

DragonSpell

Donita K. Paul



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DRAGONSPELL

DONITA K. PAUL



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God has blessed me by bringing young people into my life. This book is dedicated to my first readers. They kept me on my toes and the story progressing.

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ALMOST THERE

“Are ye sure ye won’t ride all the way into the city?”

Kale hardly heard the farmer’s question as she stood beside his wagonload of barley grain. Her eyes looked over the crude cart she’d traveled in and then turned to the dazzling metropolis across the wide valley. The sun sparkled on Vendela, a city of sheer white walls, shining blue roofs, and golden domes. Many spires and steeples and turrets towered above the city, but in a vast variety of shapes and colors. More than a dozen castles clustered outside the capital, and more palaces were scattered over the landscape across a wide river.

Seeing Vendela reminded Kale her life had changed forever. Her hand rose to her chest and rested on the small pouch hidden under her clothes.

I have a destiny. The thought scared her and pleased her too. After being a village slave all fourteen years of her life, she’d been freed.

Well, sort of free.

One week ago she’d left River Away, her village of two dozen homes, a shop, a tavern, and a meetinghouse. In maybe another week, she’d go through the tall gates of the most beautiful walled city in all of Amara, quite possibly in the entire civilized world. It would take a week to get used to the clamor. She could feel it from here.

I’d go mad in my head if I stepped into Vendela tonight.

The city pulsated with thoughts and feelings of more people than she could count. On market day in River Away, she endured thirty or forty people close enough for her to feel their lives bumping against the walls of her inner person. But Vendela...

I might smother. I’ll go slowly into that city. Nobody knows I’m coming. I don’t have to hurry. A mile or so a day. Slow, till it feels comfortable.

A lot of things worried her. It was easy to say you were glad not to be a slave any longer. It was hard to walk alone into a place you’d never been before. Nobody knew or cared about her in Vendela.

In River Away, most everybody cared, even if the caring revolved around whether or not she worked hard.

“Girl!” The old man’s bark jerked Kale from her thoughts. He scowled at her. “I’m going right into the city. Ye might as well ride with me.”

“Thank you, Farmer Brigg, but I’d just as soon walk the rest of the way. I can look at how pretty Vendela is.”

She smiled up at him, feeling some affection for the gruff old man. She’d ridden the last leg of her journey beside him on the wide wooden seat. He’d been kind to her, sharing his bread and cheese and stories of all the wonders in the great city. Nevertheless, Kale would not be rushed into entering Vendela. She’d do it in her own time.

“Ye’re headed for The Hall, aren’t ye?” His pale blue eyes twinkled under bushy gray eyebrows.

Kale didn’t answer. To say yes would give away more about herself than she intended. Not such a good idea, trusting someone outside your own village, even a grandfatherly, talkative old farmer.

“Well, I see ye’re not going to tell me.” He winked at her and then looked off at the city, his expression growing grim. “Should ye get in trouble, go to The Goose and The Gander Tavern, North City. Ask for Maye. Tell her ye’re a friend of mine, and she’ll help ye if she can.”

“I will,” said Kale, and waved good-bye to the old man before trudging up the hill, away from the road. She listened to the squeak of the axle and creak of the wheels but didn’t turn to watch the farmer’s wagon lumber down the sloping road. Among an hour’s worth of advice, Mistress Meiger had said to keep her focus on what’s ahead.

Kale sighed. *Mistress Meiger knows best.*

Lush gorse bushes covered the grassy slope. The hill nestled right against one of the mountain peaks. Farmer Brigg had known the names of all the peaks in the Morchain Range. His stories of how the names came to be fascinated Kale, but it was tales of Vendela that caught her attention. After all, Vendela would be her home.

Just over the rise, she found a place to settle. She sat with her back to a gum tree, her bare feet propped up on a stone outcropping. She rested her arms on knees pulled up to her chin and her chin on her folded arms. Then Kale took a long peaceful breath of the hot summer air and allowed herself the luxury of gazing at beautiful Vendela. The twisting spires and floating spheres were beyond anything she had imagined. The whole scene looked like a magical picture, clean and bright and full of promise.

