragon? Its own dragon lord?

Wincing at the pain, she took her right arm out over the top of her tunic to expose the wound. She bent over and splashed cool, soothing water on it, rinsing away dried blood and washing off what was encrusted on her tunic. Blood-stained water ran down her arm, carrying bits of dirt that the claw had left in the wound.

At the lower end of the slanted meadow was the edge of the thin forest. She stared longingly at it, knowing the dragon couldn't

see her face. The woods were too sparse to hide her, but dense enough to help her. If she could get there first, she could dash through it while the beast would have to weave around the trees.

The dragon could burn her with its fire. It could snatch her before she reached the woods. But to stay captive would mean certain death. She put her arm back into its sleeve, her eyes still on the woods.

“No.”

The voice came from behind—almost too deep to be human. She whirled around to find the beast staring at her. Silently, it had come within fifty paces of her. She looked around, but no one else was in sight. She turned back to the dragon, in disbelief.

“Did you . . . ? You can speak?”

The dragon’s eyes fixed on her, as if it understood.

The beast could speak? Never in any story or song had there been a dragon that spoke. Dragonslayers never talked of such things. Could she beg for her life?

“What . . . What do you want with me?”

The dragon lowered its head. Could she reason with it? Would it agree to ransom her? Perhaps the Church, or her betrothed’s family, would agree to the ransom. Tax collectors often reported dragons stealing riches from their caravans. Dragons valued riches.

Didn’t they?

She glanced toward the woods, trying to decide whether to plead or to run. Before she could gauge the dragon’s receptiveness to reason, she saw it move in her peripheral vision, the dark creature taking slow steps toward her.

A vague instinct convinced her that, despite the stories she’d heard, this creature cared nothing for riches. Despite her hope, she didn’t want to know just how little silver her life was worth. Her best chance might be now, while there was still some distance between her and the beast.

She grabbed two fistfuls of her skirt and ran. Her feet splashed through the ankle-deep stream and her shoes filled with cold water. She immediately slipped on algae-covered rocks and threw down her hands to break her fall. The left hand landed on more slippery

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rocks, and her weight pounded down on the twisted joint.

She grunted and stumbled to her feet, ignoring the injury. On the other side of the stream, she ran for her life, bursting through the stream-side brush without a thought, without looking back, knowing the dragon was coming for her. She had a straight path, but the wet skirt hobbled her. She gathered it back in her hands while running as fast as the task allowed. Her footsteps wobbled on the uneven ground.

The woods came within reach. She saw her entry point between two trees, her path into denser forest.

But it had taken too long. The dragon's shadow fell on her. Clawed toes closed around her chest and thighs. Instead of running into the woods, she sailed over them.

## Nest of Bones

Quiet and strong after its rest, the dragon headed up the narrow, steep valley with Isodore in its grip. Wind chilled her through her soaked tunic, except where the dragon held her.

Its toes had a warmth, the same that she felt yesterday when she was too much in despair for contemplation. The creature radiated heat and was warm to the touch. Curious, she brought her hand to the toe that came across her chest and felt the beast's warmth. She rubbed the crinkly dry skin under her fingertips. Realizing what she had done, she recoiled in horror.

Trees, grass, and rocks slipped away below her, as Savelle had, into forever. Carried through the folds of the mountains, she saw that Dragon's Ridge wasn't the single crest it appeared to be from afar. It was a convoluted landscape of mountains after mountains after mountains, whose ends she couldn't see, linked together to form a gigantic maze.

At higher elevations, meadow-lined valleys cradled lakes and streams. Creeks ran down the flanks of mountains in dark crevices and spilled over cliffs. A pressure deep in her head felt like her soul was being drawn out of her ears, but she moved her jaw and it disappeared.

The dragon took her up the narrow valley, into the barren, rocky heights. It passed through a three-sided chasm with blue

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lakes and rocky shores, then toward the notch of a rocky spine. The lakes they had passed, now far below, turned indigo, and boulders around them looked like pebbles.

Valleys lay in indifferent stillness, devoid of woods and life, while dizzying heights formed a world of their own, stark and foreboding. Mountain peaks towered like keeps across a desolate realm.

The dragon passed through the notch, turned right, and followed the spine for a short distance, its wingtip almost brushing the mountain. It ascended an escarpment and up a precipice, where a ledge protruded like a balcony from the steep mountainside. There, her captor deposited her with more grace than it had done the previous day. Without pausing, it continued, to a perch on the ridge above the ledge. Its wings sent blasts of wind, scattering a murder of crows pecking at the rotting remains of some dead creature.

