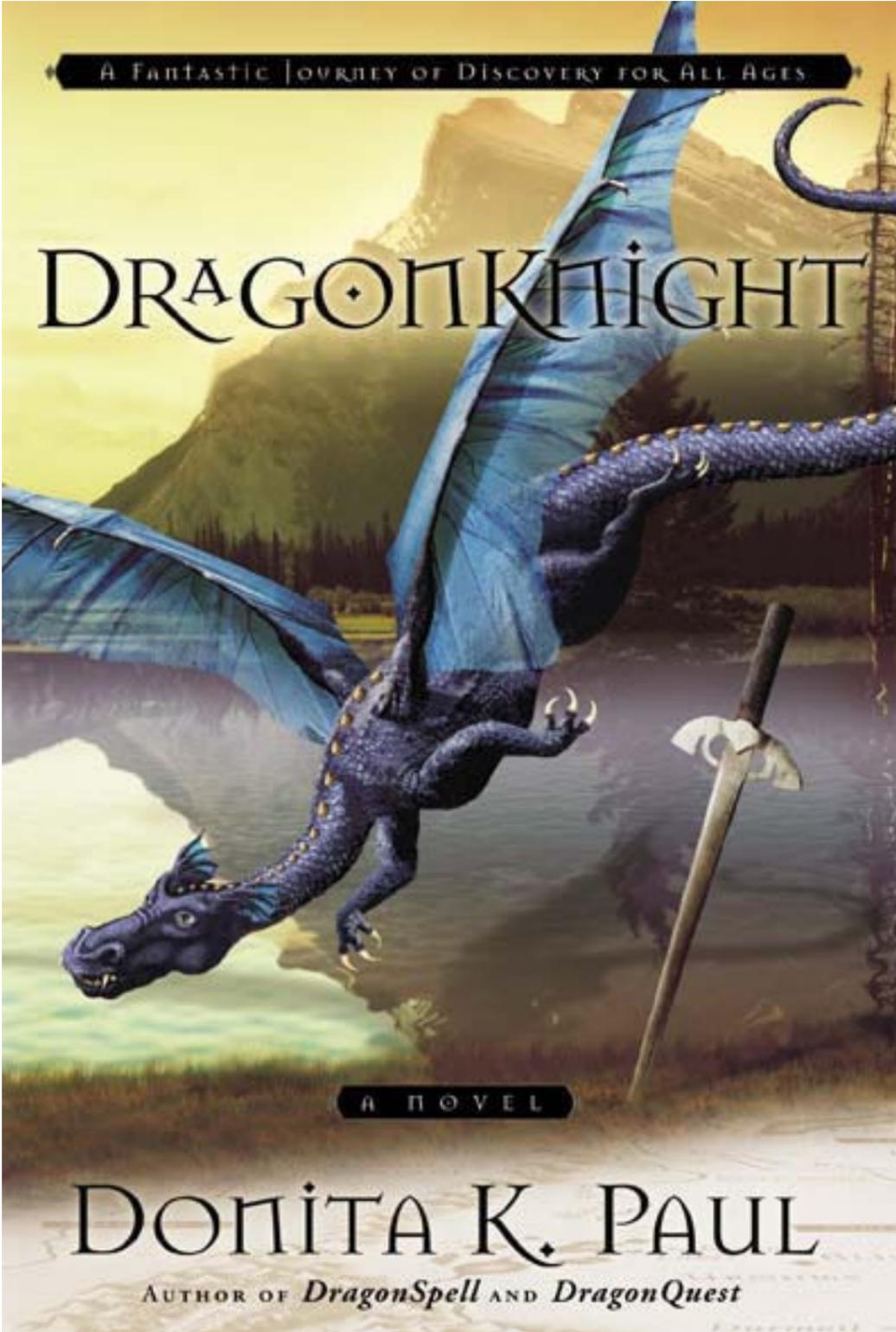


A FANTASTIC JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY FOR ALL AGES

DRAGONKNIGHT

A blue dragon with large, translucent wings is flying over a body of water. The dragon's body is dark blue with yellow spots along its back. In the foreground, a sword with a wooden hilt and a silver blade is planted in the ground. The background shows a landscape with mountains and a forest under a hazy sky.

