

‘There was Tolkien, there is Pullman,  
and now there is Katherine Rundell’

Michael Morpurgo



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THE  
POISONED KING

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS  
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

*For Theodore and Phoebe Rundell:  
two impossibly wonderful creatures*

‘The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.’

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1601)

‘None of the animals is so wise as the dragon. His blessing power is not a false one. He can be smaller than small, bigger than big, higher than high, and lower than low.’

Lu Dian (1042–1102 CE)

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CARUTA

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ISLAND OF CLEARWATER

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SOFT WATERS

ARVATANA

LITHIAN STRAIT

ANTIDINA

FRANCE

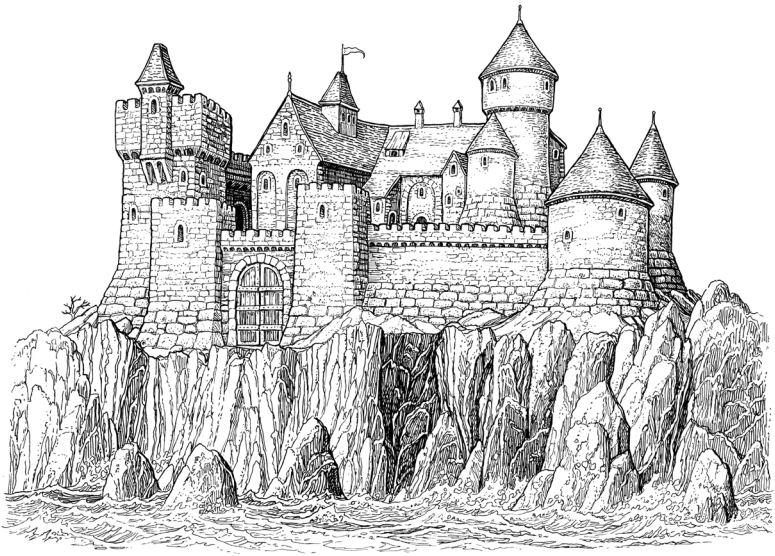
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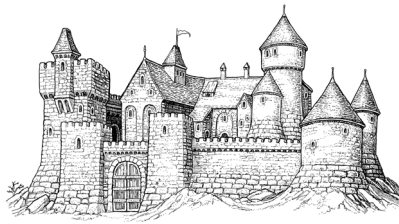
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PART ONE

# CASTLE

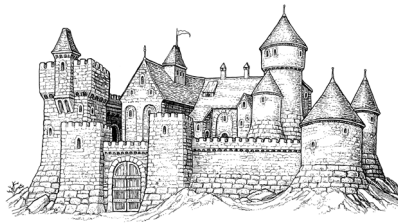




## A WARNING BEFORE WE BEGIN

**T**hey would have said it wasn't possible: the chaos and the mayhem she caused. They would have said she didn't have it in her.

It was in her, but deep. What's under your house, if you were to dig? Mud and worms. Buried treasure. Skeletons. You don't know. The girl dug into the depths of her heart and there she found a hunger for justice, and a thirst for revenge.



## THE JACULUS DRAGON

Christopher Forrester woke up to find a dragon chewing on his face.

The dragon was the size of a sparrow, small enough to fit on the top joint of his thumb, and a thing of ravishing silver-green beauty. His expression was haughty enough to burn a hole through a steel door.

The dragon spoke. 'Christopher!' he said. 'You have not been easy to find.'

Christopher sat up. 'Jacques?' he said. His whole body began to shake: with shock, and with joy.

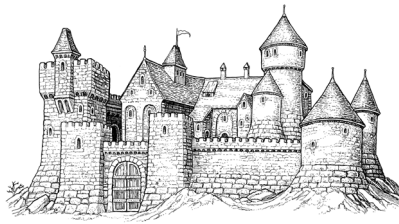
He pushed back his covers, looking around his bedroom. His jeans were on the floor; the window looked out over a London street. Everything was as before, and nothing was as before, because a tiny dragon was perched on his bedside table.

'Jacques!' he said again. He was real, and he was here, and he was biting experimentally at the light bulb in Christopher's lamp. 'What's going on?'

'I have come to bring you back with me,' said Jacques. He shook broken glass off his back. 'Now, immediately.'

'Back? To the Archipelago?'

'Obviously. I command it!' Beneath the hauteur, there was a vibration to his voice; it was fear. The dragon flew on to Christopher's hand, and bit down hard on his thumb. It drew blood. 'I have urgent need of you.'



## THE PRINCESS OF DOUSHA

**A**t the exact same moment, Princess Anya Phoebe Cornelia Argen of the Island of Dousha, Duchess of the Silver Mountains, Countess of the Winged Forests – dirt in her fingernails and blood on her lip – darted over the rooftop of her castle. A dozen royal gaganas flew overhead, following her. It was dusk, and the gold beaks of the gaganas caught the moonlight and sent it skittering across the stone.

There was a movement in the darkest corner of the rooftop. Anya froze, and whisper-hissed, ‘Who’s there?’

But it was only Coren, a young gagana, scarum-feathered and confident as a king. He came skimming up to land on her shoulder. ‘Quick. He’s coming up the stairs.’

Anya’s bedroom was in the far corner of the West Wing: you could slide sideways out of the window on to the battlements, and from there look out across the stately gardens,

down over the rooftops and clamour of the city, to the ocean where the winged unicorns bathed.

