



“Bewitching.” —Gregory Maguire, author of *Wicked*

A Naomi Novik Unrooted



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unrooted



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By Naomi Novik

About the Author

Chapter 1

Our Dragon doesn't eat the girls he takes, no matter what stories they tell outside our valley. We hear them sometimes, from travelers passing through. They talk as though we were doing human sacrifice, and he were a real dragon. Of course that's not true: he may be a wizard and immortal, but he's still a man, and our fathers would band together and kill him if he wanted to eat one of us every ten years. He protects us against the Wood, and we're grateful, but not that grateful.

He doesn't devour them really; it only feels that way. He takes a girl to his tower, and ten years later he lets her go, but by then she's someone different. Her clothes are too fine and she talks like a courtier and she's been living alone with a man for ten years, so of course she's ruined, even though the girls all say he never puts a hand on them. What else could they say? And that's not the worst of it—after all, the Dragon gives them a purse full of silver for their dowry when he lets them go, so anyone would be happy to marry them, ruined or not.

But they don't want to marry anyone. They don't want to stay at all.

"They forget how to live here," my father said to me once, unexpectedly. I was riding next to him on the seat of the big empty wagon, on our way home after delivering the week's firewood. We lived in Dvernik, which wasn't the biggest village in the valley or the smallest, or the one nearest the Wood: we were seven miles away. The road took us up over a big hill, though, and at the top on a clear day you could see along the river all the way to the pale grey strip of burned earth at the leading edge, and the solid dark wall of trees beyond. The Dragon's tower was a long way in the other direction, a

piece of white chalk stuck in the base of the western mountains.

I was still very small—not more than five, I think. But I already knew that we didn't talk about the Dragon, or the girls he took, so it stuck in my head when my father broke the rule.

"They remember to be afraid," my father said. That was all. Then he clucked to the horses and they pulled on, down the hill and back into the trees.

It didn't make much sense to me. We were all afraid of the Wood. But our valley was home. How could you leave your home? And yet the girls never came back to stay. The Dragon let them out of the tower, and they came back to their families for a little while—for a week, or sometimes a month, never much more. Then they took their dowry-silver and left. Mostly they would go to Kralia and go to the University. Often as not they married some city man, and otherwise they became scholars or shopkeepers, although some people did whisper about Jadwiga Bach, who'd been taken sixty years ago, that she became a courtesan and the mistress of a baron and a duke. But by the time I was born, she was just a rich old woman who sent splendid presents to all her grandnieces and nephews, and never came for a visit.

So that's hardly like handing your daughter over to be eaten, but it's not a happy thing, either. There aren't so many villages in the valley that the chances are very low—he takes only a girl of seventeen, born between one October and the next. There were eleven girls to choose from in my year, and that's worse odds than dice. Everyone says you love a Dragon-born girl differently as she gets older; you can't help it, knowing you so easily might lose her. But it wasn't like that for me, for my parents. By the time I was old enough to understand that I might be taken, we all knew he would take Kasia.

Only travelers passing through, who didn't know, ever complimented Kasia's parents or told them how beautiful their daughter was, or how clever, or how nice. The Dragon didn't always take the prettiest girl, but he always took the most special one, somehow: if there was one girl who was far and away the prettiest, or the most bright, or the best dancer, or especially kind, somehow he always picked her out, even though he scarcely exchanged a word

with the girls before he made his choice.

And Kasia was all those things. She had thick wheat-golden hair that she kept in a braid to her waist, and her eyes were warm brown, and her laugh was like a song that made you want to sing it. She thought of all the best games, and could make up stories and new dances out of her head; she could cook fit for a feast, and when she spun the wool from her father's sheep, the thread came off the wheel smooth and even without a single knot or snarl.

I know I'm making her sound like something out of a story. But it was the other way around. When my mother told me stories about the spinning princess or the brave goose-girl or the river-maiden, in my head I imagined them all a little like Kasia; that was how I thought of her. And I wasn't old enough to be wise, so I loved her more, not less, because I knew she would be taken from me soon.