A NOVEL

DONITA K. PAUL

AUTHOR OF *DragonSpell* AND *DragonQuest*

Praise for
DragonKnight

“*DragonKnight* is a thoroughly enchanting fantasy where dragons speak, tiny mouselike guardians protect normal-sized folk, and young people search for identity. Woven through Donita K. Paul’s carefully crafted world is a strong theme of love, redemption, and the sufficiency of God to see His children through all trials. The icing on this delightful cake is a surprise ending that brings tears of joy!”

—DOUGLAS HIRT, author of the Cradleland Chronicles series

“Donita K. Paul’s inventiveness never ceases to amaze. Fresh ideas for new races of people and unusual creatures keep flowing from her gifted pen. In *DragonKnight*, we meet a few of these and rejoin old friends like Kale, Bardon, Regidor, and the ever-huggable Toopka on a rollicking adventure. As always, this author has a whole bag of tricks up her sleeve—unexpected plot twists, heart-tugging relationships, and captivating characters. ‘Classic’ is written all over this series.”

—JILL ELIZABETH NELSON, author of *Reluctant Burglar*

“*DragonKnight* swept me into the exciting exploits of Bardon and his loyal friends. The inventive and richly compelling characters quickly drew me into their lives and into a fast-paced fantasy adventure.”

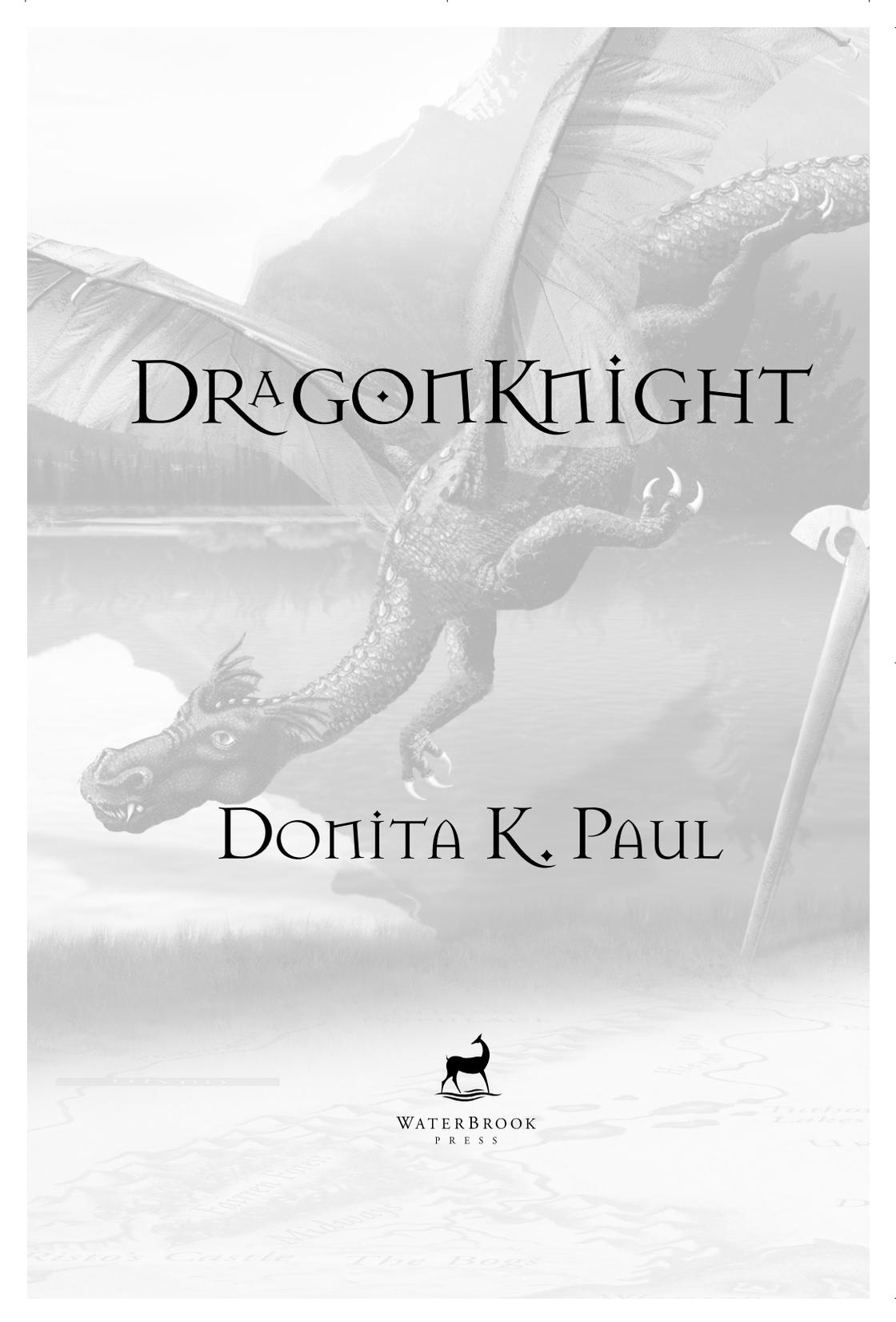
—FAYE SPIEKER, playwright and author of ministry tools for children

