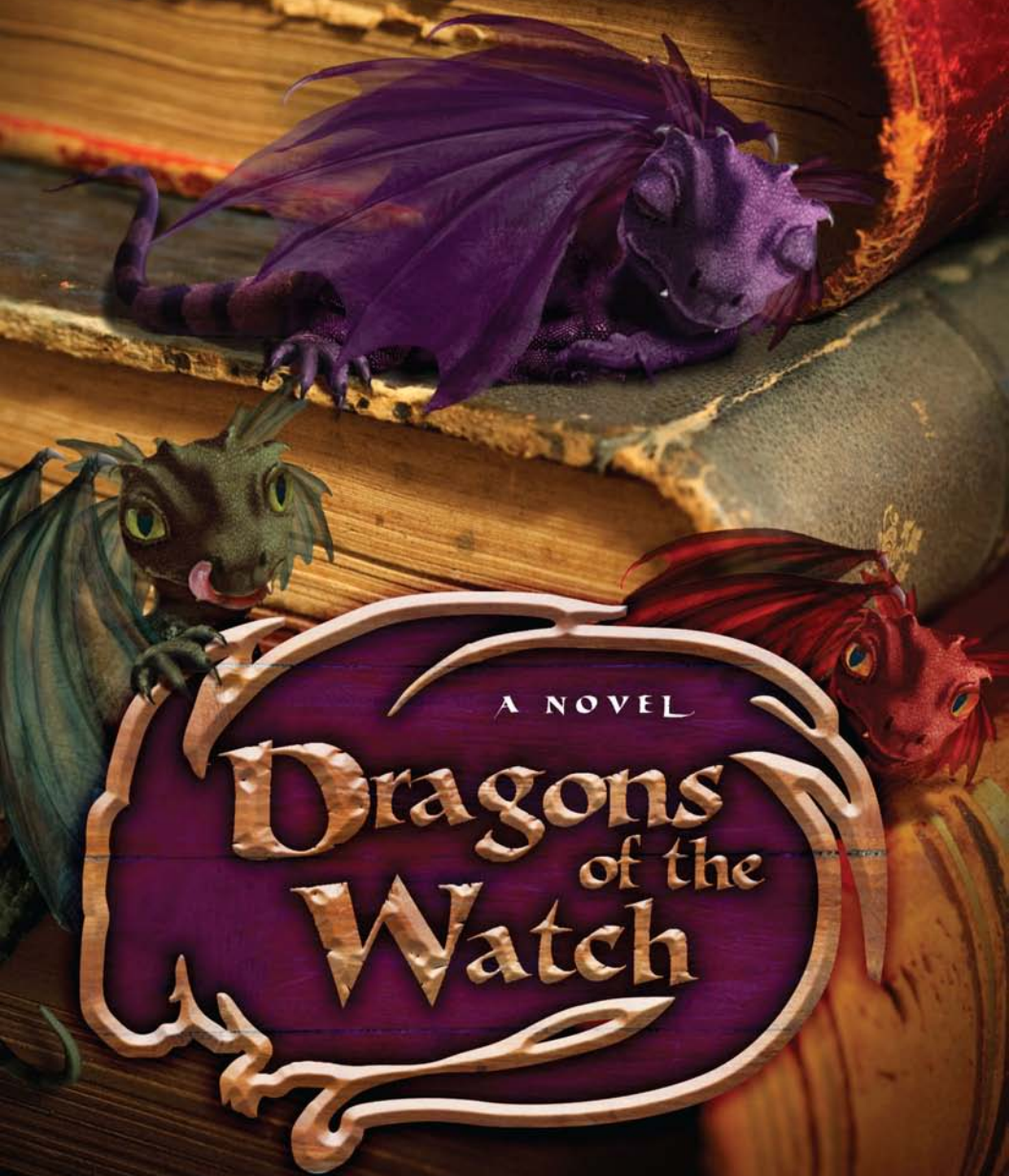


A Fantastic Journey of Discovery for All Ages

Donita K. Paul

AUTHOR OF *DragonSpell* AND *DragonLight*



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1

Invitation

Ellie sat on her favorite boulder and looked Tak right in the eyes, telling him what was on her mind. “Gramps shouldn’t have taught me to read.”

