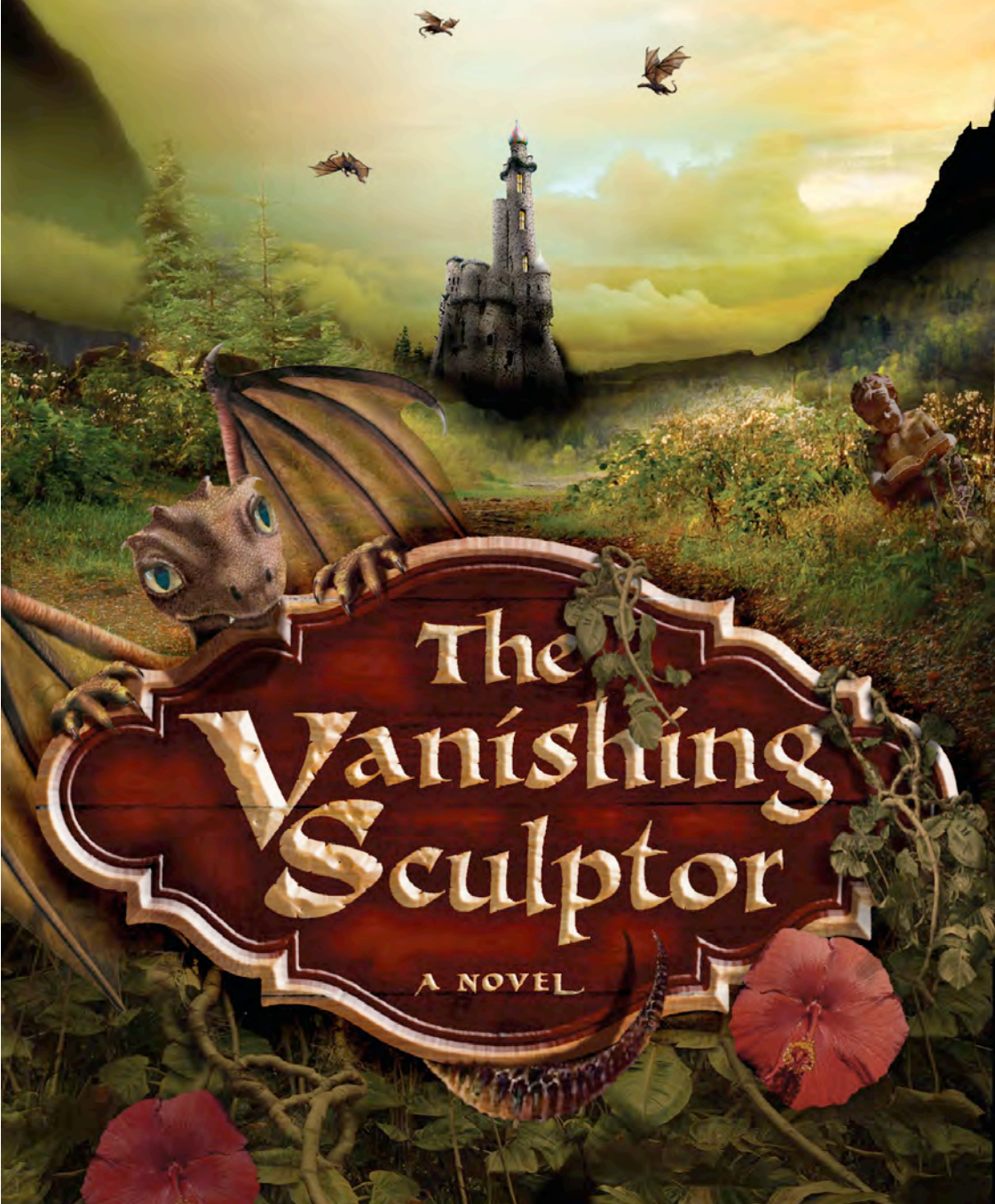


A Fantastic Journey of Discovery for All Ages

Donita K. Paul

AUTHOR OF *DragonSpell* AND *DragonLight*



Praise for
The Vanishing Sculptor

“Have you ever looked at a painting from a distance and thought it beautiful, only to draw nearer to it and realize it was more exquisite, complex, and wonderful than you ever imagined? *The Vanishing Sculptor* by Donita K. Paul is like that. I began reading and liked it. As usual, I found myself happily enveloped in a vivid world full of emerlindians, tumanhofers, and dragons. But then, just when I thought the work was beautiful, something deep within me started to tingle... and I began to see that *The Vanishing Sculptor* was far more than simple entertainment or escape. I had one ‘aha!’ moment after another. Clues everywhere, right in front of my eyes, blossomed into truth, until at last I put down the book and swam in the rich waters of adventure, peace, and blessed melancholy—the rare state revealing that you’ve been touched by the story of an inspired author. *The Vanishing Sculptor* is sure to be loved by readers and re-readers of every age.”

—WAYNE THOMAS BATSON, best-selling author of the
Door Within Trilogy, *Isle of Swords*, and *Isle of Fire*

“Donita K. Paul never fails to satisfy the imagination and delight the soul. In *The Vanishing Sculptor*, she takes us beyond the boundaries of her beloved DragonKeeper chronicles and opens up vast new realms of wonder. The adventure of Tipper, the sculptor’s daughter, will strike a responsive chord in the heart of every reader who has ever faced a seemingly impossible challenge. This is fantasy that truly illuminates reality!”