As Isodore sat facing the sun, shivering in her wet clothing, her eyes registered, one by one, remnants of human belongings scattered around. Tattered clothing, ropes, broken spears, stiff shells of leather armor, and a Norman casque with a bent nose guard. The clothing was frayed and faded, but retained pale shades of their former colors. Further away, a pile of rocks turned out to be bones slowly giving up their colors to the intense sun.

She looked around. The ledge was some twenty paces from north to south along the mountainside and three paces deep at its widest. It tapered at each end, like half an ash leaf. It canted slightly downward, toward the morning sun. On her left was dirt, sand, then bare granite toward the northern end. The southern ground, to her right, was grass-lined. Dragon footprints crisscrossed the muddy grass.

The bone pile occupied the northern end. Skulls of calves, colts, deer, boars, wolves or dogs, and three humans stared in all directions. Atop the pile lay the dirty remains of recent kills in varying stages of decay. The scattered crows reassembled to pick over bits of meat in the crevices of a foal skeleton swarming with flies. Below the cliff, more bones lay piled in a second graveyard.

She found the remains of a surcoat among the bones. Dragon teeth had perforated it, creating a line of holes, each inked by dull blood stains. The chest bore a gold insignia, not yet faded from sun exposure—a cross above the arched neck of a suffering dragon. This beast had recently killed a dragonslayer. She dropped the surcoat, wrapped her arms around herself, and tried, in vain, not to despair.

Like a giant gargoyle king on his high perch, the dragon watched her from the ridge, thirty feet up the mountain. The ridge line ran north, curved to the east, and dropped, so she could see over it. Beyond, there was a narrow section of Gascony, but nothing else of the world she knew. She looked at the blood-stained surcoat and the bones around her and began to cry.

THE DRAGON LEFT before afternoon, to hunt or abduct and torment more helpless people, or because it grew bored watching her—Isodore didn't know. She wrung out her tunic and undergarment as much as her swollen wrist and shoulder would let her. Her skin was punctured in the chest, abdomen, and thighs from the dragon claws, but none as deep or painful as the hole below her collarbone. Her clothes dried fast in the arid mountain air and intense sunlight. But evening was much colder on the mountain than in the low lands. She gathered tattered bits of clothing and tucked them inside her tunic for insulation. With the surcoat wrapped around her shoulders, she huddled, shivering in a rock crevice still warm from the day's sun.

The dragon returned and swept up to the ledge from below. Its wings spanned the breadth of the ledge, enclosing Isodore between the mountain and a black-leather curtain. It stood for a second while the wings drew into spidery forelimbs and turned the knuckles toward the ground. Long, bony wing fingers held the membranes like leather drapery along the seven-foot-long radius bones. It approached on all fours, not angry like it had been yesterday, but its silence was every bit as menacing. Its neck extended the horn-crowned head toward her, and she shrank into the crevasse.



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"There are no trees for fire," it said in a rumbling voice.

Isodore nodded.

"The cave is warm." Its head turned to guide her eyes to a long vertical shadow of a crack in the granite. She scanned the granite up and down, side to side. The crack was deeper than it first appeared, an opening hidden so well within its own shadow that it had escaped her notice all day.

The skeletal head turned back to her. "Go."

She swallowed. "My friends will pay for my safe return."

The dragon snorted, baring sharp teeth. Hot breath struck her face. She sprang to her feet and ran. She scrambled over rocks piled at the entrance and stumbled inside with a glance backward to see whether the monster was behind her.

The narrow, triangular entrance was three times her height and slanted like the mountainside. One of the cave's steep walls was, in fact, the sheer mountainside. The opposite wall was a slab of rock, leaning against the mountain like a book on a shelf. The space between formed the chamber, tall and narrow at the entrance, tapering to almost nothing at the far end. It was not so much a cave as a nook that children at play might hide in. A horse could fit inside, though it would have no room to turn around.

The cave was bare. Without a fire, she thought she might still die overnight, despite the roof over her. She sat, curled up against one wall, hungry, cold and lonely, though a bit less afraid than she had been the night before. At least she was away from the hideous beast.

Light suddenly dimmed inside the chamber. To her horror, a ragged silhouette filled the entrance. The dragon squeezed into the cave.

## Child of the Woods

**H**unger, cold, and loneliness were things that Isodore knew well. At age ten, or thereabouts, she lived in the forest after having escaped an orphanage. She stayed near the roads for fear of wild beasts in the deep woods. At night, she slept, curled up, under dense thickets.