But Anya was not there that evening for the view. She was there to stop a death.

It was Gallia who had warned her. The old bird had come flying in through her bedroom window just minutes earlier, croaking in a high panicked urgency Anya had never heard before. 'The egg! Anya! He's coming for her egg!'

A guard in the grounds – a stranger, a man Gallia had never seen before – had shot a gagana with a crossbow. It was unheard of – royal gaganas were protected by law.

The soldier had nodded in satisfaction and had turned to his companion: 'Get the egg then. It's what he's paying us for.'

Who would want a gagana egg badly enough to kill for it? It was unthinkable! The gaganas were not just birds; they were her best friends and dearest companions. They were as wise as any human – much wiser than most, Anya thought. In a castle built on rules and regulations, they filled the air with light and song and the clamour of wings.

The egg belonged to Felin, whose body now lay limp, out of sight by the castle lake. Anya did not know Felin well, but she knew her nesting spot: on top of a chimney for warmth, on the far side of the West Quadrangle.

Crouching low, she ran as fast as she could along the courtyard side of the slanting rooftop. She had never run it before, and her stomach swooped as her feet fumbled for purchase.

‘Take care,’ said Gallia. The old bird flew just above her head, and came now to rest on her hair. ‘The slate!’

Too late. Anya set her foot on a loose tile, and she lurched as it dislodged and dropped to the ground with a crash. But she had not been drilled for endless hours in posture for nothing. Anya Argen could pirouette with a book on her head; her balance was strong and true. She caught herself and dropped to a crouch.

‘Hurry!’ called Coren. ‘He’s close!’

Anya scrambled onwards, and the egg was there: small, silver-white, delicate as blown glass. She took it as if handling the world’s most precious porcelain, and her heart surged with relief. She turned to run back to her room.

The trapdoor in the roof shifted, creaked, began to lift.

With a low cry, she dropped to her stomach, pressing herself against the stone. The shadow covered her, but it wasn’t enough. She would be caught. He would take the egg from her.

The trapdoor lifted. Anya swore. The soldier’s face appeared, scanning the rooftop.

Anya waited until his whole head was clear of the trapdoor. Then she cried out, ‘Coren! Attack!’ Coren gave a high shriek and dived straight at the man’s eyes. The man bellowed in shock.

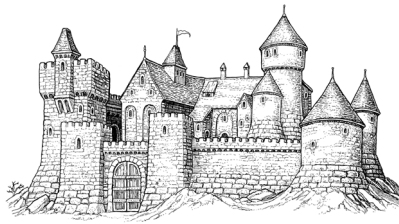
Anya cried, ‘Together! Now!’ and every gagana around her rose in a cloud, and cannoned towards him. He roared, and ducked back down behind the trapdoor – and Anya ran, one hand clutched to her chest with the egg, back to her room.

She crouched on her bed and feverishly checked every inch of the shell. It was uncracked, unharmed.

Anya held the egg close, breathing on it to warm it. She would tell her father, she thought, as soon as he was free of his royal duties. He loved the gaganas. He would know what to do. He always did.

Her fingers went to her pendant: a small silver disc on a chain. Her mother had left it to her when she had died ten years ago, and Anya never took it off. Touching it gave her comfort; when she was a baby she had cut her teeth on it. Now she put the edge in her mouth, and bit gently down on it.

Something was bitterly wrong in Argen Castle. This was fresh proof of it.



## THE GLIMOURIA ARCHIPELAGO

**A**nya's home was in the bright-lit southern end of the Glimouria Archipelago.

In the Archipelago you would find thirty-seven species of dragon, and mermaids with shimmering tails twenty feet long. You would find behemoths in the ocean that could eat a dozen people in a mouthful, and sphinxes on the (unimaginatively named, Anya felt) Sphinx Peninsula.

The sphinxes cut words into the rock of the mountains with their claws: mathematics, astronomy, history, and even jokes, most of which did not work in translation.

One of those histories was that of the Island of Dousha, and the family of Argen: the last royal family left in the Archipelago.

A king or queen from the Argen family had ruled the Island of Dousha for more than a thousand years. They had

built Argen Castle back at the beginning of their reign, and bedecked it in silver; the metal had been beaten to the thinness of paper by blacksmiths, and hammered on to each brick. It had, the histories said, been a thing of astonishing beauty. It had not, though, been practical. The sunlight had caught the silver, burning the grass and toasting the feathers of birds in the gardens.

Nowadays, the silver was largely gone, through rain and time and theft. But the castle was still silver-*flecked* and, seen from above as the phoenix flies, it still glinted in moonlight.

It had been a strange year. The army had grown larger, and soldiers lined the streets in ways they had not done before. It should be spring, but the snow had lingered on the Island of Dousha for far too long. The sky felt uneasy. People said the snow was a sign of nothing good to come.

The current king, His Majesty Halam Argen, had just turned seventy years old. He had a stern jaw, a thin mouth and wrinkles that expressed a life of scepticism and pride.

Anya Argen – with hair the colour of an unwashed moon, brown eyes, gagana scars on every finger and all the way up her forearms – was his granddaughter.

Though she did not know it, as she carried the egg to the fire to warm it, her life was about to change – beyond all recognition, and forever.