She didn't mind it, she said. She was fearless, too: her mother Wensa saw to that. "She'll have to be brave," I remember hearing her say to my mother once, while she prodded Kasia to climb a tree she'd hung back from, and my mother hugging her, with tears.

We lived only three houses from one another, and I didn't have a sister of my own, only three brothers much older than me. Kasia was my dearest. We played together from our cradles, first in our mothers' kitchens keeping out from underfoot and then in the streets before our houses, until we were old enough to go running wild in the woods. I never wanted to be anywhere inside when we could be running hand-in-hand beneath the branches. I imagined the trees bending their arms down to shelter us. I didn't know how I would bear it, when the Dragon took her.

My parents wouldn't have feared for me, very much, even if there hadn't been Kasia. At seventeen I was still a too-skinny colt of a girl with big feet and tangled dirt-brown hair, and my only gift, if you could call it that, was I would tear or stain or lose anything put on me between the hours of one day. My mother despaired of me by the time I was twelve and let me run around in castoffs from my older brothers, except for feast days, when I was obliged to change only twenty minutes before we left the house, and then sit on the bench before our door until we walked to church. It was still even odds whether I'd make it to the village green without catching on

some branch, or spattering myself with mud.

“You’ll have to marry a tailor, my little Agnieszka,” my father would say, laughing, when he came home from the forest at night and I went running to meet him, grubby-faced, with at least one hole about me, and no kerchief. He swung me up anyway and kissed me; my mother only sighed a little: what parent could really be sorry, to have a few faults in a Dragon-born girl?

—

Our last summer before the taking was long and warm and full of tears. Kasia didn’t weep, but I did. We’d linger out late in the woods, stretching each golden day as long as it would go, and then I would come home hungry and tired and go straight to lie down in the dark. My mother would come in and stroke my head, singing softly while I cried myself to sleep, and leave a plate of food by my bed for when I woke up in the middle of the night with hunger. She didn’t try to comfort me otherwise: how could she? We both knew that no matter how much she loved Kasia, and Kasia’s mother Wensa, she couldn’t help but have a small glad knot in her belly—not *my* daughter, not *my* only one. And of course, I wouldn’t really have wanted her to feel any other way.

It was just me and Kasia together, nearly all that summer. It had been that way for a long time. We’d run with the crowd of village children when we were young, but as we got older, and Kasia more beautiful, her mother had said to her, “It’s best if you don’t see much of the boys, for you and them.” But I clung to her, and my mother did love Kasia and Wensa enough not to try and pry me loose, even though she knew that it would hurt me more in the end.

On the last day, I found us a clearing in the woods where the trees still had their leaves, golden and flame-red rustling all above us, with ripe chestnuts all over the ground. We made a little fire out of twigs and dry leaves to roast a handful. Tomorrow was the first of October, and the great feast would be held to show honor to our patron and lord. Tomorrow, the Dragon would come.

“It would be nice to be a troubadour,” Kasia said, lying on her back with her eyes closed. She hummed a little: a traveling singer had come for the festival, and he’d been practicing his songs on the

green that morning. The tribute wagons had been arriving all week. "To go all over Polnya, and sing for the king."

She said it thoughtfully, not like a child spinning clouds; she said it like someone really thinking about leaving the valley, going away forever. I put my hand out and gripped hers. "And you'd come home every Midwinter," I said, "and sing us all the songs you'd learned." We held on tight, and I didn't let myself remember that the girls the Dragon took never wanted to come back.

Of course at that moment I only hated him ferociously. But he wasn't a bad lord. On the other side of the northern mountains, the Baron of the Yellow Marshes kept an army of five thousand men to take to Polnya's wars, and a castle with four towers, and a wife who wore jewels the color of blood and a white fox-fur cloak, all on a domain no richer than our valley. The men had to give one day a week of work to the baron's fields, which were the best land, and he'd take likely sons for his army, and with all the soldiers wandering around, girls had to stay indoors and in company once they got to be women. And even he wasn't a *bad* lord.