She begged for food from travelers and learned to tell whom to trust and whom not to. Pilgrims were the kindest, for they keenly felt the eyes of God. But they were rare. Servants accompanying noblemen weren't particularly kind, but they often had leftovers to discard. Woodland heathens kept to themselves, except when trading with travelers. She had nothing to trade. When she begged, they told her to beg from her own kind. She feared the bandits, but indigent waifs had nothing of value, so they rarely bothered her. Some of them offered her food for information about the travelers on the road.

She tried to protect the people who were kind to her by pointing the bandits toward armed parties instead. Knights and their men were mean, arrogant, and reckless in their deadly squabbles. Unlike the bandits, they didn't waste their time on those who didn't challenge them. She gave them no reason to notice her. Their strength kept the bandits away, so she camped near them when she could. But she kept hidden, never trusting them to be

kind. Some knights, however, were very chivalrous, even to little girls. She felt safest around these gentle knights.

She learned that begging was more effective after performing some chores, however unsolicited, and the work alleviated some of her shame. "Le' me help ye," she'd say. "I won' ask fer nothin' but yer trash." Some travelers would claim to have no leftovers, but they usually found some bit to give her, if she persisted.

One afternoon, a knight let her fetch water for him and his men while they rested. He sat apart, tearing into a loaf of bread as he watched her fill all the buckets from a trickling stream. After the ache-inducing task, she started gathering firewood for his camp.

"We don't need firewood," the knight called. "It's the middle of the day."

"But ye mus' be prepared," she replied. "By evenin', 'twill be too dark te find anythin'. The woods by the road 'ave been picked clean. Ye'd 'ave te search far, and good, dry wood's 'ard te find. And 'tis goin' te rain. Yeh." She glanced at the pitiful clouds above, then quickly returned to her work, hoping to have a good bundle to fill him with guilt, should he prove stingy. He watched her flit about, as he chewed his bread and cheese and sipped from a wine skin.

"Done." She dropped the last bundle as close to him as she dared. "I even got kindlin' for ye. Driest in these parts. Awfully 'ard te find." She nodded at the pile and wiped sweat from her brow. "I'll say, ye should 'ave no want of firewood t'night. Oh, no. Ye can jus' rest an' enjoy yerself, ye an' yer men."

"We're not staying here tonight. We have farther to go." He broke off a piece of his bread, reached toward her, and placed it on the ground, then added a chunk of cheese. "That's yours, if you want it." He continued eating.

She never had to put on her sad, hungry face. She didn't have to beg. She approached, no closer than absolutely necessary, and snatched up the food.

He held out the skin. "Wine?"

She took a hasty gulp before he could change his mind, then spat it back out, trying to rid her tongue of the sour, bitter taste. Wine dribbled down her chin, adding more color to her filthy tunic.

The knight gave a hearty laugh. "Can you believe people pay for such things? The bread should wipe away that taste, if you don't care for it."

She eyed him, then bit off a piece of bread. Her teeth sank in. It wasn't the rock-hard leftovers she typically received.

He sniffed the skin's spout. "Wine is perhaps better appreciated by the grown. Where are your parents? I shall give to them what you've earned but can't enjoy."

She looked over her shoulder, as she always did when asked about her parents. "They're restin'. They don' like bein' disturbed."

He nodded. "Of course. They must be tired, if they're as hardworking as you are. What shall I call you?"

She forgot how to answer, because for two years no one had asked for her name.

The knight lifted his brows expectantly, and his sparkling brown eyes caught hers. A dark mane of hair rested on his shoulders, and a thick mustache bent down to his jawline, framing a mouth that held a constant little smile. He was neither young nor old, but at an age where a playful countenance could disguise a skilled warrior.

"Do you have a name?" he asked again.

"Uh, no," she replied, then realized she had answered a slightly different question: Whether anyone still called her by name.

"Oh. Well, I suppose you don't need one out here, do you? Who's going to call on you after I leave, eh? The wild animals have no names, and they seem happier than most people with names." He laughed.

She didn't know what to make of the knight. The attention was a break from her lonely existence, but she had learned to be wary of unexpected things.

"So, this is your home, yes?" he asked.

"Yeh." She looked around at the trees and brush, an odd place to call home, yet so familiar to her that she felt less afraid in the woods than near villages full of mean, stingy folk. She hadn't called anything home for a long time, and it was comforting to have a home. Whenever someone gave chase, it was the trees that

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protected her and the brush that hid her.

