

## Chapter 1

“Severest penalties will be enacted upon any and all persons who seek to mar, deface, or destroy a kingdom handbook.” The Committee Dedicated to Protecting Handbook Tradition.

Princess Sabella stomped her tattered green slipper. At home, dozens of servants would have rushed to her side but here not even the spiders spinning on the cavern walls noticed her.

After two weeks trapped in a dragon’s lair, maybe she should feel thankful that no one else could see her. Her once immaculate overskirt now looked more tan than cream. Her once smooth red hair- her maids pretended it was auburn - tangled about her dirt-smudged face.

With eyes nearly as green as her footwear, she peered up at the narrow opening to the tantalizing outside world. If the stone walls just had a few more foot holds then she could...The problem centered there. She could not—even if she could, she could not. She stomped again for good measure, eying the gold edged book snared on the dirt floor under her foot. All

because of that book, she stood trapped in this lair. Maybe when the dragon came back she could get him angry enough he would torch it. But that would only get rid of her copy; it would not solve her problem.

“Wait for a prince to come rescue me,” she muttered. “As is written, the princess must at all times wait for the prince to come to her rescue. Under no circumstance can she try to leave on her own. Who came with this stuff anyway? Oh!”

The rocks around her quivered and a few pebbles dislodged, rattling down the cavern walls. She heard the loud thud of something heavy moving closer from the adjoining cavern. Behind the peephole as large as Sabella’s face, a single golden eye with a glistening dark pupil emerged. “Well my dear,” a low powerful voice rumbled from behind the wall. “I am back from my long trip. Missed me, did you?”

“I really couldn’t care less what you do”, she turned her back to the eye for emphasis.

“Could have taught you better manners back at the castle, don’t you think? Well, it’s nothing personal. Got those quotas to fill. But you know, princess, if you can’t lose some of that temper of yours, those princes may up and decide just to leave you here. Not good for either of us, mind.”

“I don’t think any of them would dare to just leave,” Sabella said.

“Now, now my dear girl, don’t get down in the dumps”, the dark pupil grew as the dragon’s tone became emphatic. “We all have our jobs to do. Just be glad that I don’t have you on my menu. Princesses generally aren’t. You could have been born a peasant and I’m allowed to eat them on occasion, you know.”

“It might have been better than just sitting here,” she muttered low enough the dragon missed her comment.

“Anything I can get for you before I’m off to check the horde? Spot of tea? Few sandwiches? Though I believe that I am somewhat low on cucumbers this time of year. I could-”

“Just-get-me-out-of-here,” Sabella ground between her teeth. She turned to face the eye, her own deep green eyes sparking with temper.

The dragon eye blinked; the great jade green lid quivering. “You know, I really can’t do that. I really would like to. Really I would, especially since I am the one who has to listen to you but-”

“Why can’t you just let me go and get another princess?”

A pause issued in which Sabella began to wonder if it would be wise to back up as far as possible to avoid a blast of angry dragon’s breath. Just as she took a step backward, the dragon replied. He sounded oddly like a mother who was tired of trying to get through to a child with a particularly thick skull. “My dear girl, have you or have you not read your handbook? Of course, right now I see that you are trying to grind it into dust, which is just perfectly useless. It doesn’t matter what you do to the book—it’s all set down. You won’t change anything destroying one book. Haven’t you ever heard of the World Stone?”

Stubbornly, Sabella kept her foot posed on the handbook. “No.”

“I really wonder about your parents, I do. Any good mother-”

“Don’t talk about my mother!” In a single smooth motion, Sabella reached for the book, catapulting the volume at the huge eye.

For a large beast, the dragon could move rapidly. The eye withdrew just before the book hit the lower edge of the peephole; his voice came through the walls in a hiss. “Temper,

my princess, temper. Learn to control it or someday you will be sorry.” The corner of the dragon’s eye reappeared, slowly emerging to cover the hole again. “Despite your awful manners, I will still tell you the story of the World Stone. It appears that someone needs to take care of your education.”

Sabella managed a glare.

“The World Stone is supposed to lie somewhere at the ends of the earth. There it helps uphold the world - so they say. On it, I am told are written all the proper behaviors of dragons and I am sure the proper behaviors of princesses. So you see, destroying one book would not change what is set in stone.”