Tak responded as he usually did when he received Ellie’s confidences. He lowered his head, placing it on her knee for a rub.

Ellie obliged her pet, stroking the white hair between his nubby horns with one hand while digging in the pocket of her homespun pinafore with the other. The mountain breeze toyed with the paper she withdrew. With difficulty, she smoothed the small poster out on her other knee. Dirty and wrinkled, it still made her heart beat a little faster.

Royal Wedding and Coronation

Princess Tipper

and

Prince Jayrus, Dragonkeeper and Paladin

All invited to the celebration

“All invited. But Ellicinderpart Clarenbessipawl and her goat Tak can’t come. No chaperone, no travel. Ma and Da aren’t interested. And Gramps just laughs. ‘You’ll see. You’ll see,’ is all he says. He should take me himself.”

Her younger brother's shrill yell came from the knoll rising out of the river to the east. "Ellie! Ellie!"

He stood on the hill, grinning like a bear with a paw in the honey hive and his face red from running. His stubby tumanhofer body bounced with excitement. He held his fists above his head and whirled them around in circles. Something had set him off.

She stood and hollered back. "You best be calling me by my proper name out in the open 'n' at the top of your lungs, Gustustharinback. Ma will tan yer hide if she's finding out you disgrace the family with such shabby care of our dignity."

When he saw her, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Yer wanted at home. Itta be good news."

That information didn't impress her. Probably a delivery of the bolt of muslin ordered, which meant she'd be cutting and dyeing lengths for making new clothes. Not exciting news at all.

"Can it wait?" She gestured behind her to the scattered goat herd. "I'll have to gather Tak's clan if I'm to come home now."

"I'll come help you." Gustus charged down the hill toward the foot-bridge across the river.

Ellie stared at him for a moment with her mouth hanging open. The good news had nothing to do with cloth. Her brother would never voluntarily help bring in the goats for something as mundane as new clothes. He scurried down the path, slipping some on the loose rocks. But the precarious descent did not slow him a bit. Even in the narrower patches, where exposed roots of arranndon bushes tripped careless hikers, her sturdy brother skidded downward.

Folding the royal celebration notice into a small square, Ellie stuffed it back in her pocket. She turned away from watching her brother's

progress and nudged the goat. “Come on, Tak. You find the nannies, and I’ll find the billies.”

Ellie went one direction and Tak another. In a few minutes, she located the fifteen goats that formed the herd. Mostly young males, these animals preferred the rockier terrain. She suspected it had to do with their perpetual game of I’m-up-highest.

She clicked her tongue and tapped her staff on a rock. Their heads rose as if all attached to the same string, though they didn’t come right away. Each one chewed what was in his mouth and casually left his place one by one. Taking a serene amble down the hillside, they passed her, heading toward the bridge and home.

When the last one clomped by, Ellie rested her staff on her shoulder and followed. Tak already had the nannies plodding along the bank toward the footbridge. Gustustharinback trailed the nannies and carried the smallest of the baby goats in his arms.

He shouted when he caught sight of his sister. “Hurry! Aunt and Uncle Blamenyellomont are at the house. I can’t tell you the surprise, and I’m gonna burst with keeping my tongue from waggin’ and you from knowin’.”

She tapped her staff on the rock beneath her feet. The billies scampered before her, picking up her impatience and gratefully heading for home. Even after eating all day, they appreciated the handfuls of button grain they got from the farmer’s younger children.

With the goat hoofs pounding on the wooden bridge, Ellie couldn’t hear or be heard. So she waited until she’d caught up with her brother on the other side.

“What’s with all the falderal, Gustus?”

She watched as he forced a glare onto his face, erasing the impudent

grin he'd been wearing. "You are to call me by my proper name if I have to call you by yours."

"There's a difference between shouting 'Ellie' and speaking 'Gustus' quietly." She grabbed his arm. "Now tell me, or I'll toss you into the river."

He pressed his lips together and gave her his most obstinate glower. The corners of his lips twitched, and she knew he wanted to laugh. She let go. She couldn't really dunk him while he carried the small kid.

"Why are our aunt and uncle here?"

"Can't tell you that either. But they's only stopping, not staying. We'd better hurry."