"We're a lot alike," the knight said. "I've spent a lot of time in the woods, too. You might say it was my home. For nearly a year. But that was in England. Beautiful forests, England. Very cold though. Enough to make me long for home."

"What did ye do there?"

"Mostly hid from the Normans." He laughed again, as though hiding from the Normans was a fun game. "Much like you'd have to hide, too, from knights and bandits, eh?"

She shrugged. "Why'd ye go t'England?"

"To make war, of course. I was a young man, there to fight for Harold, the rightful king of England, against that Norman bastard William. Alas, our campaign failed. Most of my band was killed and I was captured."

She took a bite of the cheese, and her cheeks pinched out a coat of saliva as the smooth, salty taste spread through her mouth. Heavenly cheese.

"I survived, but William's men pursued me for nearly a year. Would you like to hear how I escaped?"

She nodded. No one had ever offered to tell her a story like this before.

"Listen carefully. I think you can learn a few things to help you survive in these woods." He winked.

He said he had killed dozens of men hunting him in the forest, angering his pursuers. He escaped captivity by disarming one of his guards. He escaped with the guard's spear, but nothing else. He threw the spear at one of his pursuers and took the man's sword, his weapon of choice, with which he defeated and chased off the rest. He survived by poaching livestock and stealing clothes, which helped to disguise him. Eventually, he came to Plymouth, where he obtained passage across the channel by offering up his modest plunder and making threats against the captain's family, should the man inform the authorities of his suspicious passenger. "The worst part was having to trust that captain. Hard to trust someone you've just met. But I had no choice. I had no armor and no idea how many Normans would stand in my way. It was frightening." He glanced at

her. "Aren't you afraid, living out here? With bandits and drunk men about?"

She had been afraid at first but felt capable now, after two years without serious harm. Besides, she had ways of protecting herself, which she would never tell him. "The woodlanders aren't afraid, so why should I be?"

The knight laughed. "You're more brazen than William's men."

She shrugged and put the last bites of the bread and cheese into her mouth. She liked showing him she wasn't afraid.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked.

Her mouth watered at the prospect of more of his good food.

"You're a diligent worker, little one. You shouldn't have to beg out here. There's an orphanage run by a friend of mine. You would be well fed there, and safe."

She leaned away from him, her hopes deflated.

"He's a good man, very kind. Children love him. Children just like you."

"No." She broke eye contact, pretending to look on the ground while checking her escape route and listening for footsteps from behind. This was what she did when bandits stopped to talk with her, so they couldn't surround her. She didn't like where the knight was taking this conversation, but she was still very hungry and thought she could get him to give her more food.

"You know, you may think you have nothing of value, but you have something men will eventually want. And when—"

"Yer a very kind man yourself. What's yer name, that I might remember ye?" She tried to sound like a noble lass but didn't know why. To show him he had the wrong idea about her, she supposed.

"I am Sir Rowan of Bazas, a Knight of the Cross, at your service." He rose to one knee, spread his arms and bowed deeply to her. It made her giggle. When he glanced up, she was taken by the way he looked at her, the twinkle in his eyes and a mischievous smile.

This was the first time she had ever conversed with a knight with the title of "Sir." These knights were held in high regard in the Duchy, though she wasn't sure why. Sir Rowan explained that they

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were sworn to conduct themselves by Auch's chivalric code. They were entirely different from common knights, for whom might made right. Isodore knew to stay away from that kind of knights.

"Are ye a dragonslayer?" Dragonslayers were renowned, not only for bravery in the face of seemingly invincible beasts. They were the most popular knights in the kingdom.

"No. But I once squired for one," said Sir Rowan.

She slumped under the disappointment. "Why didn't ye become a dragonslayer?"

"I, ah, like my sword too much." He tapped the hilt of his weapon, winked, and sat back down.

"Dragonslayers aren't allowed their swords?"

"Certainly they are. But swords against dragons?" He laughed, "That's like daggers against bears. Have you ever tried that?"

She shook her head. "Why are ye a Knight of the Cross if yer not a dragonslayer?"

"Would you have me be a common knight?"

Isodore drew back and shook her head.

Her acquaintance laughed. "In the old days, all Knights of the Cross were dragonslayers. Now, there aren't so many dragonslayers anymore and most Knights of the Cross, like me, are retained by northern counts, to keep the Franks from feeling too bold."

Isodore nodded.

"But," Sir Rowan held up a finger, "not all dubbed knights are the same. Knights of the Crown are more chivalrous than the norm, but they don't do so well adhering to their vows, I'm afraid."