—JIM DENNEY, author of the Timebenders series

“*The Vanishing Sculptor* is a delightful tale of otherworldly adventures laced with heavenly meanings. Author Donita K. Paul skillfully transports you to a fantasy world populated with emerlindians,

tumanhofers, speaking grand parrots, wizards, and magical librarians; where flying dragons communicate and mysterious portals whisk you across the world. Readers young and old will love journeying along with the enchanting questing party on their mission to save the world and discover a loving God.”

—MEGAN DIMARIA, author of *Searching for Spice*
and *Out of Her Hands*

“Stunning beginning to a new series! Rarely does an author recapture the exquisite charm and the bold freshness first discovered in her initial series. Donita K. Paul fans are in for a treat as they uncover new wonders and enchantment in the world of Chiril. New readers will revel in the magical blend of mischief and mayhem woven with wit-tiness and intrigue throughout this engaging tale. From the zany disposition of Lady Peg to the spirited charm and wit of Tipper, her youthful daughter, *The Vanishing Sculpture* tingles our most fervent emotions of love, joy, and hope. An exciting complement to the DragonKeeper series, and a fantastical adventure for inaugural audiences of all ages.”

—ERIC REINHOLD, author of *The Annals of Aeliana*,
Ryann Watters and the King's Sword, and *Ryann Watters*
and *the Shield of Faith*

The Vanishing Sculptor

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BY DONITA K. PAUL

DragonSpell
DragonQuest
DragonKnight
DragonFire
DragonLight

A Fantastic Journey of Discovery for All Ages

Donita K. Paul



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God has blessed me by bringing young people into my life. The days would be so boring if I dealt only with adults. This book is dedicated to my readers. They keep me on my toes and motivated to write.

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A View from a Tree

Sir Beccaroon cocked his head, ruffled his neck feathers, and stretched, allowing his crimson wings to spread. The branch beneath him sank and rose again, responding to his weight. Moist, hot air penetrated his finery, and he held his wings away from his brilliant blue sides.

“Too hot for company,” he muttered, rocking back and forth from one scaly four-toed foot to the other on a limb of a sacktrass tree. The leaves shimmered as the motion rippled along the branch. “Where is that girl?”

His yellow head swiveled almost completely around. He peered with one eye down the overgrown path and then scoped out every inch within his range of vision, twisting his neck slowly.

A brief morning shower had penetrated the canopy above and rinsed the waxy leaves. A few remaining drops glistened where thin shafts of tropical sun touched the dark green foliage. On the broot vine, flowers the size of plates lifted their fiery red petals, begging the thumb-sized bees to come drink before the weight of nectar broke off the blooms.

Beccaroon flew to a perch on a gnarly branch. He sipped from a broot blossom and ran his black tongue over the edges of his beak. A sudden



breeze shook loose a sprinkle of leftover raindrops. Beccaroon shook his tail feathers and blinked. When the disturbance settled, he cocked his head and listened.

“Ah! She’s coming.” He preened his soft green breast and waited, giving a show of patience he didn’t feel. His head jerked up as he detected someone walking with the girl.

“Awk!” The sound exploded from his throat. He flew into a roost far above the forest floor, where he couldn’t be seen from the ground, and watched the approach of the girl placed under his guardianship.

Tipper strolled along the path below, wearing a flowing golden gown over her tall, lean body. She’d put her long blond hair in a fancy braid that started at the crown of her head. A golden chain hung from each of her pointed ears. And she’d decorated her pointed facial features with subdued colors—blue for her eyelids, rose for her lips, and a shimmering yellow on her cheeks. Beccaroon sighed. His girl was lovely.

The bushes along the path behind her rustled. Beccaroon’s tongue clucked against his beak in disapproval. Hanner trudged after Tipper, leading a donkey hitched to a cart. The man’s shaggy hair, tied with a string at the back of his neck, hung oily and limp. Food and drink stained the front of his leather jerkin, and his boots wore mud instead of a shine. The parrot caught a whiff of the o’rant from where he perched. The young man should have carried the fragrance of citrus, but his overstrong odor reminded Beccaroon of rotten fruit.

A tree full of monkeys broke out in outraged chatter. Tipper, when alone, walked amid the animals’ habitat without causing alarm.

“Smart monkeys,” said Beccaroon. “You recognize a ninny-nap-conder when you see one.” He used the cover of the monkeys’ rabble-rousing to glide to another tree, where he could hide at a lower level. He had an idea where Tipper would lead Hanner.

“Here it is,” said the pretty emerlindian. She pulled vines from a clump, revealing a gray statue beneath. “My father named this one *Vegetable Garden*.”

Hanner pulled off more vines as he made his way slowly around the four-foot statue. “*Vegetable Garden*? Mistress Tipper, are you sure you have the right one? This is a statue of a boy reading a book. He’s not even chewing a carrot while he sits here.”

“Father used to say reading a good book was nourishment.”

Hanner scratched his head, shrugged his shoulders, and went to fetch the donkey and cart. Tipper’s head tilted back, and her blue eyes looked up into the trees. Her gaze roamed over the exact spot Beccaroon used as a hidden roost. Not by the blink of an eyelash did she betray whether she had seen him. Hanner returned.

