

Dragon Three Two Niner

By

Peter L. Manly



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“Dark Castle Approach Control, this is Princess Irulana aboard dragon November Bravo Three Two Niner requesting landing instructions.” Georgine labored easily beneath me, sensing the end of a long flight. Her silver-dark wings stretched outward as she caught a slight updraft and made the most of the altitude gain.

I mused that the castle tower operators must be asleep at the switch and was about to call again when they finally answered, “Ah, dragon Three Two Niner, this is Dark Castle. Hold at the outer marker over the Enchanted Forest beacon. We have some traffic to clear.”

“Dragon Three Two Niner, “ I acknowledged, slipping the empathy shell into my tunic and making sure it remained secure. Whatever one said into the shell came out of its twin, kept at the castle. It’s a neat spell and it works well. Unfortunately, the system required a separate shell for each castle at which I might land. With the recent proliferation of landing fields, one accumulates a rather lumpy collection of shells.

I hated holding over the forest. It harbored downdrafts, probably caused by the constant use of magical energy and arcane forces. Georgine responded to my slight nudges, banking off to the right in one of her perfect turns. She’s a good old girl and she really likes to fly. I could see her glancing off to the left at the castle, however, and sensed that she would rather have taken a straight-in approach. I began searching for the beacon, an energized jewel placed on a golden pillar for all dragon flyers to navigate by. Off to my right soared a large gray passenger dragon, circling high over the forest and we flew to a point underneath them. The pillar was there but the jewel was gone, probably taken by the Coastal Elves again. They’d give it back later after some concessions and maybe the sacrifice of a virgin but meanwhile, night flyers would have no beacon. Local politics -ugh!

The downdrafts weren’t too bad over the forest but Georgine had already flown the long distance from the Blue Mist Mountains and I wanted to get her bedded down. She kept looking longingly toward the castle, her large green eyes searching for a rookery which could provide shelter.

The Lesser Sun had already set. Its sharp blue cast was now missing on the landscape below. In the slanting rays of the reddish Greater Sun, the scenery took on a soft ruby glow, enhanced by the leaves of the trees preparing for winter. The first snows had fallen early in the mountains and I wanted to finish my business at the castle quickly, lest my return trip become a winter ordeal. All I had to do was find a reasonably competent Sorcerer, have him break the spell on my older sister’s gown and return home. Any little trinkets I could scare up - a magical amulet or a portable curse - would be pure profit. Maybe I could flirt with one of the Knights too - but business came first. The Oracles had predicted that if my older sister, the Greater Princess Katrashkip of Granite Keep, couldn’t wear the gown at the Midwinter Ball then she probably wouldn’t wed the Prince of Dark Castle. Without a wedding to cement the uneasy truce among the castles of the Northlands, a terrible war would break out and we would be plunged into a dark age for millennia. The seers were very specific about that point. I, for one, was glad to be a Lesser Princess so I wouldn’t have to marry for politics.

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My trip would also allow me to do some research at Dark Castle's library. I wanted to investigate rumors of strange changes in the forces of the arcane fields, a study which had been interrupted by my errand.

Above me, I noticed the passenger flight turning toward the castle. Georgine watched the larger dragon head for the rookeries and grunted a bit as we kept wheeling over the empty golden pillar. I patted her neck and hugged her a bit with my knees. "Don't worry, old girl. We'll probably be next." She made the humming rumble which indicated she was pleased with me and we flew on. I let her drift a bit from the pillar in order to catch a weak updraft and she played with it for several minutes.

I was picking up the empathy shell to call the castle when it came to life, "Dragon Three Two Niner, come to a heading West by Northwest, maintain altitude."

"Dark Castle, where are you vectoring me?"

"Dragon Three Two Niner, we're sending you out over the ocean for a long approach to runway niner zero left at the castle. You can follow dragon one twelve heavy in."

"Ah, Dark Castle, we're a small flight. Request a straight in approach to the timber rookery."

"Negative, dragon Three Two Niner, your dragon hasn't been fire suppressed. New Air Transport Safety Regulations prohibit fire breathing aircraft from utilizing timber facilities. You'll have to land on the old stone parapets."

"Three Two Niner out." God but I hate the bureaucrats! Georgine wouldn't belch any fire in a rookery. She's much too civilized about things like that. I searched for and found the large passenger dragon descending ahead of me. We turned to line up with them and Georgine strained to catch up. She likes to fly tight formation but I held her back. We were going to have to allow the larger dragon time to land and clear the apron before we swooped in.