She heard the thudding of the forepaws and scraping of the tail as the dragon moved away from the adjoining cavern, presumably off to count his treasures. Slowly she picked up the book. Though dust covered it, the tome still appeared to be in good shape. Too bad. What had he been rambling about- stone? She traced over the gilded letters on the front with slim white hands. Her father, the king, had presented it to her on her sixteenth birthday, “Read this handbook, my Sabella”, he had said. “In it you shall find everything you need to know about your job as a princess. This belonged to your good mother when she was alive and I know that she would want you to do your duty.”

The King had known that she liked to go her own way and he had not done much to curb it when she was smaller. As she grew older, he tried harder to keep her in line with good princess behavior, but he did not find corralling Sabella easy. She wanted to ride horses instead of doing embroidery. She wanted to climb trees instead of painting still life. He let her do much of this anyway but when she turned sixteen, her good life was over.

Sabella stared at the book in disgust. If she had just consigned herself to ruin, she might have ignored protocol, but ruining her family's name? She could not quite bring herself to do that-yet. She had better just wait for the prince.

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Sabella had learned to tell the approximate time of day by watching the small piece of sky she could view above her head. She eventually discovered that the dragon had no consistent method of serving meals. She never knew when food would drop from the small opening overhead. Often she would find a sack stuffed with a loaf of peasant's heavy bread and maybe a chunk of white cheese. She would sniff in disgust but eat anyway. She did not intend to pine away like some pale mewling princess. The food became more palatable when the dragon added an earthen jug of brew that she figured must be ale. Those in the palace drank fine fruit drinks and honey mead. The ale may have made her choke and wrinkle her delicate nose but it least it made the chunky bread easier to swallow. Once the dragon tried handing through a fragile glass cup of tea on one of his talons, he had obviously heated it with his hot breath because steam still rose from the cup as he maneuvered the blue tipped talon as gently as possible. Alas, he knocked it into the side of the rocks, crashed the cup to the ground while Sabella watched the shards of glass shatter and brown tea spatter and mix with the dirty floor to make mud. She did have to admit that for a dragon he went out of his way to be pleasant. Despite this, she had to bite her tongue to keep from yelling at him when she saw all that lovely hot tea going to waste.

This particular morning, light streaks of pink filled her small piece of pale blue sky. An inordinate amount of bumping and thumping had woken her. She sat up, and stretched, rubbing her gritty eyes. Sleeping on the straw mat always made her sore. Faint shouting assailed her

ears. Soon she could hear an unfamiliar voice, one that sounded rather young, somehow boyish, "Ouch! Quit doing that! I say. What do you think you're doing to me?"

A scuffling sounded from above, dirt sifted through the opening, some falling on Sabella's coverlet and her head. She jumped to her feet, ready to yell when the astonishing sight of a boy dangling midair from one of the dragon's gilded talons stopped her. The dragon lowered the slight figure until he only hung ten feet above her. He dropped the boy who landed with an ooff and lay still.

"Just a little present for you, princess," wheezed the dragon from above. Sabella thought he sounded like the little bit of exercise had done him in. "I'll come back later to check on you." The flapping of wings filled the air with a whirr that made Sabella clap her hands over her ears until the dragon lifted off the ground.

The body at her feet moaned. Sabella stared at the slender boy with very pale feathery hair that wisped about his narrow face like an areole. He did not look large enough to rescue a kitten from a tree. The pale blue silk tunic and leggings indicated that he must be a prince.

He sat up; his light blue eyes darted about.

"Well Prince," Sabella said. "What an interesting way to go about rescuing me."

"Is that dragon still around?"

"No, I don't think he would fit in here."

"Oh good. I've come to rescue Princess Sabella. I'm Prince Julian. Hey-you must be the princess."

"I am Princess Sabella. I can only suppose that you have some new brilliant rescue plan since you didn't seem to bother fighting the dragon."

“I was supposed to fight him?” Prince Julian’s eyes rounded with astonishment.