“Charming characters in a colorful make-believe world full of beauty and danger. Classic good against evil with wonderful spiritual truths layered throughout and enough twists to keep the reader engaged from first page to last.”

—SANDRA D. MOORE, director, American Christian
Fiction Writers Association

“Donita K. Paul’s new novel examples the skillful weaving of a fantasy story with strong moral lessons and spiritual insights. Throughout her series, Paul has created fascinating characters who battle powerful enemies and learn what it means to live life in the process. As a result, *DragonKnight* is both fun and important reading. Young readers will love the action—and readers of all ages will appreciate the insights.”

—PAUL MOEDE, coauthor of *Good News About Your
Strong-Willed Child*

A detailed illustration of a dragon with large, veined wings and a scaly body, flying over a landscape. The dragon is positioned diagonally across the frame. Below the dragon, a map of a region is visible, showing various locations and geographical features. The overall scene is rendered in a monochromatic, sepia-toned style.

DRAGON KNIGHT

DONITA K. PAUL



WATERBROOK
PRESS

DRAGONKNIGHT

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

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This book is dedicated to these first readers.
It is so much easier to write
to specific readers than to a general audience.
Thanks for representing a whole lot of readers.

Mary and Michael Darnell
Kristianna Lynxwiler
Jason McDonald
Alistair and Ian McNear
Rachael Selk
Amy Stoddard
Rebecca Wilber
Lindsey Winkler

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because:

“Without consultation, plans are frustrated,
But with many counselors they succeed.”