Tipper spread out a blanket in the cart after Hanner maneuvered it next to the statue, then helped him lift the stone boy into the back. Hanner grunted a lot, and Tipper scolded.

“Careful... Don’t break his arm... Too many vines still around the base.”

They got the statue loaded, and Tipper tucked the blanket over and around it. She then gave Hanner a pouch of coins.

“This is for your usual delivery fee. I couldn’t put in any extra for traveling expenses. I’m sure you’ll be reimbursed by our buyer.”

He grunted and slipped the money inside his jerkin.

Tipper clasped her hands together. “Be careful. And give Master Dodderbanoster my regards.”

He tipped his hat and climbed aboard the cart. “I always am. And I always do.”

She stood in the path until the creak of the cart wheels could no longer be heard.

Beccaroon swooped down and sat on a thick branch wrapped with

a leafless green creeper. The vine looked too much like a snake, so he hopped to another limb.

"Was that wise?" he asked.

"I don't think so either, Bec, but what else can I do? I sell the artwork only as a last resort when we need quite a bit of cash. The well needs re-digging." Tipper pulled a tight face, looking like she'd swallowed nasty medicine. "We've sold almost everything in the house. Mother sees our things in the market and buys them back. Sometimes I get a better price for a piece the second time I sell it, and sometimes not."

Beccaroon swayed back and forth on his feet, shaking his head. "She never catches on?"

"Never." Tipper giggled. "She shows remarkably consistent taste. When she spots something that was once ours, she buys it, brings it home, shows it off to me, and tells me she has always wanted something just like it. And she never notices pictures gone from the walls, rugs missing in rooms, chairs, tables, vases, candlesticks gone. I used to rearrange things to disguise a hole in the décor, but there's no need."

The sigh that followed her explanation held no joy. Tipper looked around. "There never is a place to sit in this forest when one wants to plop down and have a good cry."

"You're not the type to cry. I'll walk you home." Beccaroon hopped down to the path.

His head came up to her waist. She immediately put her dainty hand on his topknot and smoothed the creamy plumes back.

"You're the best of friends. Keeping this secret would be unbearable if I didn't have you to confide in."

Beccaroon clicked his tongue. "No flattery, or I shall fly away."

They moseyed back the direction Tipper had come, opposite the way Hanner had departed.

Beccaroon tsked. "I don't like that greasy fellow."

"I know." Tipper gently twisted the longest feather from the center of Bec's crest around her forefinger.

The grand parrot jerked his head away and gave her his sternest glare. She was his girl, but he still wouldn't let her take liberties. She didn't seem to notice he was disgruntled, and that further blackened his mood.

"Hanner is all right, Bec. He takes the statues to Dodderbanoster. Dodderbanoster takes them to cities beyond my reach and gets a fair price for them. Sometimes I think the pouch Hanner brings back is way too full."

Beccaroon clicked his tongue. "Your father is a master artist. His work is worth a mighty price."

"Hanner says sometimes Dodderbanoster sells them to a dealer who takes them even farther away, to thriving districts. Wealthy patrons bid to own a Verrin Schope work of art." She held back a leafy branch so Beccaroon could strut by with ease. "Late at night when I sit in my window and think, I hope that Papa will see one of his sculptures or paintings in a market in some far away metropolis.

"I imagine the scene. He exclaims with shock. He turns red and sputters and shakes his fists. In fact, he's so angry he comes straight home and yells loud and long at his daughter who dares to sell his masterpieces."

Beccaroon rolled his shoulders, causing his wings to tilt out, then settle against his sides. "What of your mother? Does she ever mention your father's absence?"

"No, why should she? He's been gone for years, but she still sees him. She talks to him every night after his workday is done. Promenades through the garden with him. Pours his tea, and just the other evening I heard her fussing at him for not giving enough money to the parish."

"I suppose she dipped in the household funds to make up for his neglect."

Tipper sighed. "Yes, she did."

They went on a ways in silence.

Tipper picked a bloom, savored its spicy odor, then placed it behind one pointed ear. "Mother has an idea in her head."

"For anyone else, the head is a splendid place to keep an idea. For your mother, she should just let them go."

"She's determined to visit her sister." Tipper raised her eyebrows so that the upside-down V was even more pronounced. "She'll go if she manages to pack her long list of necessities. Some of the items are quite unreasonable."

Beccaroon snatched a nut from an open shell on the ground. He played the small nugget over his tongue, enjoying its sweetness, then swallowed. "And you? Is she taking you?"

"No, I'm to stay here and make sure Papa is comfortable and remembers to go to bed at night instead of working till all hours in his studio."

"I don't like you being alone in that house."

"I don't either."

"Of course, there are the servants."

"Only two now."

Beccaroon ruffled his feathers, starting at the tuft on top of his head, fluffing the ruff of his neck, proceeding down his back, and ending with a great shake of his magnificent tail.

"It seems I will have to move into the house."

"Oh, Bec. I was hoping you'd say that."



Needed: One Painting

Tipper walked up the wide veranda steps and crossed to a wrought-iron table where her mother sat sipping a tall cool drink and reading a book.

"Is that you, Tipper?" her mother asked without looking up from the page before her.

"Yes, Mother."

"You've been in the forest?"