I kept up my altitude over the Troll thickets. The last time I'd gone through their airspace they'd fired off a few of arrows at me and at least one of them had a dragon spell on it. Although they were supposed to be civilized, they were not above plundering booty from airliners which chanced to crash in their territory- and I'd always suspected that they pushed the concept of "chance" to its limits.

As we approached the cliffs of the coast, I knew there would be updrafts. Georgine could sense it too and I could see the fine tendrils on her snout feeling for the change in wind direction. I was going to ask Approach Control for permission to spiral in the wave of air which climbed the cliffs but they called me first. "Dragon Three Two Niner, traffic alert at your three o'clock position. Please acknowledge."

I looked off to the right and saw six military dragons flying in close formation as two flights of three. They cruised down the coast, taking advantage of the updrafts along the cliffs. "Dark Castle, this is dragon Three Two Niner, I have them visually." Their wings didn't move as they glided in precise, tight groups. They soared over me and then peeled to the left, one by one, making for a pretty sight. As they came around in wide sweeping left banks, they separated into a line of dragons, following me as I flew out to sea. The passenger dragon ahead of me had started his cross wind turn and I lengthened my downwind leg to give him more unloading time.

Georgine made a normal approach. The passenger dragon was unloaded quickly and the landing apron cleared. I looked behind and saw the six military dragons strung

out behind. “Ok, girl, just hit the big D in the white circle and we’ll be down for the night. Make it a clean one, we’re visitors here.” Georgine hummed and straightened her wings, preparing for the final swoop and stall. As we came in over the parapet, she dropped her clawed talons and placed the tips lightly on the lettering of the dragon port. She made a single beat with her wings and was down without even ruffling the banners on the watch tower. It was a perfect landing and I was proud of her. She folded the dark silver wings and hummed as I patted her back.

Swinging one leg over the thick neck, I urged her head downward so I could slide to the ground. Once on my feet, I called to her, “Come on, girl, give Mamma a kiss.” She dipped her large fanged head and I kissed her below the eye while rubbing the huge tooth which protruded from her lip. She hummed and exhaled a mixture of gas and breath but she didn’t ignite it. As I said, Georgine’s a cultured lady.

I still had the reins in my hand so I led her off the landing ground before the first of the military dragons arrived. The ground crew approached and I said, “We’ll be here several days. Need a rook for the dragon and a refuel.” At their hesitation, I proffered my Wizard’s Express credit card - I wouldn’t leave the Keep without it. They were satisfied.

The red Greater Sun sat on the horizon as I walked Georgine down the old stone ramps to the dragon rookeries. I could look out over the leaden water and see a storm approaching from the North. The parapet to the ramp supported stone gargoyles of hideous shapes which would effectively hold the ghosts and wraiths of the night at bay. The rookery was a well sheltered cave with bays for individual dragons. Several of the animals were permanently quartered and one of the females was tending two cute babies. They were barely as tall as I and must have been newborns, although they were already spitting a few sparks. There were few dragons quartered in the visitor’s spaces, it being late in the flying season. We were shown a large dry cove for Georgine and before the ground attendant left I said, “She will sleep for an hour or so. Then she’ll feed. Let her have two barrels of Dragon Chow and half a barrel of water. I’ll come down later and give her a treat. Now, help me get the saddle and pack off. I’ll need a bearer to take these to my rooms.” Georgine hummed as I bedded her down and sat with her until slumber overtook her.

The attendants took my saddle and packs up the ramp while my guide ushered me to a small door in the cave wall which I hadn’t seen on my previous trips to the Castle. I was unsure of what he was doing until he disappeared upward in a whoosh of scintillating light. I’d heard of elevator spells before but I’d never used one. Dark Castle was certainly acquiring all of the modern conveniences. I was lifted easily to the main courtyard of the castle.

Getting my bearings, I walked toward the great door of the Royal Arms Hotel. As I approached the gate, I was met by a Grade Two Flunky who made a medium bow and said, “My Lady, how may I serve you?” He exhibited just the correct deference not to offend even the highest queen but not so much that he’d be making a fool of himself if I turned out to be a swine herder.

I stopped, straightened my back, held my head high and placed one hand on the hilt of my jewelled dagger, “I am Irulana, Lesser Princess of Granite Keep, Dragon rider first class, balladeer and Acolyte to the High Priestess of Imbriana.”

He stood his ground. I flashed the credit card and he bubbled over with welcome, “My, Lady, please follow me. Do you have luggage?”