PROVERBS 15:22

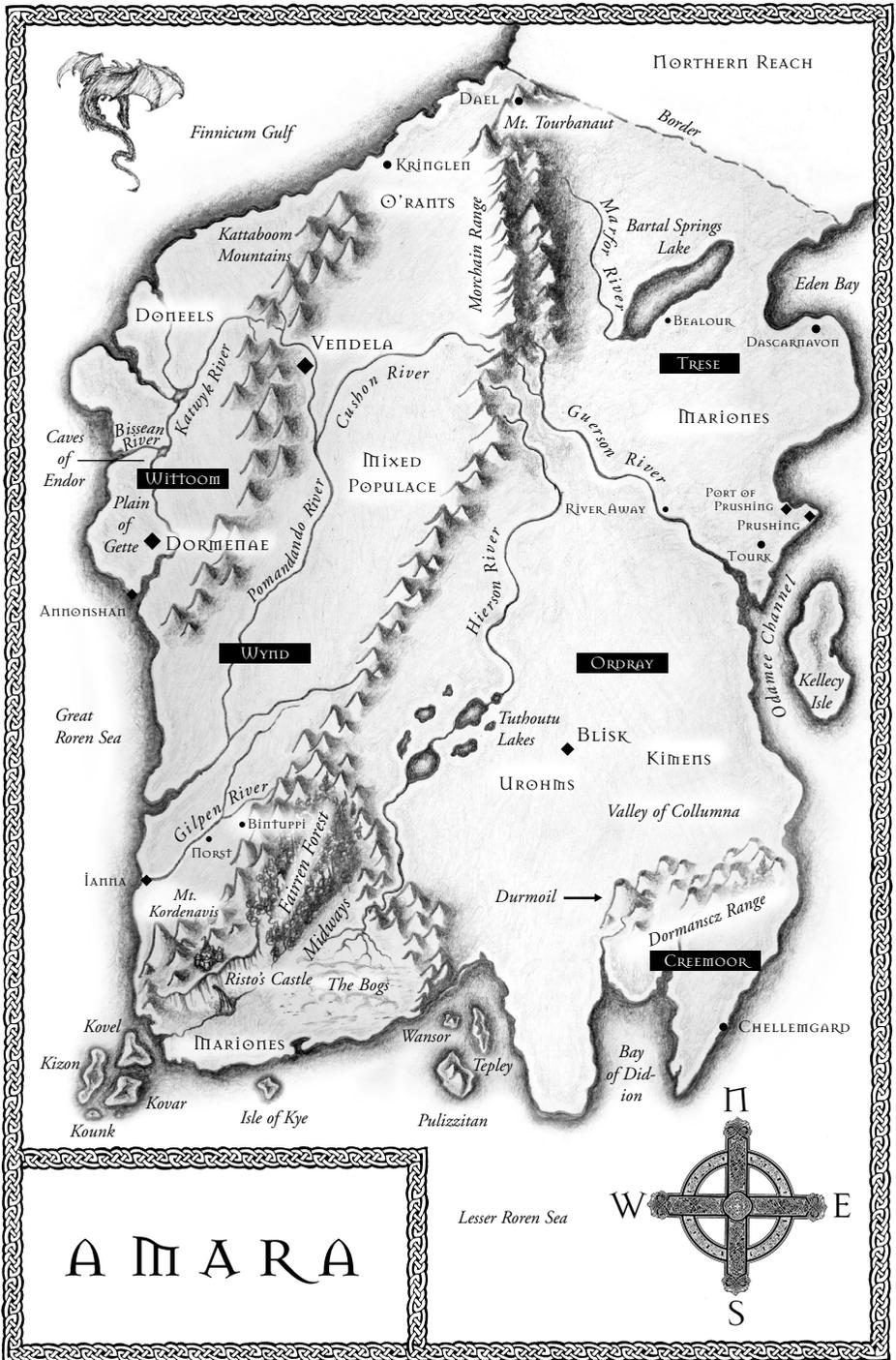
Bonnie Aldrich	Paul Moede
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Jack Hagar	J. Case and Eden Tompkins
Shannon Hill	Ahneka Valdois
Beth Jusino	Elizabeth and Kathleen Wolford
Christine Lynxwiler	Laura Wright

CAST OF CHARACTERS

- Ahnek**—o’rant street urchin, about ten years old
- Captain **Anton**—leader of the guard Sir Dar sends with Bardon
- Ardeo**—white and gray minor dragon, glows in the dark
- Bardon**—o’rant and emerlindian, squire to Sir Dar, in training to Paladin since age six
- Bim** and **Toa**—young twins, sons of cook at inn in Ianna
- Blosker**—marione rider, works for Hoddack
- Bortemiffgaten**—tumanhofer jailer in Ianna
- Bromptotterpindosset**—tumanhofer adventurer and mapmaker, owns shop in Ianna
- Wizard **Burner Stox**—evil female wizard, married to Crim Cropper
- Cadden Glas**—doneel explorer of the Northern Reach
- Wizard **Cam Ayronn**—lake wizard from Trese
- Cise**—o’rant kindia breaker working for Hoddack
- Corduff**—owner of a mine near Ianna
- Wizard **Crim Cropper**—evil male wizard, dabbles in genetics, married to Burner Stox
- Sir **Dar**—doneel diplomat and statesman
- Dibl**—yellow and orange minor dragon, reveals humor in situations, lightens the hearts of his companions
- Lo **D’mon**—not mentioned by name in text, last guard sent with Bardon
- Grand **Dost**—grand emerlindian in charge of Bardon’s spiritual education during Bardon’s time as squire at Dar’s castle
- Faye**—lady’s maid in Dar’s castle
- Wizard **Fenworth**—Bog wizard from Wynd
- Filia**—pink minor dragon, enthusiastic about all things, collects knowledge, some of it quite trivial