"Knights o' t' Crown?"

"They receive their titles from the duke. Instead of a golden cross, like this," he motioned to the insignia emblazoned across his surcoat, "they carry the Duchy's emblem. They aren't many, but they are also addressed by 'Sir.'"

Isodore stored that away, anticipating its usefulness. She saw Sir Rowan studying her, waiting patiently for her to finish her mental notes.

"There is another difference. Do you know what that is?" She didn't. "Knights of the Cross serve all, including you, dear lass."

“Me?” She knew they served all, but she didn’t think that included her.

“Yes! It was a promise by Archbishop Airardus, who created the dragonslayer corps. It was the only way he could convince people to accept his new tax, but that’s beside the point. Dragonslayers were chivalrous from their inception two centuries ago. That is why Knights of the Cross are the greatest knights in the land.”

“Century?”

“That’s a hundred years, ragamuffin.”

It sounded like an eternity to her.

“My, my,” said Sir Rowan. “This is a very pleasant conversation, but my men and I do have a ways to travel today.”

Isodore was disappointed. She hadn’t expected him to talk with her for so long, or even care about her curiosity. No one had ever treated her so kindly, and she wanted him to stay longer.

He peered through the trees, back at the men milling around. “I shall have my men prepare for departure. I’ll give you some salt pork, if you brush down my horses and pack that firewood into the donkey’s bags so we can take it with us.”

She agreed. He went to talk with his men while she worked. When he returned, he lounged at the foot of a tree. He dozed off while she worked. She whispered his name and he woke, complimented her on her work and proceeded to saddle the horse. She helped him tie the wood bundle onto the donkey. When his saddle was cinched in place, he glanced at his men, who were standing by their horses, chatting. “They’re enjoying their rest far too much, don’t you think? I should go help them, but . . . Have you ever ridden a horse?”

She shook her head.

“How would you like to learn while we wait for them?” he whispered.

She gasped and nodded, speechless.

He helped her onto the saddle. Her feet didn’t reach the stirrups. “It’s all right,” he said, “I’ll keep you from falling off.” He mounted behind her. As they rode by his men, he said, “We’ll be right back.” They watched him with mild interest. Sir Rowan slowly sped



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up, asking each time, "Would you like to go faster?" Isodore said yes each time. She enjoyed the sheer excitement of being carried along with no effort.

After some time, she realized he had not taught her anything. He only corrected her posture, but he was controlling the horse himself.

"Give me the reins," she said. "I want te try."

"Of course, in due time. For now, try to relax. Don't be so stiff. Let yourself move with the horse, like I am doing."

She couldn't relax. They had left his camp far behind. Her suspicion grew. "I've not told me parents I'm with ye. Let's go back te see 'em."

"Of course," he said with a pleasantness that she no longer trusted. "But first, how about if we get some food for them. Hmm? They won't be angry. It's hard to be angry while receiving food."

She wished she'd not gotten on the horse with him. Panic roiled in her. She grabbed for the reins, but he was too quick. He held the reins in one hand and wrapped his other arm around her. "Ye said ye'd teach me t'ride."

"I am teaching you. This is how everyone learns. You must master the basics first."

She had been tricked. She tried to push away his arm. The more she struggled, the tighter it clamped down across her chest.

"Yer no Knight o' the Cross!" she protested.

But it was too late.

## A View from Heaven

Isodore did fall asleep in the cave with the dragon. She was too tired to resist slumber, and it was better to die in her sleep than to watch as the dragon killed her. She didn't know if the dragon also slept, how it slept, or what it sounded like. She felt it looking at her when she fell asleep, and it was looking at her in the morning. Seeing the red eyes in its black silhouette, she sat up and pushed herself away, only to yelp from a terrible pain in her wrist. The joint was so swollen, it wouldn't bend.

The dragon growled and bent its neck toward the apex of the cave, reaching up like an enormous, barbed snake. Its underside glided over the canted surface. It put its forelimbs on the wall and crawled up, turning away from Isodore, toward the entrance. Its upper body followed, up the wall then over as it pivoted on its hind legs. Every foot of the creature passed before her until the tip of its tail trailed over the rock pile at the entrance. She placed a hand on her chest and caught her breath.

There was a faint, odd smell in the cave, like a tavern—strong ale, wine, and mix of spirits on a musty background of earth and oil. The smell of the beast.

A tongue of cold air slid down the boulder pile from the entrance, no longer blocked by the dragon. By the contrast, she realized that the cave wasn't cold. The creature had kept the

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chamber warm with its overpowering body heat.