Pulling the thong at her neck, Kale drew out a soft scarlet pouch. She placed it between her hands, gently rubbing the material, enjoying the satin finish, elated by the secret of the stonelike egg within. The egg warmed, responding to her excitement. It thrummed. The gentle vibration communicated joy and anticipation through Kale’s sensitive fingers.

With her eyes back on the city, Kale talked aloud. “In a week we’ll be going to The Hall. I’ll be

servant of the people then, not a slave. That's higher class than I ever dreamed of being. Fancy food, fancy clothes, fancy education."

She smoothed the silky cloth at her throat with one rough hand. Mistress Meiger had given her the long blue scarf the night her husband, Chief Councilman Meiger, told Kale to go to Vendela. The rest of Kale's homespun attire reflected her social status. Her trousers had two patches, one at the knee and one at her seat. She wore a shirt, a tunic, and the blue scarf. Travel dust covered every inch of her. She'd find a stream and clean up before entering Vendela.

A new life awaited her in that beautiful city. Not one person in all of River Away remembered the time when a local had been sent to The Hall. Master Meiger said to hold the honor tight. Kale held it tight all right, if only to convince herself she wasn't scared like a squawking peeper fallen out of the nest.

Focus on what's ahead.

"We'll travel and do Paladin's bidding." She grinned at that. "Sounds pretty high and mighty for the likes of me."

For a few moments, she stared at the fairy-tale castles surrounding the walled city. Seven bridges of jewel colors crossed the Pomandando River on the eastern side. Each bridge led to a towering entrance to the inner city.

"People from each of the seven high races cross those bridges at one time or another," she whispered.

The wall in the River Away Tavern had a mural of a brotherhood marching across a mountain pass. Each of the races was represented. Crudely drawn, the figures nonetheless looked excited to be adventuring.

Kale imagined a similar procession crossing one of the great bridges. "Bantam doneels, giant urohms, the elegant emerlindians, fighting mariones, tumanhofers, swift kimens, and o'rants." Kale sighed. "O'rants, like me. Chief Councilman Meiger said he thought I was an o'rant though he'd never seen one. Another reason for me to go to The Hall, he said."

She squinted as a large, dark shape swooped over the far mountains and headed for Vendela. She jumped to her feet and could not keep from bouncing on her toes as she recognized a Greater Dragon. It circled the city, a dark silhouette passing in front of the iridescent white towers.

Kale tucked the pouch safely back into her shirt and scrambled up the steep hillside, hoping for a better view. She stopped and gave a whoop as she saw two more of the majestic creatures crest the mountains and make a downward approach to Vendela.

Climbing the sharp incline on her hands and knees now, Kale grabbed branches and jagged rocks to hoist herself up. She topped the embankment and rolled over the edge.

Guttural shouts greeted her arrival. Rough, hairy hands grabbed her arms and legs. A putrid smell

filled her nose, and her mouth watered in revulsion. Her stomach lurched. *Grawligs?*

Kale had heard tales told in the tavern. Nothing smelled as bad as the mountain ogres. She saw da hairy legs, a leather loincloth, tattered cloth hanging over a barrel chest, fat lips, yellowed teeth, grossly flabby nose, and tiny eyes, solidly black. *Grawligs!*

Two of the mountain ogres flipped her through the air. Her muscles tightened as she expected to come crashing down among the rocks. Instead, another grawlig snatched her before she hit the ground and a screech ripped from her mouth. A burst of raucous laughter greeted her alarm. Her captors joyfully sped up their game of toss.

One grawlig claimed her as his prize. He slung her over his shoulder, his hard muscles smashing into her middle, forcing the air from her lungs. He gave a hoot of triumph and ran around the clearing camp with the others chasing him. Kale hung upside down with her arms dangling. Her face bounced into the oily, matted hair on his back.

They'll kill me! They'll play with me, then kill me.

