

*The*  
**Heathens**  
*and the*  
**Dragon**

*A 13th-Century Adventure*



KATE A. BOORMAN

Thistledown  
Press

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*For my mom,  
who taught me to wonder and look for magic*

# 1

The fish skeleton was hanging in Elodie's secret spot: inside the shed on a post, high up and out of reach of the rats, able to collect any moonlight that trickled through the hole in the thatched roof while the household slept.

Senhor Benet had been talking about getting the thatch fixed for weeks, just like he had been talking about mending the bit of broken wall that separated the kitchen garden from the narrow street. And the broken latch on the front door. It was now high summer, and rain was uncommon; the matter of the roof would go unnoticed until the autumn storms returned. As to the wall and the door... well, Senhor Benet was not a particularly attentive property owner.

Often bigger chores were left undone because Elodie was unable to do them herself. In that respect, she wasn't quite so helpful as her mother had been—the house was certainly not as well tended, which worried her. She'd been meaning to fix the door latch, but she was secretly glad she couldn't fix the roof: the importance of collecting moonlight was hard to explain.



She gathered the skeleton from its hook and then released the chickens from their nighttime roost inside the shed. The speckled hens picked their way out into the morning sun, fluffing their wings and turning beady eyes to the shadows of the courtyard for a breakfast of an unsuspecting scorpion or two. The small, nutmeg-coloured hen favoured by Elodie's little brother, Bertran (to the point that he had, of all things, *named* her: Codet, for the clucking, *coucoucodelt* sound made by all chickens) headed for a line of ants near the rows of leeks and cabbages at the broken garden wall. Elodie followed, clutching a wooden bowl tightly in one hand.

Senhor Benet had risen unusually early—even before their surly rooster had crowed—and welcomed visitors before he broke his fast, which was very strange. The glove-maker Arnaud Maury and the widow Na Roqua were regular guests, but morning was the busiest time of day, when livestock was fed and kitchen gardens were watered and workers headed off to the small fields. Senhor's guests had arrived before Elodie headed to the village well for water, when the sky was still rose-pink with dawn and the streets were silent.

Almost as if they'd wanted to go unnoticed.

*Unnoticed is not always a bad thing.* Elodie hastened toward the vegetables. She tucked in below the wall, out of sight of passersby, and set the skeleton on the earth next to the bowl. Using a small rock, she smashed the bones into small pieces and then added them to the bowl, holding it at her chest and careful to stir north to



east to south to west with her fingers, as her mother had taught her. The bowl held water from the village well, to carry her message, and moss she had scraped from the side of the well, to teach the leeks and cabbages a thing or two, since moss was a cunning little plant. The narrow trench she had dug by the first row of leeks was letting off an earthy aroma, the soil warming quickly in the morning sun.

“Bone to bone, blood to blood,” Elodie whispered, sprinkling her concoction in the trench. “Life to the earth. Life received.” She buried the water, scooping the dirt with her bare hands and patting it carefully back in place. She sat back on her heels.

There. No trace. And the garden was sure to prosper, just like it had when her mother tended it. The Senhor would be pleased.

“Elodie!” The child’s voice, raspy with lingering sleep, equal parts accusatory and delighted, rang out from the house.

Elodie grinned. Bertran had found the frog.

She plucked a decent-sized leek from the patch and stood, turning to find her little brother in the doorway. His hair and clothing were rumped, and his round cheeks were flushed.

“Practically, I jumped out of my skin!” he announced.

Elodie had gathered the frog from the garden when she’d returned from the village well and had placed it under Bertran’s overturned boot, near their sleeping nook, for when he awoke. Bertran loved to pretend to be



scared. He had also recently learned the word “practically,” though he seemed a bit unclear on its proper use.

Bertran set the creature in the shade of the stoop. It leapt away with an offended croak. “It blessed us!” he exclaimed.

Elodie dropped the leek into her bowl and crossed toward him. “Shush,” she chastised. “Senhor has visitors.” She moved past and entered the kitchen, still shuttered and dark.