She came out when the sun was high. The grass-lined, rock-walled valley lay before her. The world of her new, short life. She scanned the sky, looking for her captor, and wondered if she might see other dragons, perhaps its master. The old songs recounted how dragons once filled the skies, but she saw none. Now and then, she spotted dark wings in the distance, but she couldn't tell if it was an eagle two miles away or the dragon ten miles away. Either the bards had exaggerated or the archbishop had been right that the day of deliverance was near. Not that it mattered to her. There would be no deliverance for her unless she escaped.

She looked around. To the south, the ledge ended in a dizzying drop. On the other side of the drop, there was hope of climbing down, but the only way past the drop was flight. On the north end, smaller ledges allowed her to traverse well off the safety of the main ledge. One after another, however, they narrowed to nothing, and she turned back. Climbing down the cliff was hopeless. Merely looking down its sheer drop made her dizzy. Her last option was to go up. She climbed along the edge of the triangular slab that formed the cave, but she could get no farther than its fifteen-foot apex, halfway to the ridge above. The smooth, steep mountainside gave her little to hold on to. The dragon must have known that escape was impossible.

Further searches yielded one consolation, a gap at the small end of the cave. It was big enough for her to slip through. It only led out to the ledge, but the dragon wouldn't fit through this hole, so it was a place she could run to, should it get angry.

The dragon returned at dusk and dropped the hind quarter of a dog or a wolf, with a dangling vein and blood on the fur. If her captor meant to feed her, this was among the most unappetizing presentations she'd ever seen.

"I need fire to cook it," she said, stepping back for fear of an angry response. It had said there were no trees up here, so she didn't expect it to bring wood, but she didn't know what to do. It lowered its head and breathed its fire onto the carcass, which burned like a piece of trash and emitted a dry, nauseating odor. She

half closed her eyes and nostrils to avoid the smoke and stench. On the other side of the fire, the dragon seemed to find the smoke even more unpleasant than she did. It pushed itself away and cocked its head back, narrowing its nostrils. The fire burned out. The offering looked like a burned piece of trash.

“You,” said the dragon, relaxing its neck, “are hungry.”

She knelt and parted the charred skin with her thumbs and held the wet pink flesh up to the dragon. It drew back again, in disgust.

“It’s raw inside. It requires a sustained fire.”

The dragon looked at her then reared and spread its wings. She turned her shoulder and put up an arm in a feeble defense. The beast tipped to one side, dropping one wing over the edge and kept rotating until its body went over as well. She crawled to the precipice and watched the black wings skimming dangerously close to the ramparts. It sped along, then lifted up and away without looking back.

Isodore returned to the meat, hungry, yet repulsed by the glistening pink flesh under blackened skin that smelled sweetly nauseating. The thought of tearing raw, bloody meat off the bone was too savage, even though her fast now surpassed thirty hours.

A half hour later, the dragon returned clutching three dead branches. It started a wood fire. She tried to skin the canine’s hind quarters, but she had no knife and only one working hand. The dragon ripped skin apart for her with its claws. She cooked the meat, while it watched from its perch above, the same place she tried to climb to earlier but couldn’t reach. She found a long bone to help hold the meat over the fire. There wasn’t enough wood, so she only cooked one side. When the fire diminished, she ate the meat down to the uncooked part and left the rest surrounded by coals to cook further. Her hunger was sated by the bland but unexpectedly palatable meat.

She asked for water. The dragon brought her a chunk of white rock it broke off an expansive slab on the valley’s south rim. The rock was cold, wet and slippery. It was light and miraculously turned to water where she touched it. She licked it to quench her

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thirst. She found it soft enough to scrape with her teeth. Using a sharp bone fragment, she chiseled off bits of the rock to put in her mouth, where they turned quickly to water.

When the sun went down, the dragon returned to the ledge. "The cave," it commanded.

She crawled in. It followed, blocking the entrance and warming the chamber with its body and breath. In the morning, she woke up hungry again, and alone. The dragon had gone. A host of vultures, crows, and flies were sharing the remains of her supper.

Pain pulsed in her chest wound, which was discolored, warm, and swollen, circled by concentric red rings. Her swollen wrist had turned purple, its throbbing pain now worse than the chest puncture. She held it against the cold water-rock to soothe and cool the pain while she sat by the edge of the precipice and gazed out.

She had never been on a mountain before. She looked down on clouds, a pure white undulating blanket covering the valleys between the mountain tops. The peaks looked peaceful, like castles in heaven.