The Dragon only had his one tower, and not a single man-at-arms, or even a servant, besides the one girl he took. He didn't have to keep an army: the service he owed the king was his own labor, his magic. He had to go to court sometimes, to renew his oath of loyalty, and I suppose the king could have called him to war, but for the most part his duty was to stay here and watch the Wood, and protect the kingdom from its malice.

His only extravagance was books. We were well read by the standards of villagers, because he would pay gold for a single great tome, and so the book-peddlers came all this way, even though our valley was at the very edge of Polnya. And as long as they were coming, they filled up the saddlebags of their mules with whatever worn-out or cheaper stock of books they had and sold them to us for our pennies. It was a poor house in the valley that didn't have at least two or three books proudly displayed upon the walls.

These might all seem like small and petty things, little enough cause to give up a daughter, to anyone who didn't live near enough the Wood to understand. But I had lived through the Green Summer, when a hot wind carried pollen from the Wood west a long

way into the valley, into our fields and gardens. The crops grew furiously lush, but also strange and misshapen. Anyone who ate of them grew sick with anger, struck at their families, and in the end ran into the Wood and vanished, if they weren't tied down.

I was six years old at the time. My parents tried to shelter me as much as they could, but even so I remembered vividly the cold clammy sense of dread everywhere, everyone afraid, and the never-ending bite of hunger in my belly. We had eaten through all our last year's stores by then, counting on the spring. One of our neighbors ate a few green beans, driven foolish by hunger. I remember the screams from his house that night, and peering out the window to see my father running to help, taking the pitchfork from where it leaned against our barn.

One day that summer, too young to understand the danger properly, I escaped my tired, thin mother's watch and ran into the forest. I found a half-dead bramble, in a nook sheltered from the wind. I pushed through the hard dead branches to the protected heart and dug out a miraculous handful of blackberries, not misshapen at all, whole and juicy and perfect. Every one was a burst of joy in my mouth. I ate two handfuls and filled my skirt; I hurried home with them soaking purple stains through my dress and my mother wept with horror when she saw my smeared face. I didn't sicken: the bramble had somehow escaped the Wood's curse, and the blackberries were good. But her tears frightened me badly; I shied from blackberries for years after.

The Dragon had been called to court that year. He came back early and rode straight to the fields and called down magic fire to burn all that tainted harvest, every poisoned crop. That much was his duty, but afterwards he went to every house where anyone had sickened, and he gave them a taste of a magic cordial that cleared their minds. He gave orders that the villages farther west, which had escaped the blight, should share their harvest with us, and he even gave up his own tribute that year entirely so none of us would starve. The next spring, just before the planting season, he went through the fields again to burn out the few corrupted remnants before they could take fresh root.

But for all he'd saved us, we didn't love him. He never came out of his tower to stand a drink for the men at harvest-time the way the

Baron of the Yellow Marshes would, or to buy some small trinket at the fair as the baron's lady and her daughters so often did. There were plays sometimes put on by traveling shows, or singers would come through over the mountain pass from Rosya. He didn't come to hear them. When the carters brought him his tribute, the doors of the tower opened by themselves, and they left all the goods in the cellar without even seeing him. He never exchanged more than a handful of words with the headwoman of our village, or even the mayor of Olshanka, the largest town of the valley, very near his tower. He didn't try to win our love at all; none of us knew him.

And of course he was also a master of dark sorcery. Lightning would flash around his tower on a clear night, even in the winter. Pale wisps that he set loose from his windows drifted along the roads and down the river at night, going to the Wood to keep watch for him. And sometimes when the Wood caught someone—a shepherd girl who had drifted too close to its edge, following her flock; a hunter who had drunk from the wrong spring; an unlucky traveler who came over the mountain pass humming a snatch of music that sank claws into your head—well, the Dragon would come down from his tower for them, too; and the ones he took away never came back at all.

He wasn't evil, but he was distant and terrible. And he was going to take Kasia away, so I hated him, and had hated him for years and years.