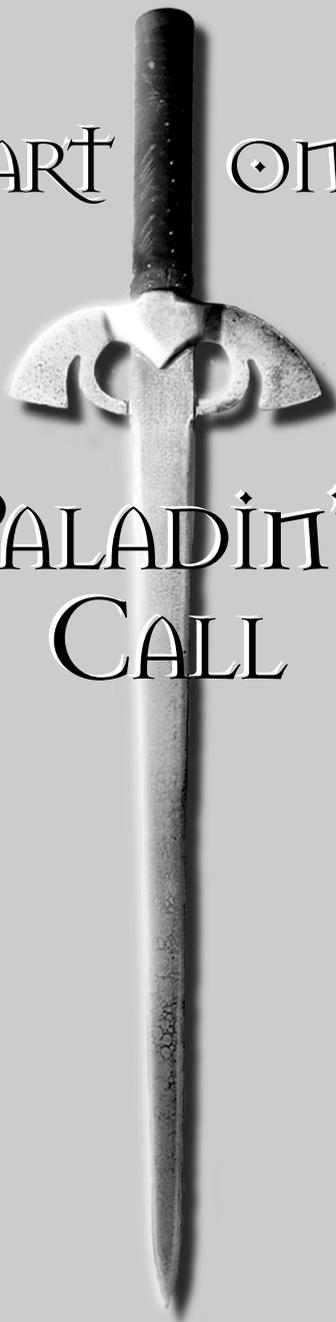
- Gallatennodken**—dealer in antiquities in Ianna
- Gilda**—meech dragon once a cohort of Risto, now lives in a bottle to keep from dissipating because of a spell Risto put on her
- Gledupkonstepper**—sociology professor at The Hall
- Greer**—Bardon's dragon, purple with cobalt wings, former rider a knight who was killed in battle
- Gregger**—investigator working for Harbormaster Mayfil
- Grupnotbaggentogg**—driver of horse-drawn carriage in Ianna
- Gymn**—green minor dragon, heals
- Dame **Hoddack**—wife of Hoddack, her father was original owner of (the rich) farm
- Hoddack**—wealthy marione farm owner and kindia trader
- Holt Hoddack**—young marione son of kindia trader
- Ilex**—o'rant worker on Hoddack's kindia farm
- Magistrate **Inkleen**—magistrate in Ianna
- Sir **Jilles**—N'Rae's father
- Sir **Joffa**—Sir Jilles's older twin brother
- Sir **Jofil**—N'Rae's grandfather
- Jue Seeno**—minneken from the Isle of Kye serving as N'Rae's protector
- Kale Allerion**—o'rant wizard and Dragon Keeper, former village slave, eighteen years old, has gift of finding dragon eggs
- Granny **Kye**—old emerlindian, artist, and N'Rae's grandmother
- Harbormaster **Mayfil**—important official in Ianna
- Librettowit**—tumanhofer librarian to Wizard Fenworth
- Lo **Mees**—one of the guard sent with Bardon
- Metta**—purple minor dragon, sings
- Mistress **Moorp**—housekeeper at Ornopy Halls
- Scribe **Moran**—Bardon's Tome mentor at Castle Pelacce
- Innkeeper **Nald**—owner of inn in Norst
- N'Rae**—emerlindian girl who was raised by ropma and is searching for her father
- Lo **Oh**—one of the guard sent by Sir Dar

- Master **Onit**—marione tavern owner in Norst
- Master **Ornopy**—o'rant landowner in upper Wynd
- Pat**—chubby brown minor dragon, fixes things
- Lo **Pont**—one of guard sent with Bardon
- Regidor**—meech dragon, in search of a colony of lost meech dragons,
likes fancy things, carries an enchanted meech dragon in a bottle
with him
- Wizard **Risto**—evil wizard killed by Fenworth
- Samaralindan**—Bromptotterpindosset's daughter
- Seagram**—Pont's dragon
- Sittiponder**—blind tumanhofer orphan and seer
- Taylaminkadot**—tumanhofer housekeeper in Fenworth's castle
- Toopka**—doneel child, under guardianship of Kale and Sir Dar
- Trum Aspect**—courtier and merchant representative at Sir Dar's court



PART ONE

PALADIN'S
CALL



SABBATICAL

“People. Always too many people.”

Only the leathery beat of Greer’s dragon wings answered Bardon’s observation. Cool air rushed against Bardon’s face, blowing away the cares of three intense years of training and study.

He squeezed his knees into the riding hooks and leaned forward across the major dragon’s neck. Brisk mountain air rose off the snow-topped mountain and blew his dark hair back from his pale face. Soon he should be able to spot the valley Sir Dar had recommended. He needed time alone. The first part of his sabbatical would be spent in isolation.