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“It will be brought from the dragon rookery. Have it placed in my room. Gently. I should also like a bath drawn for me immediately and a pig only half roasted - for my dragon - to be ready in one hour. For now, I shall take refreshment in the salon and quench my thirst while the room is being arranged.”

He bowed, then hurried off across the echoing lobby while I headed for the bar. The hotel seemed moderately full of travellers and locals. Entering the dimly lit room, I could make out the usual bands of soldiers, salesmen and scalawags. The single Knight present sat surrounded by several fat merchants. The juke box played Country. Is that a law in most bars? The ladies present appeared not totally decadent but I felt I shouldn't tarry too long if I hoped to maintain my reputation in the castle.

As I accepted a tankard of ale from the proprietor, it struck me that I really needn't worry. As the younger daughter of a minor nobleman, I was probably unknown in the bigger castles. My older sister Katrashkip carried all of the responsibility of marriage to Royalty for political purposes. Indeed, the object of my mission to Dark Castle was to rid her gown of a spell so she could wear it and snag a husband. The Goddess knew she wouldn't catch one without using the arcane ways, for Katrashkip had buck teeth, a hook nose and the personality of a wounded viper with cramps. I, on the other hand, remained free to dabble in magic, a trade normally forbidden to women. I could also ride dragons - and ride them better than most anybody else. I wore green leather flying pantaloons and a jaunty cap and I carried a weapon (only a small dagger and it had just the slightest blood spell) - all to the distress of my parents who wished that somehow I would act more like a Princess. As I gazed at the heavy oak beams of the salon, I remembered their attempts to civilize me. The music from the bar reminded me of my failed studies in the gentler arts. First the dance lessons and then music. When I showed an interest in the Arabic veil dances and salty sailor's tunes they hid my musical instruments, dispatched my instructors to the hinterlands and started me on classical studies.

They made me an Acolyte to a High Priestess. I fingered the talisman of my office as I waited in the dim lounge. Imbriana, the Goddess of Domesticity, is a minor deity but she lent sufficient respectability to my status as a Lesser Princess. The High Priestess also practiced as a closet magician and a powerful one. From her I learned both the arcane ways and the practical knowledge of being a young woman. She encouraged my work with dragons and fuelled my interest in spells. She tolerated my dress and usually tolerated my outrageous ideas. The most recent of these, that a great evil would rise up from the past, she politely quelled by heaping history books on my desk and announcing that I should study all of the tomes before I took action. Unfortunately, the history books failed to agree with my best sources in the tabloid journals. The idea had no form as yet, but my intuitions are never wrong.

The door keeper, accompanied by a footman, interrupted my reverie and announced that my room was ready. “My Lady, if you will walk this way ...”

I'd be damned if I'd walk the foppish way he minced along but I would follow his lead. We crossed the lobby and ascended a grand staircase. Some day I would have to make an entrance down such a staircase just to see what it felt like. Perhaps wearing the magic gown ... naw, not my style. The footman rushed ahead to open the room door. He said in a nearly breathless voice, “Princess, your luggage has been delivered to your room and the chambermaids are drawing your bath.” He held the door and said, “After you ...”

The room was very adequate. Comfortable. Not too large, with a view of the ocean. The footman stood with his hand out, waiting for a tip. As an Acolyte of a Priestess, I can circumvent a tip by bestowing a magical blessing. I bade him bow down and said the sacred words. A faint golden corona passed over his face and he felt the tingle of a truly unique spell. He thanked me profusely and backed out the door. Should he ever become married, the spell will make him more adept and at peace with the role of being a subservient homemaker.

Before sliding into a warm bath, I decided to call home and tell them I had arrived safely. I rummaged in my pack and located the empathy shell which connected with Granite Keep. As I whistled into the opening of the hand-sized pink seashell, my mind envisioned the dark crags of my home castle. A disgustingly cheerful voice on the other end said, "Hello, the Baron and his staff aren't available right now but if you'll leave your name..."

"Lizzie is that you?" Lizzie was my rather scatterbrained maid in waiting. Being a Lesser Princess, I wasn't entitled to the best or the brightest of help.

"Irulana?"

"Yes. Can you take a message?"

"Not really, I can't see to write. The candles ..." She couldn't read or write even in the broad light of both suns.

"Yes, I know. Now try to remember this. I've arrived at Dark Castle safely. I'll see the Sorcerer tomorrow. If everything goes well, I should be on my way home in a couple of days. Got it?"