The grawlig's beefy hands tightened on her thighs, and she felt herself swung in an arc over his head. He jumped and twisted, performing some kind of ritual dance with the others howling and gyrating around them. Kale desperately tried to pull in one cleansing breath of air.

“Stupid o’rant. Stupid o’rant.” The ogre’s taunt filled her ears. “We heard you coming.”

He released Kale and launched her frail body across the clearing toward the ridge she had climbed. Just before she sailed over the thirty-foot drop, another grawlig caught her by an arm and the back of her tunic. He swung her over his head, chanting.

“Stupid o’rant. Stupid o’rant. We heard you coming.”

He changed the angle of the swing. Now her head came within inches of the ground and then high above the grawlig’s massive skull. Pain roared within her head with every sweep. On the next swing downward, she fought darkness closing in around her. She lost.

INTO THE MOUNTAIN

Old leaves, moldy and partially decomposed, softened the ground beneath Kale. Her nose wrinkled against the musty smell. Her head felt like a cracked melon, and her eyes refused to open. Her stomach wanted to heave. The putrid smell of rotting garbage tormented her.

She shifted. A hard lump pressed against her rib cage. The egg! The rock-hard egg was still intact. Kale tried to sit. Bindings around her wrists and ankles stopped her. *Grawligs!*

She remembered the huge hairy grawligs and their rowdy game. She felt again the helplessness of being tossed from one rough ogre to another. Terror sickened her. They hadn't killed her, but she felt that every muscle in her body had been stomped on.

She slit her eyes open and peered at her surroundings. Grawligs lay sprawled around a campfire. Beyond the light cast by burning logs, night shadows hid the forest. Two females turned spits, roasting what looked like large deer. A group lounged almost in a pile under trees across the clearing. The rhythmic noises Kale assumed must be a song.

No one seemed to be interested in the captive trussed up and lying under a bush. Two grawligs sat just a few feet away as if they'd been set to guard her. Even they ignored her. They picked over a knee-high pile of dirty mushrooms, popping them into their drooling mouths, smacking their lips. They chomped on the treats.

Kale closed her eyes against the sight, hoping to protect her stomach. The repulsive smell of the grawligs could not be shut out so easily. To distract herself, she searched her memory for tales of the mountain ogres.

What's true and what's fable?

In the stories, they eat anything they catch. Lucky for me, it looks like they prefer roasted venison and roasted o'rant.

Dumb and vicious. I think I can testify to that much.

Afraid of tight places? Maybe.

Clumsy with their fingers.

Moving her head just enough to look down, Kale examined the cloth binding her hands together. She wiggled her wrists, and the loose knot unraveled.

Well, they don't tie knots very well.

She glanced up at her guards to see if they'd noticed her movements. They were still bent over, stuffing the forest fungi past their flabby lips.

Carefully, she moved her ankles apart an inch, and then back and forth until she could slip her bare feet out of the binding.

Can I escape?

She watched the two grawligs push dirt-encrusted mushrooms into their mouths. Their patience dwindled with every minute. Soon they would have nothing to distract them. Could she crawl away now? Would they turn and catch her? Should she wait until the females declared the roasting deer done and passed the meat around?

If I wait too long, I'll probably be dessert.

Kale made her decision. Rolling onto her stomach, she crawled deeper into the bushes surrounding the camp. The grawligs' caterwauling covered the crunch of leaves and twigs under her as she slipped away from the light. On the other side of low bushes she found herself against boulders, part of the mountain looming over the smaller hills.

She rose to her hands and knees and crept another ten yards. Then on her feet, but still near the ground, she doubled over, she followed the jumble of rocks. Her muscles protested, but she pushed on.

Distance muffled the noisy voices of her captors. Kale breathed more deeply, begging her body to relax. Surely tension caused as much of her pain as the injuries inflicted by the grawligs.

A shout went up from the camp, followed by a clamor of voices and howls from the angry brutes.