Ellie lost Gustustharinback's help as soon as they came in sight of the pens. He scuttled down the last hill and opened the gate but then ran through the goat barn, across the yard, and into the house.

The herd followed the leader through the opening and took up different places to observe their world. Ellie and Gustus had put many odd things within the goat pen for the animals to climb on. Old wooden benches, barrels, a huge thick branch they had pulled with the donkey's help, and crates littered the ground. The goats enjoyed scrambling up, over, and around the obstacles.

Tak stayed at Ellie's side as she put water in the trough and fastened the barn door securely open so the animals could come in if they wanted. He followed her out the door on the other side of the barn and waited patiently while she latched it shut.

Entering the back door so she could wash before meeting their visitors, Ellie noticed that the kitchen showed signs of serving tea. Her mother must have prepared refreshments to carry into the common room. Through the pantry door, she could see empty spots on the shelves, which meant the good china pot and the blue glass dishes were being used.

Warm water sat in a tub in the sink, and she used that to wash her face and hands. She pulled the scarf off her head, gathered her long, curly black locks into a ponytail and used the scarf to tie it in place. Wisps of hair immediately escaped and framed her tanned face. She washed her face again as if she could rid herself of the look of a farm girl. Hopefully Aunt Tiffenbeth wouldn't make that tired old comment: "Your blue eyes would be more attractive if you scrubbed away some of that mud you use for face cream."

Voices from the family's conversation drifted through the partially open door. Aunt Tiffenbeth quarreled with Ellie's father.

"Brother, you are wrong in this. Ellicinderpart is your eldest child and way past the age to be in the village looking for a husband."

"If there's a man good enough for her, he can just come courting here." Her father's voice rumbled in the wood-paneled room, and Ellie did not even have to strain to hear him. She stepped closer to the door in order not to miss a single word her aunt spoke.

"You are the most vexing man. That is *not* going to happen. It isn't the way of things, and you know it. You're selfish and your mind is rootbound."

Only his older sister could get away with talking like that to Ellie's father. She probably ought to go in before the discussion escalated to verbal warfare. She finished wiping her hands and draped the towel over one of the kitchen chairs around the square table.

"The girl is needed here."

"The young woman is your unpaid servant."

"She has obligations to her family. None of the other children are old enough to take over her chores."

"And it's not her fault five years passed before you begat another child. She should not be punished for Boscamon's whim. Besides,

Letterimdebomm is quite old enough to take over the goats and the dressmaking.”

Her father said nothing. Ellie held her breath. Would she get to go live in the village, get a job, earn her keep, and possibly attract the attention of some young man?

She heard the rustling of a skirt. “Would you like another cake, Tiffenbeth? Letterimdebomm made them just yesterday afternoon.” Her mother, trying to divert the tension between brother and sister.

Ellie knew it was pointless. Uncle Stemikenjon cleared his throat. Her father never cleared his throat before he spoke what was on his mind. He just blurted it out.

“I’ll have another piece,” said Uncle Stemikenjon.

“And—,” said Aunt Tiffenbeth.

Ellie flinched. Her aunt was going to ruin it. Her father’s silence might mean he was contemplating what she had said. But if her aunt pushed too hard, he’d turn stubborn.

“—all your children can read,” continued Aunt Tiffenbeth.

“That’s not my doing.”

Ellie could imagine her father tossing a glare in her gramps’s direction. The old man would smile that toothless grin and keep stroking the cat, whichever cat happened to be on his lap. He couldn’t sit down without attracting at least one.

“Reading will be a great asset in the village,” said Aunt Tiffenbeth. “It’s only up here in these hills where it’s not customary to teach all the children to read.”

“There’s no sense in taking the time to teach them all. One or two could be the readers and that could be their contribution to the family. Ridiculous waste of time to teach them all.”

From behind, Ellie heard the unmistakable sound of Tak’s foot-

steps on the wooden floor. Before she could turn, she felt the hard butt of his head on her backside.

She whirled and shook a finger at him. She spoke as forcefully as she could in a whisper. "Tak! You know you aren't allowed in here. Go back outside."