Bardon put a hand on Greer’s purple scales and communicated his desire to locate a lake shaped like a boot.

Looking down at the forested slopes, he speculated on how many of the seven high races populated the area. A smile spread across his face. It was likely that not one civilized being walked this southern part of the Morchain Mountain Range for a hundred miles in any direction.

He saw a ropma scurry across a rocky stream.

“Don’t worry, fella. I won’t bother you if you don’t bother me. I’m taking a break from everyone, both high and low races.”

Greer rumbled in his throat, and Bardon placed a hand on the amethystine scales of his dragon’s neck. “No, I’m not running away from you, my friend. And in truth, I’m not really running away from civilization. I just need a sabbatical, a long sabbatical.”

Ahead, two peaks stood taller than the rest. Bardon mentally guided the major dragon toward the landmark Dar had given him. He thought

about the parting from the wise little doneel.

The room had bustled with activity like all the rooms in Castle Pelacce. Dar had taken Bardon aside to speak words of encouragement and instruction, but the constant commotion intruded on their conversation.

"I'm proud of you, Bardon." Dar's small furry hand had rested on his squire's arm. "You've developed a gracious social presence. I know it's been hard for you, but I consider it one of your greatest accomplishments."

Inwardly, Bardon had cringed when a woman's piercing laugh rose over the clucking babble of a small group of ladies. Squire Bardon glanced at Sir Dar. He couldn't speak of his concern to the knight he admired so much. Every day Bardon underwent a great struggle to project that image of serenity Sir Dar assumed was real.

He thinks too well of me. The young man wrestled with a truth he did not like. *After three years, this knight-in-training is only better at hiding his uneasiness.*

I find the social life Sir Dar thrives on to be overwhelming. Bardon looked around at the gregarious crowd. Sir Dar smiled sincerely at a marionette's comment as he passed. The squire wished they had chosen a secluded spot for this conversation. But the Castle Pelacce boiled with activity in every quarter.

When does a day pass that someone, important or not, isn't visiting? Dozens of outsiders, along with the bustling staff, roam these hallways.

While his mentor gazed fondly at a group of giggling women, Bardon watched the finely dressed, diminutive doneel ladies and strove to keep his face neutral. *I've given up trying to keep Sir Dar's extended family straight. Are those cousins? I can't remember who's who. There are dozens of families, not just dozens of individuals.*

The uncomfortable memory faded. Bardon put aside the aggravation of court life as Greer passed between the two peaks and headed south. The rough terrain beneath them looked even more uninhabited.

I'm thankful this time of reflection is required before I take my final vow to Paladin. I'm already enjoying the peace of being out of civilization. Nothing within the city compares with the beauty I beheld last night as I watched

the heavens from my campsite. Even the stars seemed to celebrate my freedom. That comet rising from the southwestern horizon may be my herald of a contented sabbatical.

I can be gone from a month to a year. At this point, I intend to take every day of a whole year to relish the isolation. Searching my soul as I count the cost of this alliance is only part of what I must examine.

Bardon stroked Greer's neck. By using the wordless communication of mindspeaking common to a rider and his dragon, the squire often confided his thoughts to his dragon. The young squire was well aware that his closest companion already knew every detail of his life. Nonetheless, when he talked to Greer, he didn't feel like he indulged in melancholy musings. Friendly chats with the droll dragon often lifted his spirits.

Bardon gazed at the unpopulated mountain region. He would have to guard against falling into self-pity. The solemn reality of his lonely life threatened to accompany him on his chance for a relaxed time of meditation.

I lived at The Hall from the time I was six, he told Greer, until I was eighteen—a dozen years in a room with five other occupants. Dormitory life doesn't allow much time for solitude. I don't mind telling you, Greer, I crave really being alone.

Greer beat his powerful wings and rose several hundred feet to soar over a broad mountaintop. On the other side stretched a highland valley, cradling a long lake.

"That water looks to be the shape of a boot." Bardon leaned over the neck of his mount. "Sir Dar said the cabin is on the east side, close to the heel."

Greer banked and headed for the eastern shore at the southernmost end of the clear lake. Clouds reflected in the blue water, and as Greer passed over, an image of the dragon's purple body and cobalt wings glided across the rippling surface.