“Now?” Bertran asked curiously, following. “In the big room?”

“Yes.” Elodie pushed open the shutters of the window that overlooked the garden at the front of the house, letting sunlight filter into the cluttered space. She grabbed a husk of yesterday’s bread from a basket near the doorway to their small room and handed it to her brother.

She set the bowl on the table, dipped a corner of her apron into the well water she’d collected, and scrubbed the remaining dirt from the leek, glancing about for her knife. The kitchen needed a cleaning, but her eyes skipped over the dust and lingered on the big wooden door in the corner.

Most of the houses in the village of Aigues-Vives were two or three rooms, with the kitchen being the heart of the home, where guests were welcomed and meals taken. Guilhem Benet had an unusually large home, with another space for visitors: the big room. It had nothing but a large table and benches, and there were wooden



planks on the floor rather than dirt. And in the six years Elodie had lived with Senhor Benet, she had never seen it used for anything but welcoming “good men and women”—other Cathars, who considered themselves Christians even if the Church in Rome did not.

Bertran wandered over to the hearth—another sign of a prosperous home—where the fire would be set to cook today’s soup, and stared up at the small box that sat on the mantle. The box was the size of a duck egg, made of a polished wood that gleamed when the sunlight hit it.

“He didn’t take the box,” he observed.

“Hmm.” Elodie found her knife tucked between a stack of wooden bowls and a woven basket that contained turnips. She grabbed two of the biggest root vegetables, wondering if the Senhor would allow a bit of salt pork in today’s soup. While meat was generally forbidden for Cathars, every once and again he allowed some for seasoning.

“Doesn’t he need the box when he talks to . . . them?”

Elodie started peeling a turnip. “I don’t know.” She hoped Bertran wasn’t starting in on his thousand-questions business. “Did the frog leap when you moved your boot?”

Bertran was fixated on the box. “Fingernails,” he murmured, referring to its contents. “Magic fingernails.” He examined his own, which were caked with dirt and in need of a trim. “Are everybody’s fingernails magic?”

“It’s not magic.”





“Then what is it?”

Oh dear. He *was* starting that business. “It’s ... something Senhor Benet believes is important.”

“But you said he believes it brings the house good luck.”

“I said he believes it will keep good fortune in the family if he keeps something of the former *domus*.”

“The kitchen?”

“Not the kitchen. The former head of the house. Senhor Benet’s father.” The many uses of the Cathar word *domus*—kitchen, family, house, heart of the home, father, estate—confused Elodie too.

Bertran’s brow wrinkled. “Those are his *father’s* fingernails?”

Elodie sighed and set down her knife. “It’s like this.” She went to him and crouched down, pulling out the talisman she had sewn into the pocket of her dress. The small clay charm, a crudely made snake with a hole through the top for the thong tie, fit easily in her palm.

“Mother’s snake.” Bertran ran a finger over it.

“Yes.”

“It brings us good luck?”

“Well, it protects us. And it reminds me of the things she taught me, and those things will help us find our way. Which is a kind of luck, if you think about it.”

“Aren’t you meant to wear it about your neck?”

“I’m keeping it in my pocket for now.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

“But what things does it remind you of?”



“Lots of things. How to help plants grow. How to cool a fever. How to honour—” Elodie caught herself.

“The *vitae*?” Bertran finished, pleased as though he had helped.

“Shhh,” Elodie’s eyes darted toward the closed door. “Yes. But you know that is our secret.”



KATE A. BOORMAN is an award-winning author from Edmonton, with roots in the small town of Rimbey, Alberta. Her books have been published in four world territories and have appeared on a variety of “Best of” lists, from *Cosmopolitan* to *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The first book in her acclaimed *Winterkill* trilogy won the Writers’ Guild of Alberta Award for Children’s Fiction. When she isn’t writing and wrangling her family, Kate is dreaming up travel to faraway lands. *The Heathens and the Dragon* is her sixth novel, and her middle-grade debut.