"Yes, Mother."

"There are snakes in the forest. Big ones."

Tipper poured some frissent juice from a pitcher and took her glass with her. She leaned against the carved granite railing and peered up at her home. Byrdschopen had been in the family for generations. Eldymine Byrd had married Brim Schope and brought an astonishing wealth to his bounteous landholdings. Both husband and wife lived extravagantly and built Byrdschopen to accommodate their pleasure. Three stories, an attic, and a flat roof designed for entertaining. Massive stonework. One hundred seventy-six windows. Guests came from all over Chiril to visit. Servants crowded the quarters designed just for them. The family grew as seven sons and four daughters joined Eldymine and Brim.

Those days were long gone.

The extended family dwindled. Tipper's mother and father had one child. The wealth slipped away. No one visited.

Byrdschopen remained, but housed only four people.

Tipper glanced back at the rich forest. "I didn't see any snakes today." Sipping the sweet liquid from her glass, she let the coolness ease the tension in her throat.

Her mother puckered her lips in a moue of disapproval. "You could at least take Zabeth with you."

Tipper smiled at the long, lazy minor dragon sunning herself on the balustrade. "Zabeth is afraid of snakes."

"Just as she should be. You should be too."

"But I'm not."

Her mother looked up with a puzzled frown. "Not what, dear? That wasn't much of a sentence, and I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

Rather than explain, Tipper stroked Zabeth's green back. The warm scales glistened with different hues. The minor dragon looked up, winked, and curled her tail around Tipper's wrist, pulling her hand back to continue the gentle rub.

Mother cleared her throat. "I want you to speak to your father, Tipper."

"What's he done now?"

"It's what he hasn't done. I've asked him time and again to do a little painting of the garden there." She pointed to a fountain surrounded by a gravel walkway. Blooms fringed the pleasant sitting area with splashes of unbridled color. Every shade of pink dotted the dark green foliage. Spots of large yellow blossoms captured the sun. Tiny fibbirds with their purple and rose plumage flitted among the smaller flowers, drinking nectar.

"But you know how he is lately. He turns a deaf ear. Whatever project has captured his interest keeps him in his studio far too many hours." Her mother's plaintive tone touched Tipper's heart.

"I know, Mother. It's very hard."

"If he didn't come to me at night, I'd die of loneliness."

Tipper nodded sympathetically.

"So you will ask him. He always does as you request. You're his favorite daughter. I wish to take the picture with me to show your aunt." Her mother gathered up her things—a book, a fan, and a handkerchief. She left the glass and stood. "So comforting to know you'll take care of it. I'm tired now and will take my afternoon nap."

She came to kiss Tipper's pale cheek. Her complexion was only a few shades darker, and her hair still glowed a honey yellow. On her hand she wore a simple gold band declaring her married state. Her only other jewelry adorned her hair. A thin gold circlet had shifted to one side but was in no danger of falling off since a few shining braids wrapped around Lady Peg's head and secured the emblem of royalty.

Lady Peg wrinkled her nose at the dozing dragon. "Come, Zabeth. You've exerted yourself too much today. We'll go where it's cool and rest."

The dragon rose, stretched, then flew to the older woman's shoulder.

"That's right," said Mother. "I'll carry you. You must be exhausted."

Tipper whispered, "Lazy!"

Zabeth turned her elegant head, bestowed a dragon grin on Tipper, and stuck out her tongue.

Tipper chuckled and sat in her mother's seat. A bowl of fruit in the center of the table released a tempting fragrance. She plucked a cluster of grapes and popped one into her mouth.

The crackling voice of their butler, Lipphil, interrupted the pop of the fruit as she chomped it between her teeth. "Mistress Tipper?"

She choked. The ancient o'rant in shabby formal attire rushed forward. He almost pulled one of her arms out of the shoulder socket as

he stretched it straight up and pummeled her back. "Perhaps you had better stand, Mistress."

She stood more because he hauled her to her feet than because she was following his suggestion. Lippphil thumped her between the shoulder blades.

She sucked in a breath. The butler let go and poured more juice into her glass. She sipped and nodded her thanks. This man had walked her at night as a colicky baby, bandaged her knees, and wiped tears from her cheeks when her father disappeared.

He stood at attention until she recovered. "Mistress Tipper, there is a young man here to see your father."

She tilted her head. "Send him away."

"He won't go."

"Well, he won't see Papa."

"Perhaps if you would tell him so. In the meantime, I'll trot down to Rolan's and have him come up to throw the young man off the property."

The thought of her ancient friend trotting almost caused Tipper to laugh out loud. With effort she kept a solemn face and said, "Certainly."

Lippphil left and returned, trailed by the unwanted guest. Tipper straightened her spine, lifted her chin, and tried to look as regal as her mother did when she received a guest. Thankfully, the tumanhofer couldn't see her insides shaking like a quiverbug before a rainstorm.

The butler announced the visitor. "Graddapotmorphit Bealomondore of Greeston in Dornum."

Tipper nodded. "Have a seat, Master Bealomondore." She gestured toward a chair at the table.

Lippphil poured a glass for the guest, then discreetly disappeared. Tipper noted that the butler had summoned a rather old minor

dragon to be her protector. Junkit sat on the step into the house, looking alert and proud to be called to duty.