They landed on the shoreline where stubby grass and tiny, fragrant, white mountain flowers covered the bank for twenty yards before under-sized trees erupted in dense woods. The vegetation grew lush because of a

long tropical growing season but was short due to the altitude.

A one-level, split-log cabin sat at the edge of the forest.

Bardon swung his leg over the saddle horn, unhooked his other leg, and slid to the ground. With hands much practiced at his task, he unbuckled the straps of the saddle and laid it and the saddle packs on the ground. The young squire stood with his fists on his hips and surveyed the peaceful scene.

Greer stretched out his wings and shook them with a rattle of the thin leather hide. He then tucked them close to his body and rolled in the sweet-scented grass. When his itches were subdued, he strolled to the edge of the lake and took a deep drink. The dragon lifted his head with water dripping from his chin and looked back at his rider.

“Yes,” agreed Bardon. “I bet some very big fish swim in these waters.”

He picked up two bundles of personal belongings, leaving the other gear to stow later. Right now he wanted to inspect what would be his secluded home for the next few months. He would read the books he’d brought, contemplate life, and seek Wulder’s presence, hoping for a clear direction. Should he be a knight after all these years of preparation, or should he settle into a less demanding occupation?

Bardon walked slowly, in no hurry to commence these weighty meditations. He’d been so sure knighthood was his calling. Obviously, his unknown father had desired this future for his son, or he wouldn’t have left him at The Hall. But as Bardon trained under Sir Dar, he began to realize that the lofty words *servant to Paladin* actually meant “servant to mankind.”

The idea of serving the noble ruler of Amara had a pristine quality to it. In reality, this serving meant forever dealing with the sullied high races. Instead of walking on a more elevated plane than the average citizen, Bardon found himself mingling with and humbling himself for an unappreciative, uneducated, ratty populace.

“People,” he muttered. “Way too many people.”

He reached the door of the cabin, and without putting down either bundle, he awkwardly lifted the latch. He nudged the heavy wooden

plank open with his foot and stepped into the dimly lit room. His nose twitched. He smelled what could have been a hot meal eaten not long before. With shoulders tensed, he lowered his burden to the floor and put a hand on his sword hilt.

The cabin didn't feel right. Abandoned for over a year, the interior should have had a musty odor. Dust motes floated in sunbeams shining through polished windows. A door stood open to a small bedroom.

Bardon crossed the main room silently and peered in at two made beds. A simple dress hung on a peg on the wall. A set of shelves held other feminine clothing folded neatly.

He scanned the room. No one lurked in the shadows. He turned to search the rest of the small cabin. Two other rooms didn't seem to be in use. But it was abundantly clear the kitchen area and the sitting room had accommodated someone earlier in the day.

He marched out of the house and asked Greer if he had seen or heard anyone in the immediate vicinity. The dragon had not, but took to the sky for a scouting trip. The young squire soon had an answer.

What do you mean, 'uh-oh'? Bardon glared at the flying dragon. *Two women, one very old and one young?* He frowned. *What are they doing?*

Bardon didn't appreciate the dragon's comments on how delicious the berries would be when the women returned with two basketfuls.

I doubt they are picking enough to satisfy your appetite.

He turned on his heel and tramped back into the house, snatching up his bundles as he went through the door.

Sir Dar gave me permission to occupy this house, and this is where I am going to stay! These women are certainly not here because they were invited.

He carried his possessions through the sitting room and into the second unoccupied bedroom. He tossed the bags on the bed and went out to haul in the rest of his provisions. In a deliberate surge of activity, he stowed all his belongings. Then, packing a wire, a bottle with a cork stopper, and a hunk of cheese in a knapsack, he went out to the lake. He stopped to whack off a slender, five-foot-long branch from a borling tree, then picked off its smaller limbs as he walked.

The nutty scent of the wood soothed his agitation. Survival skills had been his favorite part of training. He relished the fresh air, the music of woodland noises, and the busyness of living off the land.

I will enjoy these months alone. At this moment, I will focus on what is at hand.

Thank You, Wulder, for Your gift of this time and this place.

A rock outcropping jutted into the water. Bardon clambered over a pile of smooth boulders and sat on a ledge. Settling into a comfortable position with his feet dangling over the water, he pulled out a string and the wire from his pocket. With nimble fingers, he fashioned a hook from the wire and attached it to the string, then the string to the pole. In a matter of minutes, he threw a fishing line with the cork from his bottle into the water.