Kale quickened her pace, looking over her shoulder, expecting to see dark, hairy shapes rising out of the forest to chase her. One misplaced foot slipped into a hole, and she found herself sliding, not away from the rocks and down the mountainside, but into a narrow opening under a huge boulder. She grabbed for roots to try and break her fall. Loose dirt rained down around her as she continued to scabble, sliding ten feet farther before landing on a hard rock floor.

The impact jarred her aching body. She clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut against the pain. Debris still showered on her head. Instinctively, she lifted her arms to cover her hair.

The last trickle of dirt slowed and then settled. Kale relaxed her jaw and opened her eyes. Pitch darkness surrounded her. She listened and heard the *plink* of dripping water somewhere behind her. She shivered. Goosebumps rose on her arms.

Cold and frightened, she looked around for a means to escape. Peering upward, she could make out the opening and the starry sky beyond.

A cave. This may be good. Aren't grawligs afraid of closed-in places? I sure hope so.

A scuffling warned her that the grawligs were tramping around in the forest above her.

Maybe they'll just pass on by.

She heard branches snap, grunts and low voices, and an excited exclamation. She'd been found. The heads of three ugly grawligs blocked out the dim light from above.

They chanted, "Stupid o'rant. Stupid o'rant. We smelled you."

Kale slumped in a heap, clutching her knees, and leaned against the cold rock wall. Too tired to think, too tired to fight despair, she allowed the tears to come.

"Stupid o'rant. Stupid o'rant. We smelled you."

The chant grew louder as more tormenters joined the first three grawligs kneeling by the hole. A hairy arm reached down and groped along the sides of the rock. More dirt, leaves, and twigs fell over Kale's head.

The young o'rant girl curled tighter, shrinking from the voices above. Her hand searched for her treasure, pulling it out by the leather cord. She grasped the smooth cloth of the drawstring pouch. At first the egg inside lay cold and unresponsive. Gradually, it grew warm. Kale concentrated on the soft thrum in her hand, blocking out the "stupid o'rant" chant of the grawligs.

Pain and fatigue, fear and panic drained away. She shifted around to find a fairly comfortable position on the stony floor. With the pouch gripped in her hand and pressed against her cheek, she fell asleep.

When she opened her eyes once more, streams of light shone into the cave at three spots. The first was directly above her. A head covered with matted brown hair lay partially inside the hole. Kale could see a large hairless ear and part of the loose lips of the beast. Rough snores rumbled above.

A beam no more than a hand's width descended from a second hole in the ceiling. The third opening on the opposite side of the dismal cave showed more promise. Not only was the hole big enough for Kale to wiggle through, but also large boulders like uneven stairsteps made climbing possible.

She stood and stumbled across the uneven cave floor. She looked up and studied the hole she hoped to use for her escape. Since the ceiling of the cave sloped upward, it would be a long climb compared to the slide last night.

"I'm thankful that's not the hole I fell through," she whispered.

Tucking her treasure inside the neck of her blouse, she started climbing. She placed each foot

carefully and tested each ledge before shifting her whole weight. She didn't want to cause a landslide for two reasons: *I don't want to wake those grawligs, and I don't want to be buried under a ton of boulders. I want out of here alive. I want to get to Vendela in one piece.*

Warm air touched her hand as she placed it on the next rock. Contrasted with the chill air surrounding her, it felt like a breath from the mouth of a huge animal. She pulled her hand back and listened. Faintly she heard the coarse snores of grawligs and the morning chatter of birds in the trees outside, an odd combination. Within the cave, only the drip of water from a far corner reached her ears.

Cautiously, she eased up to peer over the rock. A narrow passage stretched back into the darkness. Moist air flowed steadily from the opening.

I wonder what's back there.

Again she tilted her head and listened intently. No sound came through the tunnel opening, no sound at all. Curiosity niggled at her thoughts.

What's in that tunnel? How far back does it go? Why warm air?

She found herself crouched next to the hole and leaning in. She'd have to crawl on hands and knees. If she had a light of some sort, she could go in. She put a hand on the floor of the tunnel and placed her head within the opening.

What am I doing? I don't want to go in there. I want to get away from the grawligs.