The short tumanhofer pulled himself up to his full height, perhaps four feet, clicked his heels together, and gave a jerky bow.

Tipper sat. "Please." She smiled and gestured to the other seat.

After flipping up the tails of his coat with a flourish, the young man sat. His eager expression showed in his eyes, while a grin stretched across his clean-shaven cheeks.

"I make my appeal to you, dear daughter of the celebrated Verrin Schope. I am an artist, and I have come all this way to offer myself as an apprentice to the great master. I saw his statue *A Morning in Time* in Brextik. I was struck with his genius, as was all of the city. I found another statue, by chance, in the home of an old family friend in the Valley of Chester. That one was *Dream Night*. Are you familiar with it?"

Before Tipper could affirm that she was, he went on with an air of enthusiasm that tired her. "Of course you are." He put his fingertips to his lips, made a smacking noise, then flicked his fingers into the air as if sending his blessing to the heavens.

Tipper sighed heavily and leaned back in her chair.

Bealomondore's eyes focused on something far, far away. "And the painting. Ah, the painting. A woman beside an ocean, a ship at sea, a cloud hovering in the distance, and the bird flying from vessel to shore with a message in its beak. The poetry of line, the color of emotion, the tenderness of technique."

His eyes riveted on Tipper. "I must study under Verrin Schope. I am capable. Let me speak with him. Let me show him my work. Let the master decide whether I am to slave for him and learn at his feet."

"He won't see you, Master Bealomondore. He is a total recluse."

"So I have heard. But if his precious daughter were to make my plea...?"

Tipper examined the aspiring artist with more interest. The precious daughter currently had a problem. Could the man actually paint? She looked beyond him to the fountain. How long would this obsession with having a likeness of the garden hold her mother? Would she forget in a day like she sometimes did?

No. From long experience, Tipper knew this was one of the times her mother would harp on a point until her daughter felt like screaming. The tumanhofer presented a way to avoid days, weeks, even months of nagging, pouting, and silent despair. Her mother's performance would drive Tipper to distraction. Perhaps the daughter could act as well.

Sighing dramatically, she said, "You have come such a long distance, across the entire continent. I hate to turn you away with no hope."

He leaned forward, keen to hear her words, his face practically torn with expectation. His earnestness almost made Tipper forsake her sudden plan. But Mother would want that painting day after day for months, until she inexplicably forgot about a picture from her husband's hand.

There was the trip to see her sister. Perhaps when her mother came back, the picture would be of no importance. No, it was more likely Lady Peg would postpone the trip until she had the painting. Then there would be two topics for her mother to worry to death—the delayed trip and the fountain depiction. The thought of her mother's nagging pushed aside Tipper's last hesitation.

"You have seen my father's work?"

"Many times." He reached across the table as if to touch her but withdrew his hand. "I have searched out every piece I could find. Twenty-nine statues, fifty-three paintings."

Tipper raised her eyebrows. She hadn't sold that many. Perhaps

her father still produced his masterpieces, wherever he was. She scowled.

Tipper pointed to the fountain. "Paint that. Paint it tomorrow and be done by nightfall. Paint it in such a way that your very art proves you have already studied my father's style and genius. I will show it to my mother, and if she approves, then she will petition my father to give you an audience."

"Thank you," the tumanhofer gushed. He slid out of his chair and down on his knees before her, grabbed her hands, and bestowed a flurry of kisses on them. "Thank you. Thank you. You won't regret this kindness."

Tipper cleared her throat and tried to pull away. Junkit flew to her rescue, batting his blue wings against the effusive man's face.

He cowered. "Excuse me, I beg you. I am zealous for my ultimate dream to come true."

"Yes, well." Tipper glanced around. Her second servant stood in the door, a worried expression marring her usual serenity. "Gladyme, how good of you to appear at just the right time. Master Bealomon-dore will be staying the night and the morrow. Please show him to a room."

Gladyme gave a curtsy but looked doubtfully at the fancy-dressed guest. Nevertheless, she escorted the tumanhofer away.

Tipper collapsed in her seat, expelling her relief with a puff of air. A few minutes later, Lipphil arrived with Rolan.

"Is everything all right, Mistress Tipper?" he panted.

"Yes, but I fear we shall have to do something with Mother tomorrow. I've allowed the artist to stay to paint the picture mother wants of the fountain. Even in her hazy state, I don't think we can let her watch the stranger at work and then tell her the result is a gift from Papa."

Rolan scratched his head. "I'm taking my wife to Soebin tomorrow to visit the market. I know it's not convenient for Lady Peg to go shopping, but it would get her out of the house."

Tipper jumped to her feet and squeezed the marione farmer's arm. "Just the thing, Rolan. You've saved us."

"Not if she spies that huge clock I took away last week and has me haul it back home."

Tipper narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together in a straight line before speaking. "We'll have to chance it. Surely Boscamon will favor us with one more lucky circumstance."

Boscamon, the unseen ruler of fate. She knew better than to rely on a myth, but the phrase had slipped from her lips as if it had meaning.

It would be nice to have a mother or a father who took responsibility for regulating each day's events. Tipper would even accept a being without shape or form such as the "hero of the universe" legend if he would only show some dependability.

But Boscamon provided a convenient way to explain what could not be explained. Shifting blame for awkward situations onto the shoulders of Boscamon created a sense of relief without solving any problems. But Sir Beccaroon had taught her to carry her own burdens.