"Well, I'll try to remember."

"OK. I'll call again tomorrow afternoon. Anything going on that I should know about?"

"Well, your sister Katrashkip stormed out of here right after you did."

"Oh, any reason why?"

"Well, the scuttlebutt around the lackey's quarters is that she thinks you're going to use the gown to enchant the Prince yourself. She's flying to Dark Castle to stop you."

"Great! All I need is old Horseface mucking around while I'm making delicate negotiations with a feisty Sorcerer."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, nothing, Lizzie. Look, just Tell Pops - ah, the Baron, that I've arrived safely and will call tomorrow. OK?"

"OK. Have a nice day."

"Lizzie, how many times have I instructed you not to tell me what kind of day to have?"

"Uh, three?"

"More like three hundred. Good bye."

I went to the next room anticipating a long relaxing soak. The bath was just right. It was warm, not scalding. There were perfumed scents and soaps handy. There was a glass of chilled wine by the tub. There were soft, dry robes waiting. Unfortunately, in the center of it all was my elder sister Katrashkip, her large, angular shoulders and fatty thighs submerged in the tub which I had ordered. Picture a hippopotamus with a hook nose. One look at me and she threw a bottle of scent, screaming, "You bitch! You think

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you can sneak off with my magic gown and capture the heart of the Prince? Well, you've got another think coming, you little ... you little ... you little ... bitch!"

I calmly closed and locked the door to the bathroom and picked up the room's empathy shell. "Front desk? I'd like a different room, please. Yes. Preferably one without a screaming demon in the bathroom. Thank you. I'll return the key on my way down to the dragon rookery. And please have my things moved. Thank you again." I'm going to be really glad when she does marry some poor hapless Prince and is out of my castle once and for all.

The walk down to the dragon's rookery was cool, the sea breeze bringing a salt tang to my nostrils. As I approached Georgine's cove, she rumbled with pleasure. She even stopped eating for a few moments while I rubbed the spot behind her ears which causes her to go limp. After a while, the half roasted pig arrived and Georgine smelled it long before she saw it. Her humming rumble reverberated throughout the cavern and she sat up, her tail banging against the wall in a solid thumping sound. At times like these, at the end of a long and successful journey, the bond between dragon and rider was cemented.

I sat leaning against her large leg as she slowly finished roasting the pig to perfection. Then with my dagger I cut off a token slice and left the rest to her. Since I had missed dinner, I made my token a bit larger than usual but Georgine, ever the grand hostess, did not begrudge me the extra meat. The leather flagon of wine I had brought added the last touch to a perfect meal.

Soon, Georgine lay on her bloated stomach, snoring peacefully at about two point eight on the Richter scale. I became drowsy myself so I quietly stole away and headed for the hotel. After I'd gotten my new room key and headed toward the stairway, I was confronted by a rather garishly dressed fop with ladies of questionable merit on either arm. He was obviously drunk as he let one of them go and reeled toward me while slurring, "Hey, baby! You wanna grab a little gusto?"

He wrapped his arm around me and placed his hand on a portion of my anatomy normally reserved for sitting. If I'd been able to reach my dagger, he'd have pulled back a bloody stump. As it was, I merely loosened several cartilage joints in his wrist as I returned his hand to a more polite location while saying, "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's gustoes that are ..." I looked at his midsection " ... little!" It made my day.

The room was better this time and the bath felt wonderful. After a long day travelling, it was comforting to know that I'd bedded down Georgine and all I had to do was relax. As I stood on the balcony, wrapped in a long warm robe, I finished the last of the wine and felt at peace. Sleep came swiftly and the morning slowly.

I awakened early, as usual, and I checked on Georgine. She appeared too bloated to fly, of course, but tomorrow we'd make a short flight for the exercise - and just for the fun of it. I made a note to find somebody else to fly with. Perhaps they would know of the good soaring areas locally.

After breakfast, I set out along the narrow passageways above the market to find the old Sorcerer. The scents and sounds of foreign traders rose from the stalls and tables of the hawkers, following me through the slim corridors of the ancient guilds. Finally I arrived at the crooked door of the Sorcerer, his weathered sign advertising, "Licensed Magician Doing Business At The Same Location For Over 50 Years!" I could sense a lock spell on it so I knocked. Nobody answered. I waited and then knocked again. The

lock spell wavered, then held steady. Somebody or something had moved through the field, probably someone on the other side of the door looking at me through a spy-hole. I knocked firmly again and waited. Finally, I shouted, "I'm going away to get a good book and something to eat. Then I shall come back, sit on your step, take my meal and read until I finish the book." There was no answer. "Then I'll get another book and come back."