Greer ambled toward the rocky ridge to sit within a few yards on the grassy bank. Bardon tried to ignore the ripple of amusement coming from the dragon's mind.

"Why don't you go fishing?" he asked.

The dragon stretched his neck over the water.

"Not here!" Bardon jerked his line and jutted his chin out toward the long expanse of shoreline. "Go to the other end of the lake. Sir Dar said the water is quite deep there."

Greer looked to the north and then over his shoulder at the stunted forest.

"No," said Bardon. "I don't need you to stay and help greet the ladies." He paused to absorb the dragon's response. "I am *not* in a foul mood, and I will not catch any fish with you hanging over my shoulder. Go have your dinner and let me catch mine."

Greer spread his wings and abruptly took off, but not before Bardon heard the rumble in his throat that indicated the dragon was laughing at his rider.

Bardon ducked as a draft from the strong, leathery wings nearly knocked him off his rocky perch. But Greer's good humor dispersed the last of his rider's prickly temper. By the time Bardon looked up to see his friend soaring above the mountain lake, a grin had replaced his scowl.

He pulled in his line, reset the bait, and cast his hook into the water. Then he leaned back against the rocky ledge and watched Greer rather than the cork floating in the placid lake below.

The purple dragon circled over the lake. One moment he spiraled in a lazy pattern, the next, he tucked his wings and plummeted into the water. He came out again, stretching his neck skyward, flapping his wings, and leaving a waterfall of droplets cascading from his body. Even across the distance, Bardon felt the satisfaction that pulsed through the dragon as he swallowed his catch.

Bardon's gaze locked on Greer as the dragon repeated the performance many times. The dragon didn't feed every day, but when he did, he ate until sated. With the close connection between dragon and rider, Bardon grew more and more content as his friend satisfied his hunger. He leaned against the sun-warmed rock and sighed. Even if he had to eat hardtack tonight instead of fried fish, he would be immeasurably happier here than at the busy Castle Pelacce in the heart of bustling Dormenae.

Bardon wiggled his foot, feeling as if a muscle in his calf had drawn taut. The cramp intensified. He opened his eyes and sat up. Around the circumference of his lower leg, a writher snake had coiled its two-inch-thick, moss green body.

Bardon held his breath. Writher snakes, though small in circumference, had muscles that were strong like cables, teeth like razors, and a reputation for drowning their victims. Bardon wondered how old this writher might be. Legend said they grew five feet longer every year, but never any thicker. This one's tail still hung beneath the surface of the lake.

With its head lifted, the snake's pale eyes gazed dispassionately at its victim. A black, forked tongue flickered, tasting the air. Hissing with an odd cadence like the humming of a song, the serpent bobbed its head to and fro.

Bardon eased his hand to his waist, where a leather sheath held his hunting knife. The creature flinched and drew back toward the water, squeezing its victim's leg and pulling him toward death. The snake paused, flicked its tongue, bobbed its head, and stared at the face of its prey.

Bardon's fingers inched over the finely braided leather loop that secured the large knife. With no other part of his body moving, he pushed a finger under the catch and freed the blade. He took a slow, steadying breath and tensed for the one attempt he would have to kill the beast. He whipped the blade out in a smooth motion and swung to slice off the snake's head. The snake dodged the knife and struck at Bardon's leg. His boot saved him from the serpent's bite. The tough leather tore, but the teeth did not penetrate.

The snake jerked, tightening its grip, and moved toward the water. As if understanding the threat of the knife, it laid its head along its victim's inner knee, too close to the rock for Bardon to reach without slicing his own leg.

Flipping onto his stomach, Bardon tried to find something to hang on to, something to help him resist being dragged beneath the cold waters. He dug the fingers of one hand and the knife in the other hand against the hard surface of the rock. The stone gave no purchase. He slid farther as the snake pulled.

Bardon knew just when Greer recognized his rider's distress and flew toward the south end of the lake. The amount of fish he'd eaten slowed his flight. His movements would be sluggish, but the dragon would not abandon his rider.

Again the snake yanked backward, and Bardon fell off the rock. Just before his head splashed beneath the surface, he heard the enraged battle cry of a dragon above him and a feminine screech of horror from the shore.

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