Ellie followed Tak as he made his docile retreat, but she watched scornfully the arrogant sway of his hips and the self-satisfied bounce of his head. His white coat gleamed as he entered the sunlight. Once he'd tromped down the stairs, she shut the door and latched it. That goat was too cunning.

Ellie straightened her shoulders and passed through the kitchen once more. With fingers on the doorknob, she drew the door toward her and stopped.

"I suppose she can go."

"Da!" She rushed into the room and flung her arms around him. "I'm going to the village?"

"Nay, not that. Yer going with your aunt to Ragar, to see the coronation and celebrate the wedding."

Ellie tried to breathe, but her lungs had expelled all the air from within and seemed paralyzed. She pushed out of her father's arms and looked around at the faces that stared at her. Gramps grinned. Her mother's face wrinkled in concern. Aunt Tiffenbeth arched eyebrows above twinkling eyes. Uncle winked. Her seven smaller siblings sat around the room with hands folded primly in their laps but eyes dancing with excitement.

Ellie made a strangled attempt to speak.

Her father thumped her back. "Breathe, you silly girl. You can't go anywhere if you expire on the spot."

Departure

Three days later, Ellicinderpart knew for sure that the world was a beautiful place and her aunt and uncle were the most generous of tumanhofers. She sat in the second seat of their carriage with Aunt Tiffenbeth and gazed out the window. She wore a new dress her aunt had purchased in town, part of her new wardrobe. The coachman had strapped two carpetbags full of new things to the roof of their vehicle. Her uncle sat across from them with his face hidden in a book.

A warm glow spread through Ellie as she thought of the two gowns she'd carefully packed in the larger carpetbag the night before. She'd tried them on one more time and admired the dresses in her aunt's tall mirror. She had never thought to own one gown so lovely, let alone two. One for the coronation ball and one for the wedding reception.

In the mirror, a sophisticated young lady had laughed at the sight of herself, a farm girl dressed in such finery. In the pale yellow dress, Ellie felt like a delicate flower. In the soft azure gown, she could have floated up into the sky and drifted among the clouds.

Aunt Tiffenbeth patted Ellie's knee and pointed out the opposite window. "There's the road we take to go to your home. I bet you don't travel that road often."

"Not at all. We take the path to Glenbrooken Village on the other side of the mountain."

"This road is closer for us and is wide enough for the carriage."
Her aunt frowned and pointed. "Isn't that your goat?"

On one of the cliffs, a white goat stood straight and tall against the blue sky.

"Tak!"

Ellicinderpart's shout brought her uncle out of his book.

"What's wrong?"

His wife answered before Ellicinderpart had a chance. "Her goat is up on that ridge. What is he doing there?"

Uncle Stemikenjon leaned forward to look out the window. "It's not so far from their house."

Aunt Tiffenbeth whipped around to face Ellie. "Do you come this way when you take the goats to pasture?"

"Never. The path to this side of the mountain crosses Crooked Gorge. You have to walk all the way down and then climb all the way up the other side. Very few plants grow in the gorge, so the herd doesn't feed well."

Uncle Stemikenjon glowered out the window. "Who took over your job as goatherd?"

"Gustustharinback."

"Would he be foolish enough to cross Crooked Gorge?"

"I think he's foolish enough," answered Ellicinderpart, "but too lazy."

Aunt Tiffenbeth took a turn leaning forward to improve her view of the rough hillside. "Stemikenjon, you must have the driver stop. Ellicinderpart must do something about Tak."

"Nonsense!" her husband blustered. "The goat got here on his own, and he can very well find his way back."

"But this goat is special, like my Niffy. You know how distressed I would be if dear Niffy were in danger."

“Indeed I do. You treat that cat as if she were worth something, and I tell you, she’s not.”

Ellie smiled as her aunt and uncle bickered over her aunt’s spoiled feline. Ellie had met the cat when the family journeyed all the way to the relatives’ house for a feast day. Niffy, looking fluffy and elegant, had never shown any friendliness to her family, and the family had no opinion of the cat. But Aunt Tiffenbeth made a great deal over the pleasure and companionship the cat bestowed upon her. Ellie didn’t feel a “great love and admiration” for her goat as Aunt Tiffenbeth felt for her cat, but she didn’t want anything to happen to Tak either.

