

Chapter 2

“It is the duty of the princess to permit the dragon to carry her off to his lair. Though docility in this matter is preferred, some screaming is expected. This abduction will allow the prince the chance to show his expertise in the art of rescue.” From the Princess’ Handbook

That evening when the sky overhead proclaimed twilight with orange wisping into magenta, Princess Sabella jumped from her mat at the thundering of dragon’s wings. Prince Julian huddled in a corner muttering to his frog Gertie. At the noise, he also rose.

Sabella had spent a long disgruntling day trying to plan an escape. Julian had backed away from most of her suggestions with comments like, “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” or “Why don’t we just wait.”

“Wait for what?” Sabella had finally exploded.

“Uh, maybe he’ll get tired of keeping us in here. Or maybe another prince will rescue you.”

“You think a prince will plan on rescuing another prince?” Sabella’s green eyes had flashed at Julian. “I think he’d just leave you in here.”

“You’d leave me in here?” His pale eyes had protruded with disbelief.

“Well, you don’t seem to want to do anything that will get us out of here. That’s exactly what will happen if you don’t get up and help me.” She had stamped her little foot for emphasis. Unfortunately, all her stomping was wearing out the soles of her slippers and she could now feel the hard floor. The close to a temper tantrum that reduced her maids at the castle to quivers and her father to resignation had only made Julian peer at her in puzzlement from behind his gold spectacles.

Now Sabella and Julian both waited to see if Galgriffe would just retreat to his lair or if something else was going on.

“Greetings my dear royals,” the dragon thundered. “I was wandering through the kingdoms when I picked up another friend for you.”

A writhing, wiggling feedbag descended and landed on the dirt floor with an unmistakable female shriek.

“Cheerio!”

As the dragon’s voice faded into the distance, Sabella and Julian stared at each other. Even Sabella who usually jumped into every situation gazed at the moving sack in silence.

“Let me out! Let me out, I demand you!” The person inside fell into a coughing fit.

“Beet flakes,” Prince Julian nodded sagely after reading the label on the burlap bag. “The residue left from the previous product would be enough to constrict the lungs of any human.”

“Well, for heaven’s sakes, let’s get her out,” Sabella said, already working the cord tying the bag. Fortunately, sneaking to the stables in her growing up years to play with the horses, she was very familiar with ropes and their intricacies. As Julian stood back and continued to expound on the effects of agricultural dust on human lungs, Sabella loosened the knot.

A disheveled but very lovely dark head rose from the dusty folds. Deep blue eyes set in a face of perfect porcelain pink blinked in disdainful bewilderment. “I believe I have been abducted!” Dramatically throwing one hand back on her forehead, the princess fell into a graceful faint.

Galgriffe the dragon shuffled into his section of the lair, scorching an x with a small stream of fire onto the wooden calendar placed to the side of the entrance. “Quotas, quotas,” he muttered as he deposited his bag of beet flakes in the section he called his larder. “I’m behind again. Bother.” He had just come back from a visit to his oldest brother, which always put him in a disgruntled mood. He was the youngest of four dragon brothers, the eldest of which lived in

the third kingdom on the other side of the tall mountains while the other two lived in more distant realms.

“I don’t know why I even visit him,” Galgriffe complained sticking his long jaw in the sack of flakes. Maybe a little snack would make him feel better.

He was especially hungry after the feast of raw sheep and oxen his brother Zofrendo had placed before him at lunch. Galgriffe felt there was something distinctly unappetizing about animals lying on a banquet table, their feet in the air. He could only manage a few bites. If he had to eat meat, he much preferred scorching it first, burnt tasting much better than raw. Of course, Zofrendo gave him a hard time about that, making snide comments about the genetic deviation he had inherited. Most dragons enjoyed uncooked fare but there had been an uncle some thousand years back who was thought to be a vegetarian. Obviously, he had come to a bad end. Then as if that was not bad enough, Zofrendo wanted to know all about Galgriffe’s quotas, of course using it as an excuse to brag about his prowess; how many princesses he had dragged to his home in the last year, how many princes he had defeated, how many peasants he had been forced to eat.

“It’s enough to make anyone sick,” Galgriffe said through his mouthful of beet flakes. Now that was more like it. Nothing like dehydrated vegetables to give a boost!

The problem with conversation had not been so much his brother’s bragging—he was used to that—but the fact that he really was behind in his duties. There were so many things he preferred doing that he tended to forget

he had obligations. When he had heard some field peasants in his home kingdom chatting about Sabella's sixteenth birthday party, he had realized with a sinking feeling that a hundred years had passed since he had stolen a maiden. He immediately made a trip to the castle and snatched Sabella from the gardens. So it was with relief he had bragged about the fair princess even now sitting in his lair.