Tipper's body sagged as if a weight bore down on her. She recognized the threat, squared her shoulders, and lifted her chin. "Whatever tomorrow brings, we'll plow ahead. Determination isn't a choice. It's a necessity."



The Proper Light

Beccaroon cocked his head and critically examined the painting developing under the hand of the young tumanhofer Bealomondore. The grand parrot waited to comment until the artist pulled his brush back from the canvas. “You’re good.”

The man jumped and turned abruptly to face Beccaroon. “I didn’t know you were there.” He dabbed his paintbrush on his palette, then waved its green tip at the mansion. “Do you live in the house?”

“No, I’m visiting.”

“Friend of the family?”

“Yes.” He lowered his head, his version of a courtly bow. “I’m Beccaroon.”

The tumanhofer put down his brush, wiped his hand on his artists overcoat, and extended it to shake.

Beccaroon tilted his head. The feathers above one eye ruffled up like an eyebrow.

Bealomondore withdrew his hand. “Ah! You don’t...um. Pardon me. I’m not accustomed to...um... Pleased to meet you. I’m Graddapotmorphit Bealomondore, at your service.” He clicked his heels together and bowed.

Beccaroon nodded and turned his attention back to the likeness of the fountain on a six-by-six-inch canvas. “I’m impressed with your replication of Verrin Schope’s style.”

The tumanhofer picked up his brush and rolled the slim handle

between his thumb and forefinger. His brow furrowed as he studied the foliage surrounding the scene and then his work. He dabbed a few strokes of shading to the bushes, then stood back and glared at the fountain. "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Lady Peg or Verrin Schope."

Beccaroon clicked his black tongue against his beak. "I doubt you'll meet either."

The artist whipped around again, facing the parrot with a scowl. "Is my talent not great enough? Do not say so! I am the best of the best."

"Then why do you seek tutelage under Verrin Schope?"

The tumanhofer's demeanor changed in an instant. His head hung, and tears welled in his eyes. "Because no one takes me seriously. I am a man of infinite talent but no occupation. I can speak with a golden tongue, but no one listens. I am a fop in the eyes of my friends and relatives."

"Well, you can't do a thing about your relatives, but you can choose better friends, ones who appreciate your gift."

Bealomondore shrugged, wiped his wet cheeks on his sleeve, and returned to his painting. "If Verrin Schope believes I have talent, then there will not be a soul to contradict him."

Beccaroon clicked his tongue again. "Verrin Schope is extremely involved in his current project. It could be that you will be denied your apprenticeship because the time is not right. While your talent would prove sufficient, Verrin Schope's availability could be...nonexistent."

"Then I'll wait," said the painter. Using his brush, now tipped in vermillion, he pointed to one of the ground-level windows. "Mistress Tipper is trying to get your attention. I assume she doesn't want to speak to me."

Beccaroon turned his head a three-quarter rotation. "She does,

indeed, seem to be summoning me. What an unusual means of communication she's chosen."

The tumanhofer made a guttural sound. "Whenever I turn toward the house, she pops behind the curtain. She should realize an artist is a keen observer."

"Perhaps she does not want to disturb you when you are so nearly done."

"Perhaps she is avoiding me altogether, as are her mother and her father."

"Well, well," said Beccaroon as he stretched his glorious scarlet wings. "No need to imagine affront. I'll go see what ails the girl."

He flew to an entrance near the window where Tipper lurked. He waited a moment before she opened the door and gestured for him to enter.

"Is he done?" she asked.

"Almost. He's perfecting the shading and highlighting the flowers. His work is very good. Your father would be interested in the young man."

"If he were here."

"I can't think it is right to take this aspiring artist's painting and then just send him on his way. I also think you may have a hard time getting rid of him."

Tipper bit her lower lip and peeked through the heavy brocade drapes. "He *is* determined." She turned away from watching the artist and put a hand on Beccaroon's shoulder. "Mother could come back any minute."

"And she might not come back for several hours," Beccaroon countered. "Rolan knows you want her occupied for a greater part of the day." He sighed. "You want me to check, don't you?"

"Yes, please."

"I'll return shortly."

They crossed the room and went through a hall to the main foyer, where Tipper opened the massive front door. She kissed Beccaroon on his forehead, right in front of the golden plumes that formed a substantial crest.

He didn't acknowledge the affection but strutted out the door. Tipper's habit of stepping over his personal boundary should not be encouraged. He took flight without comment and soared high above the surrounding forest, following the wide path that wandered toward the market town. He flew over Rolan's farm and saw the crops standing in neat rows, almost ready to harvest.

He continued his journey, searching the road and several taverns along the way for any sign of Rolan, his wife, and Lady Peg. He squinted his eyes at a group of men camped by the River Noslow. He'd send someone to keep watch over these strangers. People had been going missing closer to the coast. Most agreed they'd been taken for slave trade. A nasty business, and Beccaroon would not let it get started in his territory.

Circling Soebin, he had a good view of the merchants folding up their tents, packing their wagons, and heading for home. Rolan and his lady passengers were nowhere in sight.

He flew back by a different route and finally spotted the wagon pulled by a large dapple gray workhorse. Rolan had placed a two-seater sofa in the wagon bed. The ladies tilted their parasols against the setting sun and chattered away.