Dark wings glided over the white expanse.

Dragons! Several of them. Against the bright clouds, they were easy to see. They flew in long, sweeping lines, disappearing into the clouds while others emerged. She wondered which was her captor. The closest one appeared dark red. The rest were too far away to tell. She watched the dragons until most of the clouds burned away and the textures of forest, rocks, and earth made it harder to see them.

Never before had she reflected on how the land she inhabited looked from above. Rivers lay like loose and aimless ribbons, glinting in the low morning sun. Cloud shadows moved quietly over the valley meadows and crawled up the mountains, a beautiful sight that, for brief moments, took her mind off her misery.

She saw her captor a few times that day when it flew past the ledge. It was patrolling the nearby ridges, gliding on wind that blew up the mountain. Its wings stretched wide and strong, even the slender fingers holding the tips. The wings' trailing edges curved gracefully backward, blending into the tail. It had the calm grace of

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the storks migrating through Gascony in the springs and autumns.

It felt strange to look down on dragons. The sight of one overhead was always terrifying. Having one crouch over her nearly killed her with fright. But from above, a dragon in flight looked so natural, peaceful. Even beautiful.

With a shiver, she realized that God in heaven saw dragons from above.

## For Love of a Knight

A long road rose and fell over Gascony's gently rolling hills. It cut through woodland and connected villages, farms, fields and vineyards. Out of the woods galloped a horse bearing a knight. A skinny waif with tangled hair sat squirming in front of him, straining against the arm that clamped down across her chest.

"Let me go!" cried Isodore.

She tried to bite his arm but hurt only herself as her teeth crunched down on the links of his mail coat. She twisted left and right to throw off her captor, but his legs were braced in the stirrups while hers kicked at thin air. "Damn ye, knight! Get yer filthy hands off me! I'll have ye castrated by dogs!"

"Good heavens," said the knight. "Who taught you such manners? A pack of bandits?"

She swung a fist up to hit him but missed.

"Try that again and—"

She did, feeling her fist connect with the side of his head.

He sighed. "Please don't do that. You'll force me to be unkind to you."

"Yer already unkind t'me. Help!"

"I am not unkind to you. For the fourth time, I'm trying to help you."

"Ye tricked me!"

"I saved you the trouble of wrestling with me, didn't I? You could have been hurt."

She fought back harder, just to spite him, but it only made her angrier and more tired. It failed to annoy him in the least. She gave up, waited, then tried to reason with him.

“Where are ye takin’ me?”

“To get you more food.”

“I’m not ’ungry anymore, truly.”

“And a bed.”

The pieces of his scheme came together in her mind. “Te yer friend’s orphanage?” He had mentioned this friend when he was charming her with his friendly talk. It had put her on guard. She wished she’d stayed on guard.

“Yes,” he said tonelessly.

“But I’m no orphan. Me parents await me in t’ woods. Truly, I’ll take ye to ’em.”

“You have no family, ragamuffin. If you had a family, you’d have a name.”

“I do have a name! It’s . . . Isodore.” She hesitated because she didn’t want to give anything to this trickster. She’d bet his name wasn’t even Sir Rowan. But the pause only made her seem untruthful. “It’s Isodore. Me name is Isodore.”

He had made up his mind. “You are homeless, ragamuffin. Your clothes are too small and horry. You have no food, no shelter, no lord, no protection. You’re fortunate to have survived till now.”

“That’s what ye think,” she mouthed, knowing he couldn’t see her face. The thought of an orphanage scared her sick, but she would not let him know. She wanted him off guard before trying another escape. She sat back, paying careful attention to the arm he kept around her, and watched for her opportunity. To encourage him to trust her, she asked about the orphanage, the work, its food, the children there, the headmistress. He made it sound rather pleasant. She pretended to believe him, while she planned.

At last, she felt his arm soften. She waited for the right time. They passed farm fields and reentered the woods, her element. As quickly and suddenly as she could, she threw off his arm and lurched from the horse.

The knight wasn’t as inattentive as she had thought. She never



cleared his arm. "Bravo! Very clever." He gathered her back in front of him, squeezing her tight, until she stopped struggling. "So, now you see why I must hold on to you the rest of the way."

"Let me go. Jus' let me go!"

"That wouldn't do, would it, after I told my men I was going to take you to the orphanage. They shall think you escaped me. What kind of a knight would I be to let a child escape like that?"

Anger poured out of her. She threw herself against his arm but he hardly budged. "Impostor! Yer no Knight of the Cross. Let me go or I'll tell the archbishop. 'E'll lop off yer pretty little head."