My feelings didn't change on that last night. Kasia and I ate our chestnuts. The sun went down and our fire went out, but we lingered in the clearing as long as the embers lasted. We didn't have a long way to go in the morning. The harvest feast was usually held in Olshanka, but in a choosing year, it was always held in a village where at least one of the girls lived, to make the travel a little easier for their families. And our village had Kasia.

I hated the Dragon even more the next day, putting on my new green overdress. My mother's hands were shaking as she braided up my hair. We knew it would be Kasia, but that didn't mean we weren't still afraid. But I held my skirts up high off the ground and climbed into the wagon as carefully as I could, looking twice for splinters and letting my father help me. I was determined to make a special effort. I knew it was no use, but I wanted Kasia to know that

I loved her enough to give her a fair chance. I wasn't going to make myself look a mess or squint-eyed or slouching, the way girls sometimes did.

We gathered on the village green, all eleven of us girls in a line. The feasting-tables were set out in a square, loaded too heavily because they weren't really big enough to hold the tribute of the entire valley. Everyone had gathered behind them. Sacks of wheat and oats were piled up on the grass at the corners in pyramids. We were the only ones standing on the grass, with our families and our headwoman Danka, who paced nervously back and forth in front of us, her mouth moving silently while she practiced her greeting.

I didn't know the other girls much. They weren't from Dvernik. All of us were silent and stiff in our nice clothes and braided hair, watching the road. There was no sign of the Dragon yet. Wild fantasies ran in my head. I imagined flinging myself in front of Kasia when the Dragon came, and telling him to take me instead, or declaring to him that Kasia didn't want to go with him. But I knew I wasn't brave enough to do any of that.

And then he came, horribly. He didn't come from the road at all, he just stepped straight out of the air. I was looking that way when he came out: fingers in midair and then an arm and a leg and then half a man, so impossible and wrong that I couldn't look away even though my stomach was folding itself over in half. The others were luckier. They didn't even notice him until he took his first step towards us, and everyone around me tried not to flinch in surprise.

The Dragon wasn't like any man of our village. He should have been old and stooped and grey; he had been living in his tower a hundred years, but he was tall, straight, beardless, his skin taut. At a quick glance in the street I might have thought him a young man, only a little older than me: someone I might have smiled at across the feast-tables, and who might have asked me to dance. But there was something unnatural in his face: a crow's-nest of lines by his eyes, as though years couldn't touch him, but use did. It wasn't an ugly face, even so, but coldness made it unpleasant: everything about him said, *I am not one of you, and don't want to be, either.*

His clothes were rich, of course; the brocade of his zupan would have fed a family for a year, even without the golden buttons. But he

was as lean as a man whose harvest had gone wrong three years out of four. He held himself stiff, with all the nervous energy of a hunting dog, as though he wanted nothing more than to be off quickly. It was the worst day of all our lives, but he had no patience for us; when our headwoman Danka bowed and said to him, “My lord, let me present to you these—” he interrupted her and said, “Yes, let’s get on with it.”

My father’s hand was warm on my shoulder as he stood beside me and bowed; my mother’s hand was clenched tight on mine on the other side. They reluctantly stepped back with the other parents. Instinctively the eleven of us all edged closer to one another. Kasia and I stood near the end of the line. I didn’t dare take her hand, but I stood close enough that our arms brushed, and I watched the Dragon and hated him and hated him as he stepped down the line and tipped up each girl’s face, under the chin, to look at her.

He didn’t speak to all of us. He didn’t say a word to the girl next to me, the one from Olshanka, even though her father, Borys, was the best horse-breeder in the valley, and she wore a wool dress dyed brilliant red, her black hair in two long beautiful plaits woven with red ribbons. When it was my turn, he glanced at me with a frown—cold black eyes, pale mouth pursed—and said, “Your name, girl?”

“Agnieszka,” I said, or tried to say; I discovered my mouth was dry. I swallowed. “Agnieszka,” I said again, whispering. “My lord.” My face was hot. I dropped my eyes. I saw that for all the care I’d taken, my skirt had three big mud stains creeping up from the hem.