Beccaroon swooped down and landed beside Lady Peg and Rolan's wife, Zilla.

"Oh, Beccaroon," exclaimed Lady Peg. "Just look what we've found." She pointed to a tarp-covered rectangular box around six feet tall. "You'll never guess."

Tipper shielded her eyes from the bright sun with a hand propped against her brow. She stood on the covered balcony that ran along the second floor of the mansion's west side. Rolan's farm lay beyond the forest. The road that led to the village passed by his front gate. So far she had not spotted any activity along the winding lane. No sight of a wagon bringing her mother home.

She dropped her hand to clasp the other and wrung her fingers together. "Oh, I do wish this day were over."

"I'm finished." The tumanhofer's voice startled Tipper.

She jumped and turned quickly. He scowled at her.

Pressing her lips together against saying something foolish, she kept her thoughts to herself. Why did the man have to be so prickly? Had he figured out he was not going to get his position of apprentice? He'd have the right to be even more unpleasant when she sent him packing without meeting her father. "You don't look very pleased about being done."

The muscles in his face tightened a fraction more. "One naturally prefers to execute a painting in one's own style. Still, I am pleased with the results."

"Well." Tipper paused, fumbling for words that would answer this touchy coxcomb. None came to her. "Shall we go see it?"

He blocked the door to the upstairs hall, and she waited for him to move aside. With her head held high in imitation of her mother's regal stance, she brushed past the shorter man. Walking briskly, she headed toward the main staircase, a showy affair that curved down from two points to the high-ceilinged foyer below.

In the hallway to the back of the house, Bealomondore displayed his small painting on a console table flush against the wall.

"The light is not good here," he complained. "I would like to present the piece with a full complement of candles. Perhaps two branches to the side and a shallow row in front."

"Yes, yes." Tipper picked up the painting, touching only the sides.

The smell of fresh oil paint reminded her of sitting in her father's studio while he worked on a masterpiece in progress. He would hum at times while making slow, deliberate strokes. Other times his hand moved so quickly the air seemed to buzz as it did when a fibbird flew past. She remembered the excitement of an image exploding out of a mundane background.

She tilted the canvas in her hand to catch the dying sunlight from the west window. She gasped. The exquisite detail of flowers, foliage, and a spray from the fountain captivated her. How could she declare this piece inferior and not worthy of her father's attention? Tears sprang to her eyes. Bealomondore had captured the vibrancy of Verrin Schope.

Why had her father had to withdraw from his family, abandon them? Anger surged through her, washing away sentimentality and destroying her appreciation of fine art.

She turned to the stiff tumanhofer, her face feeling like a frozen mask. "It's an interesting interpretation of my father's style. I shall show it to my mother and have your answer by tomorrow at breakfast. She will be tired after her venture to market. I suspect she will have dinner in her room and go early to bed, but I promise you I'll seek an audience this evening."

For a moment, the young artist's composure slipped. His eyes rounded in astonishment. "You seek an audience with your own mother?"

"My mother never forgets she is the second daughter of King Yellat." Tipper quickly turned away to hide her thoughts. Her mother

had trouble remembering the day of the week but never the fact that she had worn a circlet crown of finest gold from the day she was born.

Tipper replaced the painting on the table. "I'll ask Gladyme to bring you all the candles you require. I'm afraid you will have your dinner in solitude again this evening. I will attend my mother in order to find an opportune moment to present your request."

"Your father?"

"As is his custom, he will not appear in the main house while there is a stranger present."

She heard his sigh. She could not look back lest she lose her resolve.



Impropriety

Beccaroon circled the main house in the fading light. The rosy rays of sunset tinted Verrin Schope's home so that the building looked made of pink marble. Beccaroon landed on the decorative parapet surrounding the flat roof of the mansion. Covered archways protruded from the patterned tiles of the floor. Each of these charming cupolas led to a stairway. Steps descended through the attic of the manor to the third floor.

The colorful bird strutted across the band of elaborate design that surrounded a smoother surface used for dancing. He remembered the many cotillions and summer concerts that had once been part of the grand house's activities. It had been years since friends had gathered to dance on this roof. So long ago that Tipper probably did not remember the spectacular events.

Beccaroon clicked his tongue against his beak and entered between pillars supporting a painted gable in the nearest cupola. At the bottom of the dark stairwell, a heavy wooden door blocked his path.

"Doors," he muttered under his breath. "Confounded nuisances."

At least Verrin Schope had had the courtesy to remove the knob and replace it with a bar handle. The parrot grabbed the metal lever with his beak and pulled down. The latch clicked, and he maneuvered the door open. Entering the dim hallway, he cast a grim look at the odious slab of wood. Obligation compelled him to pull the blasted thing shut. He sighed and reached for the handle.

"I'll get that," said Tipper from the shadows behind him. She breathed heavily as she glided past him. Her shoes made no sound as she hurried across the carpeted floor. "I saw you fly in and came to meet you. Where's Mother?"

"Behind me by five minutes at the most."

Tipper gasped. "I must find Bealomondore and make sure he doesn't cross paths with Mother."

"I don't approve of this scheme of yours, Tipper."

"I don't either, but sometimes one has to do what is distasteful."

"Does one?" asked Beccaroon as his girl raced away.