“Silly goat,” she muttered. The last thing she wanted was to interrupt her trip before it had barely begun to take care of a goat that should be at home, or at least in the pasture near home, with Gustustharinback.

Uncle Stemikenjon used his cane to bang on the front of the carriage above Ellie’s head. The driver hollered, “Slow!” in a loud and long, stretched-out way. The coach lost speed and came to a stop.

“Oh no!” Ellie looked frantically from her aunt to her uncle. “What are we going to do?”

“You,” said her uncle as he opened the door, “are going to see to the goat. Take Tak home.”

Ellie felt all the joy drain from her, leaving a sad, hollow shell that wanted to wail. She was much too old, of course, to disgrace herself with sobs and rivers of tears.

“No, no,” said Aunt Tiffenbeth. “Home is too far from here. You would never catch up. Take Tak to the Hopperbattyhold family, and pay one of those boys to return your goat to the farm.”

Ellicinderpart relaxed a little. Taking the goat to the Hopperbattyhold home would only take a little time. She could get there and back in under an hour if she scampered.

"I don't have any money," she said.

Aunt Tiffenbeth dug deep into the folds of her elaborate skirt, where a pocket held her cloth coin purse. She opened it and reached through the narrow neck with two fingers, pinched a coin, and brought it out. "There." She placed the copper piece in Ellie's hand and took a moment to carefully return her money to its hiding place.

Uncle Stemikenjon had already descended from the coach and stood on the road, waiting to hand Ellie down. Ellicinderpart placed her small hand on his broad fingers to steady herself and jumped.

"Will you wait for me here?" she asked. "I shouldn't be too long."

"No need to wait." His gruff voice raked across her resolve not to cry. "After you leave the goat at the Hopperbattyholds', continue around Nose Point and down the hill. You should reach this road again just about the time we've traveled the long way around. We'll pick you up at the crossroads near Pence."

"Look at the clouds, Stemikenjon," said Aunt Tiffenbeth. "She should take a cloak in case it rains."

"Right." Uncle Stemikenjon shouted to the coachman. "Toss down the blue carpetbag."

The servant loosened the ropes, slipped out the needed luggage, and hoisted it in the air.

"This one, Master Blamenyellomont?"

"Aye."

Half of Ellicinderpart's new clothes came over the edge of the rooftop in a small valise made of heavy cloth. Uncle Stemikenjon caught it and handed it to Ellie.

"Get your cloak out, dear," said her aunt. "Oh, and you'd better take a change of clothing in case you get rained on."

Ellicinderpart opened the bag and pulled out her cloak. The clouds

in the distance did look ominous, black and brewing. She gladly put the beautiful brown and black patterned wool around her.

A chill wind swirled up from their feet, and road dust pelted her face. She put a protective arm over her eyes. When the little tempest had passed, she looked up the stony hillside at Tak. He shifted his feet and kept an eye on her. She got the impression that the goat waited impatiently.

“Oh my,” said Aunt Tiffenbeth as she struggled to close the window, pulling on the thick, opaque waxed paper that provided shelter. “Perhaps you won’t make it to the other side of the mountain before the storm hits.”

Uncle Stemikenjon leaned over, snapped the carpetbag closed, and handed it to Ellie. “Take the whole thing. If you can’t make it to the crossroads, spend the night with either the Hopperbattyholds or the Dabryhinckses. Tiffenbeth, give her a few more coins to give the neighbors for their trouble.”

Her aunt obediently dug through the abundant material of her skirt to find the cloth pouch.

“Ellicinderpart,” said her uncle, “if you were a young flibbertigibbet, I’d be worried. But you have a sensible head on your shoulders. If you get lost, follow us to the capital as best you can. Once on the main highway, you will be able to stay in reputable taverns, and you can probably find a ride.”

Aunt Tiffenbeth stretched her hand out to deposit a few more coins in Ellie’s palm. “Keep those safe, dear. The clothes in that bag are for everyday. The better gowns will stay with us.” She sighed, carefully depositing the purse back in the deep pocket. “We would wait while you take care of this little chore, but we are to meet up with my sister and her family in Bellsawyer day after tomorrow. Maybe we can wait for

you there.” She turned to her husband. “Stemikenjon, why don’t we wait for Ellicinderpart in Bellsawyer?”