Zofrendo had snorted. "You shouldn't have let yourself get behind in the first place. Little brother," he always called him little brother when he wanted to make him feel inferior. "When was the last time that you looked in your handbook? Just how far behind are you anyway? One princess may get you started but I should think that you have much catching up to do. Now don't hang your head. I am just trying to help you. You know what happens if you don't meet your quotas."

"No, what does happen?" Galgriffe had wanted to say but he was afraid that he would get another lecture on the importance of family tradition and duty.

His brother had inspired enough guilt in him, that on his way home he had snatched a princess picking flowers in the meadow with her maidens. Since she did not live in the second kingdom where he did, he just knew she was a princess because of her clothing; only a princess wore lavender silks and a gold circlet on her hair.

That ought to help bring him up to quota. But it made him grumpy to think of the extra princes that might come questing. He already had one misplaced prince in his home. He should have dumped him off in some forest instead of

bringing him to Sabella. Now there was a prince didn't know how to be princely. But he had thought that she might appreciate the company.

“So what does happen?” Galgriffe said now, raising his massive head from the feed sack and glaring across the room at the huge handbook for dragons propped against the wall. “What happens if you go against the handbook?” It did look rather dusty and a large brown spider was resting in a web she had woven over the top of the binding. He really couldn't blame that Princess Sabella for stomping on her own handbook. He had a sudden desire to disintegrate his neglected volume. But what would happen? Everyone had his or her handbooks; he could always remember having his. The world stone had always been. But why have handbooks? Who had started it? Who made sure everyone followed the rules? He had longed to ask these questions for some time but had never had the nerve. Now he stumped across the room. Time to do a little reading and see just how far behind he had fallen.

“What should we do?” Prince Julian dropped his frog into a pocket as he looked at the newcomer.

“It's just a pose,” Sabella said. She dashed across the room for the earthenware jug of water that still had a few inches left and threw it in the princess' face.

The princess sat up sputtering. “How dare you throw water in my royal face? Don't you know who I am?”

“A helpless princess from some kingdom abducted by a dragon,” Sabella said.

“I am Princess Violet.” The princess straightened herself to full height and rescued a golden circlet from the ground, placing it back on her dark curls. “From the third kingdom, much sought after by many royal suitors.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see just how sought after you are,” Sabella said. “Don’t expect too much sympathy from us. We’re both in the same predicament as you. This is Prince Julian and I am Princess Sabella.”

Violet lifted delicate brows in astonishment. “You are both royals? Strange that I have never heard of you. And you.” She turned towards Julian. “You are a prince and you are trapped here with us? The prince is not the victim. The prince rides in to a glorious rescue. I have never heard of a dragon abducting a prince.”

Julian’s pale complexion suffused with pink. “I- I did try.”

“Then your training was sadly lacking. In our kingdom any royal, especially a prince, begins his training for dragon combat and control at the age of eight. He is usually apprenticed to an older knight. At sixteen when he is given his handbook, he is already well versed in his obligations.”

Julian adjusted his glasses. “I-I had other obligations.”

Princess Violet’s eyebrows went through more gymnastics in her apparent astonishment. “I suppose in a small, more common, kingdom, things may be different.”

“Yes, and I suppose in a larger, more established, kingdom they have nothing better to do than to run their mouths,” Sabella sniffed. She also found Prince Julian very unprincely but she found Princess Violet’s snooty attitude even more annoying.

Princess Violet stood up even straighter as did Sabella while blue and green eyes locked. Sabella stood an inch taller and had the advantage. “Besides,” concluded Sabella as the blue eyes finally blinked and fell, “we have more important things to do. I have come up with a plan for escape.”

Violet sputtered, “But we’re princesses. We don’t escape. We wait for a prince to come. I know he,” she looked aside at Julian, “is already here but surely another prince is on his way even now. I cannot imagine that it would take long for a royal in my kingdom to come to my rescue.”

“Oh, do what you want,” Sabella shrugged. “If Prince Julian and I leave first, I’m sure you can just wait around for your prince.”

Julian fumbled in the pocket of his powder blue tunic and brought out his frog. Princess Violet gave a little shriek. “What is that nasty creature?”

“Haven’t you ever seen a frog?” Sabella snipped.

Prince Julian said proudly, “she is from an amphibian from the family Ranidae. Gertie is not at all nasty I assure you and very well behaved.” At that, Gertie squirmed in Julian’s hands and let out an odd sounding gurgle.

“Ugh!” Violet took another step backwards in her pale lavender slippers. Hers were still in perfect shape. “Well I don’t care what family she’s from. Don’t get her close to me.”

Princess Sabella sighed. Between Prince Julian and Princess Violet, it was going to be a very long night.