She drew back as if she'd nearly stepped off a high cliff. Her breathing came in quick, panicked puffs. Clenching her fists, fighting the urge to plunge into the tunnel, she remembered Mistress Meiger's stern face.

Focus on what's ahead.

Kale stretched a hand up and grabbed a rock ledge. In a minute she'd be out of the cave.

Still she wanted to turn back and explore the tunnel. The powerful urge to go through the underground passage scared her. It made no sense.

She climbed the last few feet to the top of the cave with firm determination. Kale cautiously poked her head and then her shoulders above the ground. Squinting in the bright morning sun, she considered the bushes around the rocks where she had fallen into the cave. Her present outlook was higher and good twenty feet west of the sprawled grawligs. Not all of them had fallen asleep around the hole. That meant some were out of sight.

Awake or asleep? And how many?

As near as she could count, eleven uncouth ogres lay in piles in and around the bushes. Last night dozens of grawligs had gathered in the camp.

Where are the others?

She surveyed the surrounding area, first the low ground ahead. Then she turned and peered about her. The best route of escape lay over the rocks going west.

At least that looks like the best way.

She looked again at the beasts below. The grawligs might sleep for some time. They had feasted late and probably guzzled brillum, a brewed ale that none of the seven high races would consume.

Five, maybe ten minutes, and I'll be in and out of that tunnel.

She slipped back into the cave and into the stone burrow before she could think twice about what she planned to do.

Thick, moist air settled on her skin as she groped her way in the dark. A sweet fragrance grew heavier as she moved farther and farther away from the cave. The dark, the smell, the damp, all screamed danger in her mind. Her arms and legs kept moving. She argued with herself, trying to force her body to back up and leave both the tunnel and the cave. None of her words, muttered softly in the cloying atmosphere, reached her ears.

Enchantment! she realized with a groan. She could not resist whatever pulled her into depths of darkness.

Trembling, she hoped fear would cause her to collapse.

Then I'd stop. Then I couldn't go one bit farther.

But I probably couldn't scoot backward either.

I'd be stuck. Stuck until I die.

BLUE CAVERN

Darkness in the tunnel pressed against Kale. Each time she tried to stop, her arms and legs ached to move forward. She bit back the whimper that rose to her lips.

Whining never got me out of a lick of work as a village slave. It won't help here...Focus on what ahead.

Oh no! Somehow focusing on what's ahead doesn't seem the right thing to do. I don't want to follow Mistress Meiger's wise advice.

I mustn't give up. The things I learned in River Away are a part of me, and those things are good and strong and pure. What did she say? What did she say? 'Focus on what's ahead. Use what is behind.' Use what is behind. There is always something from your past that will help you with your future. Use what is behind.

Perhaps when she got to wherever this force pulled her, she would have a chance to defend herself.

She tried to imagine herself swinging fists at some unseen foe. Bolley and Gronmere often fought in the square of River Away, showing off their talent as fighting mariones. She tried to picture how they held their short, muscular bodies as they prepared to lunge at each other. Instead, she saw Mistress Avion's chicken coop.

More enchantment. I can't even see in my mind what I want to see.

She groaned again and hunched down so that she was almost on her belly. She squirmed through the narrowing tunnel. The rough walls came closer together, and still she crept forward. The heavy smell of minerals choked her, and still she couldn't stop. Inch by inch she moved into the darkness.

I'm probably in the middle of this mountain by now.

Her knees hurt from scraping over the uneven rock surface, and the tops of all ten toes felt raw. Instead of slowing down, she moved faster. The enchantment grew stronger, urging her on.

I hope there's no hungry beast waiting for me. I don't want to be somebody's breakfast.

Her own stomach grumbled. Farmer Brigg's bread and cheese were a distant memory.

A soft, azure glow appeared ahead. She breathed a sigh of relief.

The end of the tunnel. Whether it's good or bad, it's better than crawling through this tiny space wondering and worrying.