“We can wait an extra day there, but if we tarry too long, we’ll lose our accommodations in Ragar. Better give the child more money for meals and lodging. And a tad more for emergencies.”

Ellie’s mind skittered over the words—emergencies, reputable taverns, Bellsawyer. The possibility of actually getting to Ragar to see the coronation and join in the festivities for the royal wedding flew into the bank of threatening clouds that approached from the west.

“Give her a handkerchief to tie up the coins, Stemikenjon. And young lady, you put the little bundle where no one will suspect you have it. Take the money out when no one is looking, and put just the amount you will need in your pocket.”

“Yes ma’am.” Ellie watched as her aunt once more went through the time-consuming process of finding the pouch, pulling it out of the complicated skirt, pursuing a few coins that rattled at the bottom, and bestowing them upon her with great solemnity. The procedure took too long and tested Ellicinderpart’s patience. But how could she utter, “Please hurry,” between clenched teeth to her generous aunt and uncle?

A second paper window shield snapped into place as Aunt Tiffenbeth returned to shutting out the elements.

Uncle Stemikenjon patted Ellie on the shoulder before returning to the cozy interior of the carriage.

“Hurry along,” he said as he climbed in. “Take care of that goat and join us, either at the crossroads or in Bellsawyer if you’re a day behind us. If you fall farther behind, you can find us at the Strolling Minstrel in Ragar.”

Ellie answered, “Yes sir,” just as the door slammed shut.

The coachman leaned over the edge of the roof with a concerned

look on his face. He tipped his hat to her and clambered over the luggage to regain his perch above the horses. He hollered, "Go on," and flicked the reins. Ellie jumped back as the huge wheels turned beside her.

She watched the coach for only a moment, then turned her gaze to Tak. The silly goat pranced as if delighted she'd been left behind.

Ellie lifted her skirts to avoid the brambly bushes and trudged upward on a hill with more rocks than grass. She didn't want to get her new dress dirty or torn, and she had on soft leather boots that shaped attractively around her ankle. Not only that, she had real stockings on. The fine knit of the hosiery itched, but her legs looked very pretty.

Her cloak caught on a branch. "Oh! I'm going to ruin my beautiful clothes." She cast an angry scowl at the goat, but Tak looked away. The cold had deepened, and her stiff fingers fumbled with the fabric clinging to a row of thorns. The material came away, and she examined her fine cloak for any damage.

"Yer a very, very lucky goat, Tak. If'n I'd found a tear, you would notta been shown to a nice warm barn."

Ellie heard the country accent in her words and repeated them as she clambered over a rocky patch. "You're a very lucky goat. If I'd found a tear, you might not have been escorted to a nice warm barn." She smiled. She could talk right when she needed to. That was due to her ma.

Tak scampered toward her when she reached the ridge, then abruptly changed directions and trotted away.

"Oh, no you don't, Tak. I'm not in the mood for playing catch-me."

Cold, damp wind whipped her cloak aside. She shivered and put down the carpetbag to button against the chill. The valise fit under the ample width of her new cape.

Holding the precious valise of clothing, Ellie looked for Tak. He'd disappeared.

“Tak!”

She heard his bleat and hurried toward an outcropping of rock. Tak stood in a patch of green grass, plucking the blades and chewing. Huffing and puffing, she crossed the level ground and sat on a boulder close to the goat.

First she made sure her cloak protected her new dress, then she looked out across the landscape, getting her bearings. The road her aunt and uncle were traveling wound between hills. In some places, she could see the brown ribbon, and in others, woods or hills blocked her view.

After she caught her breath, she'd take Tak down this mound and into the valley she could see just to the south. The distance to the Hopperbattyholds' didn't amount to much. And they'd be going downhill.

The clouds darkened the land to the west, but something caught the light in the hills across the vale. The sun still shining in the east sent shafts of light through clouds not yet amassed for the storm. For her to see it from this distance, the object must be the size of a house. The glint of reflection winked on and off as the sky collected billows of thick vapor.

A clap of thunder punctuated the last glimmer. Tak raised his raucous voice in protest. Her goat hated rain, hated rain with a will. Tak bolted down the mountainside. Ellie grabbed her carpetbag and scrambled after him.