"Ah, that would be quite amusing. I shall take you to him, if you wish."

For the rest of the way, each time she so much as twitched, he pressed his arm into her as a warning. The road became more populated. They were approaching a town. She was so afraid, she wanted to cry, but she would not give him the satisfaction. She called to the passersby for help, but they only looked on as the knight waved to them.

"Good day, good day. No need for worry. She won't harm me." To her, he said, "You know, ragamuffin, if one of those people stops us, would he then return you to the woods, or perhaps present you to his lord?"

She swallowed and kept quiet. The town was surrounded by wheat fields and vineyards. Farming cottages ringed the exterior of the settlement. Blacksmith, carpenter, baker, tanner, and other shops clustered closer to the center. She'd never seen such a big town. On the far side, a keep watched over the surroundings from atop a motte. They rode in on the main thoroughfare and stopped in the grounds of the town's church.

"Julian?" called the knight. "Julian!"

After a moment, a portly man in a long brown robe emerged, squinting into the sky. "Rowan? Good heavens! What brings you . . . ? Oh. I see you have a companion."

"I just met her. I thought she'd enjoy a ride."

"'E abducted me!" shouted Isodore.

"Woodness." Julian shaded his eyes, looked to the knight, then

back to her. "Abducted? Oh, come, child. You have to forgive Sir Rowan. I'm certain he had very good reasons. He's a Knight of the Cross, you know."

She threw off the arm restraining her and wrapped hers around the horse's neck to slide off. Julian helped her down.

"Careful, there," warned Sir Rowan, "She's threatened to have me castrated and beheaded. Wouldn't want that awful fate for you, too, would we?"

She glared back at the knight. He smiled and brushed his fingers through his hair, which was disheveled from her attacks.

"Stella!" called Julian, and a girl slightly older than Isodore answered. "Take this lass to the kitchen and let her have anything she wants. I want to talk to Sir Rowan."

In the kitchen, Stella gave her carrots, a boiled egg, a cup of water and a bowl of savory, hot soup. Isodore ate greedily and asked for seconds. She couldn't recall when she'd last had hot food. Afterward, the two men came in and sat across from her at the trestle table.

Father Julian introduced himself. "I am the priest of Dorune, this town. I understand you have been living in the woods. It can be a dangerous place for a child, even one as brave and clever as you are."

The priest somehow knew much about her life in the woods, how lonely, how frightening, especially when people came with dogs, how cold it was in the winter, the long stretches of hunger. She denied that these things bothered her, but didn't argue.

"We have food for you here. We can feed you every day, give you a warm bed and new clothes, a blanket and a hearth."

Isodore remained pointedly silent and uncooperative, knowing the knight was behind all of this.

"You'll be safe in my orphanage, well protected, and you'll no longer have to beg."

"I wasn't beggin'. I was workin'."

"See?" shrugged Sir Rowan when the two men exchanged a glance.

Father Julian cleared his throat. "There are dangers you do not

know for a girl who would soon come of age. You should not be out without protection.”

Though the men didn't elaborate, she knew what they spoke of. She'd seen an attack that had left several men dead and a young woman alone in the forest. The young woman was wrestled into the bushes, where she screamed and cried. Then she just cried. Isodore didn't understand what was happening at the time, but it was exactly what the two men before her were warning her of. Their reluctance to name it revealed that they didn't think her tough enough to hear the word, or capable enough to survive. They were wrong.

“Girls your age can be married,” continued Father Julian. “You can have a husband to provide for you. You'll have children. You need safety, protection. Without a lord, you can be harmed with impunity.”

“I'm not afraid,” she said. “I'll be all right.” She looked them in the eyes to show that she was strong and self-sufficient, but the instant she met Sir Rowan's eyes, she knew what he was thinking under that wily smile of his.

“You need not be frightened of us, child,” Father Julian said. “We are doing God's work. That is to save people, not harm them.”

The girl who ladled out her soup bowl had remained, chopping herbs and laying them out to dry. Not hard work. She didn't have the look of someone who had been mistreated, although she could be acting because the men were here. Isodore resisted the temptation to lower her guard again. She folded her arms, sat back, studied the two men for a moment then told them no.

They released her as they had promised. Sir Rowan offered her a ride back to where he had met her, but she scorned the offer. Still angry over the trick he had pulled, she didn't want to sit with him on the horse.

“How about a meeting with Archbishop Guillaume then? I am a man of my word.”

He smiled. She glowered.