“That is the usual way princes rescue the princess from a dragon. If the dragon is the social type, you ding him a little with the sword to show you did your job and take back a piece of treasure to show that you braved that lair, along with the princess of course. If you’re unlucky and he’s anti-social then you just have to pierce his tender spot and cut off his head. Then of course sometimes you end off dead because a dragon’s breath can scorch you quite easily and-

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“I’d rather not know anymore,” Prince Julian glanced upwards. “Are you sure that dragon can’t fit in here.”

“Yes.”

Julian sighed heavily. “It’s true that I don’t know how a prince sets about rescuing a princess. My father never told me any of those things. He was so anxious for me to become famous when the news of the dragon Galgriffe capturing you arrived, he sent me right off. I tried to ask questions and tell him I was too busy with my studies of amphibians to be bothered but he is a forceful man. He pushed me out of the castle saying, ‘My boy, you must hurry before another prince comes to rescue her.’ I didn’t know what to do when I got here so I thought maybe I could just try to sneak in. Of course the dragon saw me right away.”

“Didn’t you read your handbook?”

“My handbook?” His face flushed a light pink. “Uh, I don’t know where it is.”

“Didn’t your father give it to you on your sixteenth birthday? You are sixteen, are you not?”

“My birthday fell about six months ago”, he reached in a side pocket of the tunic and brought out a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, which he adjusted onto his face. “Sorry, can’t see very well without these. I was so nervous about the dragon that I forgot to put them on before I approached the lair. “

“But what about your handbook?” Sabella demanded.

“Oh, well, you see, I have so many books and I’m occupied studying the life of the frog family Ranidae. I didn’t have time to look at the handbook. It must be somewhere on one of my shelves.”

Sabella rolled her eyes. “I don’t like being a princess. I don’t like the handbooks. But I do know how to do my duty. Our handbooks are family heirlooms.”

Prince Julian hunched forward. “I know all you say is true, princess. But I also find the life of a prince most tiresome. I love to study. My happiest days have been spent with Gerdie, my frog, as I study how the amphibian species lives.”

“I don’t care about your silly frog,” Sabella paced the cavern, her deep green silk skirts swishing with each step. “We need to think about escape.”

“Escape?” Julian faltered. “But that would mean the dragon-”

“Well, did you want to sit in this musty cave the rest of your days? You couldn’t study frogs then, could you?” Sabella pulled at a strand of her long red hair in frustration. It reached past her knees in the proper princess hairstyle and in her opinion, it was in the way. Another ridiculous princess rule. “Listen, I haven’t had anything to do in here but read my stupid handbook. It may say that a princess can never attempt to escape without the prince but it doesn’t say that she can’t try to escape once the prince is here. So, I just need to come up with a plan.”



“Perhaps.” Julian looked doubtful. “Couldn’t another prince come, I mean-”

“Yes, another prince could come but we don’t know when. I can’t just sit here anymore.”

“I don’t suppose you could,” Julian said. Suddenly his face brightened and he reached in his pocket withdrawing a small pale green frog. “Poor Gertie. I forgot all about you in the excitement. You must be starving.”

“What is that?” Sabella stopped pacing to stand near to Julian. “You brought a frog with you?”

“Gertie is not just any frog. I’ve had Gertie for about six months now.”

He cleared his throat. “I’m very fond of her. She really must have some water. If you could point me to some we would be most grateful.”

“Over there”, Sabella pointed a finger towards one edge of the cavern where moisture trickled down the walls and puddled a little at the edge. She watched Prince Julian rushing to the spot, cradling the frog in one hand and murmuring encouragement to it under his breath. She might as well forget help from him, she thought. He cared so much for his books and his frog; he would never be of any practical use.

“Princess,” Julian called from where he squatted on the ground. “You haven’t happened to see any bugs like say flies or mosquitoes around lately have you?”

“I’m sure there are all kinds of spiders around if you care to look,” Sabella gestured around the cave. “Maybe you can do a study on spiders while you’re at it. But to find flies or mosquitoes I think maybe you’d be better off trying to get out of here.”

“After I feed Gertie”, Prince Julian was already absorbed in searching the wall nearest him.

Sabella sniffed, flounced her once ivory overskirt, and sat down to make her plans.