The spell disappeared and the door creaked open. Cobwebs hung across the opening, as if nobody had entered the Sorcerer's shop in a long time. The dark room appeared mostly empty but the hearth smelled of recent use. On the mantle sat an owl. I couldn't tell if it were stuffed or alive so I watched it for more than a minute until it blinked. Alive, then. I scanned the musty interior, noting the vials and potions lining the walls.

"All right," I spoke to nobody in particular, "When do I see you?" I waited in silence, the owl watching my every move. Near the window stood a tall stool and I sidled over to it. As I sat, I called out, "Remember, I am prepared to spend a long, long time waiting."

After another minute, a short balding man came bustling through a doorway from the back and said, "The Sorcerer will not be able to see you today. Perhaps tomorrow. Now please ..." He motioned to me with his hands almost as if he were guiding a flock of chickens. "... I must ask you to leave. He is a very busy man. An appointment is required. The procedures, you know ..."

I could feel the power in the funny little man and knew he was the Sorcerer. The fact that he did not have an assistant to shoo me out spoke of his poverty. In an age of increasing technology, magicians and Sorcerers fell on hard times. I reached into my pouch and withdrew a large gold coin. He didn't notice it until I spoke his name, "Fastasertine!" Knowing a Sorcerer's true name deprives him of some of his power over you. It was only a quirk of luck that he had, in his younger days, tried to bed a Priestess of Imbriana and she had, in her later days, given the secret to me.

He froze and hissed, "You guess!" His eyes locked on the gold piece, as they would gaze upon a lover.

I smiled and countered, "I know, Fastasertine! I know who you are and I know how much you want this gold. It would warm you in the winter, lend power to your spells and ward off the cold fate of age which gnaws at your bones."

The Sorcerer licked his lips and asked, "What is it that you want?"

We both relaxed, our contest of wills complete. We had now established who would drive the bargain and who would follow. "A simple task, really. I have a magic gown. She who wears it is irresistible. Unfortunately, some magician has put a spell on it rendering it useless. I need the spell removed."

A light beamed in the Sorcerer's eye, "Surely you have no need of such a gown, for you are indeed irresistible."

"The gown is not for me. It is for my sister. She wishes to wed the Prince of Dark Castle."

The Sorcerer cast his eyes downward and said after a pause, "My lady, I am perfectly willing to remove the spell but first I must warn you. The Prince is not ... Well, he just hasn't ... I mean, perhaps he is not the right man for your lovely sister. The Prince is, in fact a weakling, a drunkard and a womanizer. Only last night some wench in

the hotel broke his wrist - and he had two other hussies with him at the time. I was called to mend the bones this morning and the harlots were still with him. I pray that you warn your sister of his ways. Perhaps if you were to meet him yourself ...”

“We’ve met. Now break the spell.” I removed the gown from my pack. It was a quite ordinary ball gown, neither too revealing nor too prim. I could, however, feel the power of enchantment in the garment.

The old man took it and felt it, sniffed it, closed his eyes and ran his hands over it. “The gown is ancient. Hundreds of queens and Princesses have used it to gain power. Others have used and misused its enchantment. Adulteresses have worn it more often than maids. There is much sorrow and misery in the gown, much more than there is happiness. Are you sure that it is wise to break the spell blocking the gown’s use?”

“Positive. You haven’t met my sister. She needs it.”

He chuckled and replied, “Probably not as badly as the poor wench I met at the hotel this morning. The face of a beaver combined with a gargoyle, the chest of a dead man and the hips of a rhinoceros. Now she could ...”

“Then you’ve met her.” Nobody else could possibly fit that description.

“Oh my, “ he chuckled, “the Prince would really get what he deserves.” He thought for a moment. “But is that fair to your poor sister? Although she may look ...”

I interrupted him with, “I’m not entirely sure, but I believe she had several people killed in order to obtain this gown. Good people. And if she didn’t, then I still believe she’s capable of it.”

“I see. And if I remove the blocking spell then they will both get what they deserve. May I also suggest a spell of my own as a wedding gift?”

“And what is that?”

“I have one and only one portable spell left. It insures absolute fidelity in a couple. Absolute!”

“How does it do that?”

He paused and gave me a fatherly frown, saying, “You don’t want to know.”