"Yes!" she called back over her shoulder. "If you have a scatter-brained mother and an absent father, the answer is yes!"

She disappeared around a corner. Beccaroon followed in his stately stride. "I believe," he said to the empty corridor, "that Boscamon will teach my young friend the efficacious nature of truth."

He ruffled his neck feathers, the image of a juggler throwing balls into the air disturbing his calm. The traditional view cast Boscamon as a mysterious conjurer manipulating daily circumstances. A circus performer who tossed balls into the air had never appealed to Beccaroon. Surely if someone had the power to control the universe, he would be more caring. As the magistrate, Beccaroon took his duties seriously.

He leaned toward there being a deity. Obviously, order came from somewhere beyond the scope of the temporal races. Although great minds could detect design in nature that had to be intelligently created, no one explained the phenomena to his satisfaction.

Nevertheless, in the end, balance was maintained. He pictured truth as a chunk of ice in a pond. One could push it beneath the water, but it would bob to the surface. He had instructed Tipper on the reality of choices. Action created reaction. There would be a reckoning

for Tipper's deception. Experience would teach her the validity of his observations.

He strutted down the hall, following his girl, and muttered, "I hope the lesson doesn't hurt too much."

Tipper's thin leather soles beat a rapid rhythm on the wooden servants stair. She'd chosen the quickest route to the parlor, where she had last seen Bealomondore sipping a glass of wine and reading a book from her father's library.

Outside the door, she took a moment to slow her breathing and run through the lines she would use to put off the tumanhofer. After squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she swept into the room.

"My mother is about to arrive."

Bealomondore jumped to his feet. "I will be allowed an audience?"

"No, not tonight. I've explained. I will use the best of my diplomacy to present your case in a favorable light. Popping up out of nowhere and surprising her is the worst tack you can take. Please, avoid her at all costs. In the morning, at breakfast, I will tell you what I have accomplished."

The artist scowled, and Tipper held her breath, wondering if he would accept her terms. Finally he let out a sigh that seemed to deflate his shoulders.

"All right." He scooped up the book he had been reading. "Mind if I take this to my room? I doubt I will sleep tonight waiting for the verdict."

"Of course, Master Bealomondore, take the book. And if you would like, I will have Gladyme check on you before she goes to bed. Perhaps you would like her to bring you a light refreshment later?"

The tumanhofer bowed. "You are too kind."

Tipper hesitated. Was that a snide remark? No matter. She would have the artist out of the way.

She curtsied. "I fear we are not an easy family to get to know. My father is very much immersed in his work. My mother is of a nervous nature and doesn't like to have her routine disturbed. And I have not studied the social graces. I beg you to forgive us our inhospitable ways."

Bealomondore frowned again, but there was a touch of compassion in his gaze. "I fear that your family suffers at the hand of your habits."

Tipper felt her back stiffen and her chin come up. This tumanhofer had no business passing judgment on how they lived. "We are mostly content," she countered.

"Perhaps you have nothing to compare your present circumstances with, but surely your parents are aware that to squander a life is foolishness."

A rustle preceded the words pronounced behind Tipper. "Squander? Foolish?"

Horried, Tipper whipped around to find her mother standing in the doorway.

"Do you already know of my purchase, Tipper?" Lady Peg looked over her shoulder. "Here they come now."

Grunting accompanied the arrival of something heavy. Rolan appeared in the doorway with a familiar grandfather clock angled on his back and shoulder. He held a rope to keep it from sliding.

Lady Peg gestured toward the far wall. "Right there, Rolan. Thank you so much. I've always wanted such a clock for that space, and this is just the thing. I do admit it was a bit dear. But perfect, don't you think, Tipper?" She gestured toward Bealomondore. "Give Rolan a hand, won't you? Help him ease it down to the floor. I'm so glad Rolan is strong. He's the best of neighbors, as I am sure you are aware."

Bealomondore shot across the room to give aid.

Lady Peg's face folded into lines of confusion. "I don't believe you *are* a neighbor, sir. Do I know you? Do you know Rolan? What are you doing in our house? We generally do not accept visitors. Company disturbs my husband."

Tipper's mother turned a worried look upon her daughter.

"This is Master Bealomondore, Mother. He's respectable and from a fine family on the coast, beyond the Sunset Mountains."

The tumanhofer faced Lady Peg and bowed deeply. "Madam, is the clock in precisely the right location? Do you want us to shift it left or right?"

"To the left three inches so that it is exactly between those two bookcases." Lady Peg tapped her finger against her chin. "No, no, I don't remember any Bealomondores. I don't know you at all."

Rolan and the tumanhofer shouldered the clock to one side. Bealomondore stepped back to eye the symmetry of the new location. Rolan cast Tipper an apologetic look.

She nodded, knowing full well the good farmer had tried his best to delay her mother's arrival.

"Is this satisfactory, Lady Peg?" Bealomondore nodded toward the clock.

"Not at all."

The tumanhofer turned back to gaze at the position of the huge piece. "I believe it is centered, Madam. Would you like us to obtain a measuring stick?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The clock. Precisely, the clock's position in relationship to the two bookcases."

Tipper's mother squared her shoulders and looked the visitor in the eye. "Young man, clocks do not have relationships with bookcases. At least not in my house. The whole idea is preposterous and, I believe,