The Dragon moved on. And then he paused, looking at Kasia, the way he hadn’t paused for any of the rest of us. He stayed there with his hand under her chin, a thin pleased smile curving his thin hard mouth, and Kasia looked at him bravely and didn’t flinch. She didn’t try to make her voice rough or squeaky or anything but steady and musical as she answered, “Kasia, my lord.”

He smiled at her again, not pleasantly, but with a satisfied-cat look. He went on to the end of the line only perfunctorily, barely glancing at the two girls after her. I heard Wensa drag in a breath that was nearly a sob, behind us, as he turned and came back to look at Kasia, still with that pleased look on his face. And then he frowned again, and turned his head, and looked straight at me.

I'd forgotten myself and taken Kasia's hand after all. I was squeezing the life out of it, and she was squeezing back. She quickly let go and I tucked my hands together in front of me instead, hot color in my cheeks, afraid. He only narrowed his eyes at me some more. And then he raised his hand, and in his fingers a tiny ball of blue-white flame took shape.

"She didn't mean anything," Kasia said, brave brave brave, the way I hadn't been for her. Her voice was trembling but audible, while I shook rabbit-terrified, staring at the ball. "Please, my lord—"

"Silence, girl," the Dragon said, and held his hand out towards me. "Take it."

"I—what?" I said, more bewildered than if he'd flung it into my face.

"Don't stand there like a cretin," he said. "*Take it.*"

My hand was shaking so when I raised it that I couldn't help but brush against his fingers as I tried to pluck the ball from them, though I hated to; his skin felt feverish-hot. But the ball of flame was cool as a marble, and it didn't hurt me at all to touch. Startled with relief, I held it between my fingers, staring at it. He looked at me with an expression of annoyance.

"Well," he said ungraciously, "you then, I suppose." He took the ball out of my hand and closed his fist on it a moment; it vanished as quickly as it had come. He turned and said to Danka, "Send the tribute up when you can."

I still hadn't understood. I don't think anyone had, even my parents; it was all too quick, and I was shocked by having drawn his attention at all. I didn't even have a chance to turn around and say a last good-bye before he turned back and took my arm by the wrist. Only Kasia moved; I looked back at her and saw her about to reach for me in protest, and then the Dragon jerked me impatiently and ungently stumbling after him, and dragged me with him back into thin air.

I had my other hand pressed to my mouth, retching, when we stepped back out of the air. When he let go my arm, I sank to my knees and vomited without even seeing where I was. He made a muttered exclamation of disgust—I had spattered the long elegant toe of his leather boot—and said, "Useless. Stop heaving, girl, and

clean that filth up.” He walked away from me, his heels echoing upon the flagstones, and was gone.

I stayed there shakily until I was sure nothing more would come up, and then I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and lifted my head to stare. I was on a floor of stone, and not just any stone, but a pure white marble laced through with veins of brilliant green. It was a small round room with narrow slitted windows, too high to look out of, but above my head the ceiling bent inward sharply. I was at the very top of the tower.

There was no furniture in the room at all, and nothing I could use to wipe up the floor. Finally I used the skirt of my dress: that was already dirty anyway. Then after a little time sitting there being terrified and more terrified, while nothing at all happened, I got up and crept timidly down the hallway. I’d have taken any way out of the room but the one he had used, if there had been any other way. There wasn’t.

He’d already gone on, though. The short hallway was empty. It had the same cold hard marble underfoot, illuminated with an unfriendly pale white light from hanging lamps. They weren’t real lamps, just big chunks of clear polished stone that glowed from inside. There was only one door, and then an archway at the end that led to stairs.

I pushed the door open and looked in, nervously, because that was better than going past it without knowing what was inside. But it only opened into a small bare room, with a narrow bed and a small table and a wash-basin. There was a large window across from me, and I could see the sky. I ran to it and leaned out over the sill.