The bluish light continued to beckon. Excitement overcame the dread in her heart. The cramped passage abruptly opened up to a vast underground chamber. She twisted to put her legs in front of her. As she hopped down into the cavern, she saw lights glistening from millions of tiny sapphire-like stones embedded in the rock walls. An additional glow emanated from icicle-like formations hanging from the ceiling and thrusting up from the floor.

They look like sharp dragons' teeth.

The bubbling of an underground hot spring distracted her for a moment. The steam that rose from its foamy surface smelled sweet like syrup boiling in the spring after the trees had been tapped.

The enchantment pulled her attention away from the odd formations in the cavern, and she walked unerringly through the maze of pointed columns to a niche in the opposite wall.

Seven small, oval stones clustered together in a nest of hardened broer.

Dragon eggs! Her hand went automatically to the pouch hanging around her neck. Now I know why I saw Mistress Avion's chicken coop. This is too much like gathering eggs for breakfast to be real. Am I dreaming?

She touched one of the glowing stones, felt its cold, rough surface, and saw the light turn part of her hand blue.

I'm awake.

She whipped the scarf from her neck and stretched it out on the floor. She picked up each egg and held it with wonder before placing it on the soft blue material. When she'd lined up all seven eggs, she sank to the ground beside them, sitting cross-legged and admiring her find.

"Seven!" She breathed the word. She pulled out her treasure and opened the pouch. She placed the dragon egg she had been carrying next to the others. "Eight. I have eight dragon eggs."

Chief Councilman Meiger had had a fit when he saw one.

"How did you find it, girl?" he'd asked.

"I went to the stream to gather rushes for Mistress Avion. I waded into the water, and my skin began to tingle."

"Tingle?"

“Yes, tingle.”

“Go on, go on.” He placed his hands upon his ample hips and glared at her.

Being a marione, he didn't have much height, only a few more inches than Kale. But his ominous expression made the village slave feel small and vulnerable. She swallowed hard before continuing.

“I waded under the bentleaf tree to the boulders. The egg was in a hole there.”

“Where?”

“Under the water.”

“Under the water?”

“In the rocks. I reached in and pulled it out.”

“How did you know it was there?”

“I didn't.”

“Why did you stick your hand in a hole?”

“I don't know.”

“There could have been a blattig fish in there with sharp teeth ready to gobble your fingers.”

Kale didn't have an answer. She didn't dare scoff at the fabled fish that ate children when they fell in the river. She hadn't believed that old wives' tale since she was old enough to gather reeds for basket making.

“Humph.” Master Meiger sat down hard on the bench by his front door. “There has to be a meeting,” he'd said after a moment of contemplation. “We must decide what to do with you.”

“May I keep the egg?”

“What?”

“May I keep the egg? It's mine, isn't it?”

“See how much you know? Nothing! No one owns a dragon egg.”

Kale had been disappointed. Besides her clothes, she didn't have a thing that was her own. She too, like herself being allowed to keep the egg had been a small hope, and therefore, losing what wasn't even hers had to be a small disappointment.

“You can't stay here.” The councilman's words shocked Kale. “You have to go to Vendela, girl. But the village council must meet first.” He had stood and walked away, but more words drifted back

her as he shook his head and glowered at the ground. "Shocking! Never in River Away. Never this far south."

Kale looked at the blue scarf and the eggs nestled in its folds. She counted them again. In the pale light of the cavern, each shimmered a faint blue. In the sunlight she thought they would be alabaster white like the egg from River Away. Her breath seized in concern as she spied her treasured egg. She picked it up and examined it more closely. The egg from River Away had tangles of fine, dark lines crackled over the surface. The lines had not been there a month before.

The council told me not to take it out of the pouch until I reached The Hall in Vendela. Could I have broken it just by taking it out? I thought it was too hard to break. What happens if I did break it? What will the wizards of The Hall do to a village girl who broke a dragon egg?

She turned the egg over in her hand, hoping she would see some sign that this promise of a new life was not damaged. The dragon egg warmed and began its gentle thrum.

"Maybe it is just the light in here."