The Dragon’s tower stood in the foothills on the western border of his lands. All our long valley lay spread out to the east, with its villages and farms, and standing in the window I could trace the whole line of the Spindle, running silver-blue down the middle with the road dusty brown next to it. The road and the river ran together all the way to the other end of the Dragon’s lands, dipping into stands of forest and coming out again at villages, until the road tapered out to nothing just before the huge black tangle of the Wood. The river went on alone into its depths and vanished, never to come out again.

There was Olshanka, the town nearest the tower, where the Grand Market was held on Sundays: my father had taken me there, twice. Beyond that Poniets, and Radomsko curled around the shores of its small lake, and there was my own Dvernik with its wide green square. I could even see the big white tables laid out for the feasting the Dragon hadn't wanted to stay for, and I slid to my knees and rested my forehead on the sill and cried like a child.

But my mother didn't come to rest her hand on my head; my father didn't pull me up and laugh me out of my tears. I just sobbed myself out until I had too much of a headache to go on crying, and after that I was cold and stiff from being on that painfully hard floor, and I had a running nose and nothing to wipe it with.

I used another part of my skirt for that and sat down on the bed, trying to think what to do. The room was empty, but aired-out and neat, as if it had just been left. It probably had. Some other girl had lived here for ten years, all alone, looking down at the valley. Now she had gone home to say good-bye to her family, and the room was mine.

A single painting in a great gilt frame hung on the wall across from the bed. It made no sense, too grand for the little room and not really a picture at all, just a broad swath of pale green, grey-brown at the edges, with one shining blue-silver line that wove across the middle in gentle curves and narrower silver lines drawn in from the edges to meet it. I stared at it and wondered if it was magic, too. I'd never seen such a thing.

But there were circles painted at places along the silver line, at familiar distances, and after a moment I realized the painting was the valley, too, only flattened down the way a bird might have looked down upon it from far overhead. That silver line was the Spindle, running from the mountains into the Wood, and the circles were villages. The colors were brilliant, the paint glossy and raised in tiny peaks. I could almost see waves on the river, the glitter of sunlight on the water. It pulled the eye and made me want to look at it and look at it. But I didn't like it, at the same time. The painting was a box drawn around the living valley, closing it up, and looking at it made me feel closed up myself.

I looked away. It didn't seem that I could stay in the room. I

hadn't eaten a bite at breakfast, or at dinner the night before; it had all been ash in my mouth. I should have had less appetite now, when something worse than anything I'd imagined had happened to me, but instead I was painfully hungry, and there were no servants in the tower, so no one was going to get my dinner. Then the worse thought occurred to me: what if the Dragon expected me to get his?

And then the even worse thought than that: what about *after* dinner? Kasia had always said she believed the women who came back, that the Dragon didn't put a hand on them. "He's taken girls for a hundred years now," she always said firmly. "One of them would have admitted it, and word would have got out."

But a few weeks ago, she'd asked my mother, privately, to tell her how it happened when a girl was married—to tell her what her own mother would have, the night before she was wed. I'd overheard them through the window, while I was coming back from the woods, and I'd stood there next to the window and listened in with hot tears running down my face, angry, so angry for Kasia's sake.

Now that was going to be *me*. And I wasn't brave—I didn't think that I could take deep breaths, and keep from clenching up tight, like my mother had told Kasia to do so it wouldn't hurt. I found myself imagining for one terrible moment the Dragon's face so close to mine, even closer than when he'd inspected me at the choosing—his black eyes cold and glittering like stone, those iron-hard fingers, so strangely warm, drawing my dress away from my skin, while he smiled that sleek satisfied smile down at me. What if all of him was fever-hot like that, so I'd feel him almost glowing like an ember, all over my body, while he lay upon me and—

I shuddered away from my thoughts and stood up. I looked down at the bed, and around at that small close room with nowhere to hide, and then I hurried out and went back down the hall again. There was a staircase at the end, going down in a close spiral, so I couldn't see what was around the next turn. It sounds stupid to be afraid of going down a staircase, but I was terrified. I nearly went back to my room after all. At last I kept one hand on the smooth stone wall and went down slowly, putting both my feet on one step and stopping to listen before I went down a little more.