She relaxed and enjoyed holding her treasure. After only a moment, her ease gave way to amazement. The weariness and aches that had overcome her body were vanishing. The hunger squeezing her middle was gone as well. Her eyes opened wide as she watched the small scrapes and scratches on her bloody toes and knees heal over. The damage to her body disappeared as if it had never been, but the torn cloth of her trousers was as ragged as ever.

When the last break in her skin closed, she stared at the egg in her hand as if she had never seen it before. If her clothes hadn't been tattered and bloody, she would have thought she'd dreamed the injuries. As her excitement grew, the egg jumped. She tightened her grip to keep it from falling.

"I guess you aren't broken," she said with a grin.

She tucked the egg back in its pouch and pushed the bag inside her shirt. She moved the other egg onto the rock and tied a knot in the scarf about a foot from one end. She tucked one egg in next to the knot, folded the soft cloth around it. Using a length of thread from the unraveling edge of her tunic, she secured the egg and tied a knot. She placed another egg on her makeshift sling and tied it in. When finished, she had a ropelike object with seven bulges. She tied the egg-bearing blue scarf around her waist, next to her skin, under the tunic and shirt.

"Now, let's get out of here."

She stood and trotted across the floor of the cavern, neatly dodging around the glowing columns. Just as she reached the opening of the tunnel, she had a thought. She turned to search the area around her.

Spying a fist-sized rock lying on the ground, she rushed to pick it up. Dozens of crystals shimmered from the rough stone. She smiled and carried it into the dark tunnel.

The way back didn't seem nearly as long. The enchantment, which had pulled her in, had

disappeared when she touched the first egg. No dread of what was ahead plagued her thoughts. The rock glowed in the tunnel. She could see several feet ahead of her, although it was awkward to hold the rock and crawl.

She pushed on, eager to get to the cave and climb out the top. The thought of the grawligs awakening helped her to hurry. She halted as soon as her head poked through the opening from the tunnel to the dimly lit cave.

Three beams of light still fell in straight shafts from the outside. They'd shifted with the movement of the sun.

Her ears told her something else had changed. She tilted her head, trying to identify the clamor. The grawligs no longer snored. Instead she heard metal clanging against metal, angry shouts, frenzied commands, and roars of fury. If she was not mistaken, sounds of battle echoed from all three openings of the cave.

FRIEND OR FOE?

This time Kale raised her head out of the hole even more cautiously. Judging from the tumult, she had expected an army to be facing the grawligs. Kale spotted only three attackers—two mounted on dragons. Most of the noise came from the mountain ogres.

The third attacker stood within a circle of the grawligs and felled them right and left, wielding a sling-type weapon with a spiked ball at the end. She recognized him as a fighting marion like the ra of people populating River Away. His muscled frame, short and blocklike, stood solid against the onslaught. Known as farmers and fighters, the mariones could make any ground productive and defend any ground against invaders.

The dragons in the air were not as big as the Greater Dragons Kale had seen fly into the city. One large milky-white beast carried a giant warrior in armor and chain mail. As the dragon swooped and soared over the battling grawligs, the rider hurled lances with deadly aim. The insignia of a royal house emblazoned his helmet and riding gear. Two large quivers hung over the dragon's shoulders just in front of the knight's knees.

Kale watched the other dragon's aerobatics, stunned by her beauty. The red wings glistened as if covered with tiny rubies. Her chest and stomach pulsated in blue and purple shimmers. Sunlight reflected off blue-green scales on her head, tail, and hind feet.

A small furry rider wore bright colors, almost as flamboyant as his mount. Shouting terse words Kale could not understand, the man cast yard-long lances among the grawligs.

"I am Leetu Bends. We came to rescue you."

A female voice uttered the words directly into Kale's thoughts. The o'rant girl jerked in surprise.

A mindspeaker! She looked around trying to decide who had spoken.

"Go now, while we have the grawligs' attention. Go west, over the ridge. Follow the stream down the mountainside. We'll catch up with you."

Kale still held the glittering rock she'd picked up in the cavern. She opened the neck of her shirt and

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