After I'd crept down one whole turn like that, and nothing had

jumped out at me, I began to feel like an idiot and started to walk more quickly. But then I went around another turn, and still hadn't come to a landing; and another, and I started to be afraid again, this time that the stairs were magic and would just keep going forever, and—well. I started to go quicker and quicker, and then I skidded three steps down onto the next landing and ran headlong into the Dragon.

I was skinny, but my father was the tallest man in the village and I came up to his shoulder, and the Dragon wasn't a big man. We nearly tumbled down the stairs together. He caught the railing with one hand, quick, and my arm with the other, and somehow managed to keep us from landing on the floor. I found myself leaning heavily on him, clutching at his coat and staring directly into his startled face. For one moment he was too surprised to be thinking, and he looked like an ordinary man startled by something jumping out at him, a little bit silly and a little bit soft, his mouth parted and his eyes wide.

I was so surprised myself that I didn't move, just stayed there gawking at him helplessly, and he recovered quick; outrage swept over his face and he heaved me off him onto my feet. Then I realized what I'd just done and blurted in a panic, before he could speak, "I'm looking for the kitchen!"

"*Are you,*" he said silkily. His face didn't look at all soft anymore, hard and furious, and he hadn't let go of my arm. His grip was clenching, painful; I could feel the heat of it through the sleeve of my shift. He jerked me towards him and bent towards me—I think he would have liked to loom over me, and because he couldn't was even more angry. If I'd had a moment to think about it, I would have bent back and made myself smaller, but I was too tired and scared. So instead his face was just before mine, so close his breath was on my lips and I felt as much as heard his cold, vicious whisper: "Perhaps I'd better show you there."

"I can—I can—" I tried to say, trembling, trying to lean back from him. He spun away from me and dragged me after him down the stairs, around and around and around again, five turns this time before we came to the next landing, and then another three turns down, the light growing dimmer, before at last he dragged me out into the lowest floor of the tower, just a single large bare-walled

dungeon chamber of carven stone, with a huge fireplace shaped like a downturned mouth, full of flames leaping hellishly.

He dragged me towards it, and in a moment of blind terror I realized he meant to throw me in. He was so strong, much stronger than he ought to have been for his size, and he'd pulled me easily stumbling down the stairs after him. But I wasn't going to let him put me in the fire. I wasn't a lady-like quiet girl; all my life I'd spent running in the woods, climbing trees and tearing through brambles, and panic gave me real strength. I screamed as he pulled me close to it, and then I went into a fit of struggling and clawing and squirming, so this time I really did trip him to the floor.

I went down with him. We banged our heads on the flagstones together, and dazed lay still for a moment with our limbs entwined. The fire was leaping and crackling beside us, and as my panic faded, abruptly I noticed that in the wall beside it were small iron oven doors, and before it a spit for roasting, and above it a huge wide shelf with cooking-pots on it. It was only the kitchen.

After a moment, he said, in almost marveling tones, "Are you deranged?"

"I thought you were going to throw me in the oven," I said, still dazed, and then I started to laugh.

It wasn't real laughter—I was half-hysterical by then, wrung out six ways and hungry, my ankles and knees bruised from being dragged down the stairs and my head aching as though I'd cracked my skull, and I just couldn't stop.

But *he* didn't know that. All he knew was the stupid village girl he'd picked was laughing at him, the Dragon, the greatest wizard of the kingdom and her lord and master. I don't think anyone had laughed at him in a hundred years, by then. He pushed himself up, kicking his legs free from mine, and getting to his feet stared down at me, outraged as a cat. I only laughed harder, and then he turned abruptly and left me there laughing on the floor, as though he couldn't think what else to do with me.

After he left, my giggles tapered off, and I felt somehow a little less hollow and afraid. He hadn't thrown me into the oven, after all, or even slapped me. I got myself up and looked around the room: it was hard to see, because the fireplace was so bright and there were