“Oh.” My mind raced through several unpleasant methods of insuring fidelity. All were acceptable. Some were funny. Some were disgustingly funny.

I gestured toward the gown, “Then the spell, you can break it?”

“Oh, yes. It’s a class five spell, not too old, say a century and a half. Feels like a couple of rank amateurs have tried to break it recently - put some dents in the spell but no harm done.” He spread the gown out on his work bench, mumbling to himself and gathering some powders from the glass vials on the nearby shelf. He looked, for a moment, like a man thoroughly happy doing what he does best. “Step aside, there, young lady, “ he said as he made preparations. “Never know when some fool has put a hidden backfire on one of these. Some people have a strange sense of humor.”

It was when he was smoothing the gown and pressing the wrinkles out that he said, “Oh, my!”

“A problem?” I asked.

“I do believe so.”

“Well?”

“The spell, it was made by a Guild brother of mine. I’m afraid I can’t just go off willy-nilly breaking Sorcerer’s Guild spells. It wouldn’t be ethical!”

“Well, how can you tell who made the spell.”

“It’s here in the back of the neck. See the label?”

It took three more gold coins to convince him that guilds weren’t what they used to be. As I left the shop with the newly reactivated gown, I considered wearing it for a grand entrance down the staircase at the hotel. Then I mused that the Prince might once again be in the lobby and shelved the idea. Back in my room, I called home and reported success in my mission. I’d stay two more days and then fly home on a leisurely southern route. Daddy (The Baron) rumbled his approval and gave me the verbal equivalent of a pat on the top of my head. Why is it that fathers feel they have to pat their daughters on the head? Then again, why is it that daughters like it so much?

I took the gown to big sister Katrashkip’s room to present it to her but found she had checked out and gone to the dragon rookery. Since I had to check on Georgine anyway, I went to the rookery, thinking my sister had perhaps rented a dragon to fly home. The thought crossed my mind that I might have to rescue my elder Princess since her skill at flying dragons really stank. She knew it and any dragon she got on knew it.

Georgine was gone!

There was a letter with my name on it nailed to the gate. It read, “Return my magic gown intact and I won’t kill your stupid lizard. It’s being kept under a fear cage spell at Bloody Cove. Don’t show up without the gown. Katrashkip, Greater Princess of Granite Keep.”

My sister does some really dumb things but most of them don’t affect me so I don’t bother to try and beat any sense into her head, as she well deserves. This time, however, she had gone too far. Georgine was a sensitive, gentle friend who trusted even idiots like Katrashkip. I hurried to the rent-a-dragon lot and endured a sales pitch of high order before I gave the dragon jockey the ultimatum; either shut up and rent me a dragon or point me toward his competitor. The charge card helped, although he pointed out that I was reaching my credit limit rapidly. I’d worry about that tomorrow.

“Dark Castle, this is Rent-A-Wing November Echo One Two Seven requesting clearance for departure.”

“Ah, November Echo One Two Seven, we don’t seem to have a flight plan filed for you.”

“Dark Castle, this is a local flight.”

“November Echo One Two Seven, it’s still recommended ...”

“OK, we’ll do it your way. Dark Castle control, this is Rent-A-Wing November Echo One Two Seven declaring an emergency. Dragon theft, suspect at Bloody Cove. Do not, repeat do not, apprehend until dragon is set free. Dragon is under a fear cage spell.”

“What are your intentions, November Echo One Two Seven?”

“Suspect has requested ransom. I intend to apprehend the suspect and free the dragon. If any military forces land, she’ll kill the captured dragon. Understand?”

“Understand, November Echo One Two Seven. You are cleared. We will scramble a military flight but will hold off until you give the word.” I took off without acknowledging his clearance and I could hear him shouting into another empathy shell, “Air Force Bravo and Charlie, operational scramble - this is not a drill! This is not a drill! Follow that dragon!”

The blare of the klaxon reached us and spooked my rented dragon. I nudged her and gave her a soothing sound. Usually I try to establish rapport with a dragon before

I'm airborne but there just wasn't time. I nudged her again to bank left and follow the rugged coastline South. The military dragons were leaving the castle behind me and forming up. Bloody Cove wasn't far, just a few minutes flying time away. As I circled the cove I could see my precious Georgine cowering under an invisible net of fear. Katrashkip stood out on the headland, her long stringy hair blowing in the wind and revealing her bald spot.

She shouted something at me as I approached but I couldn't make it out. I circled once again and landed inland, near the grassy slope which led to Georgine's prison of fear. Katrashkip came running to me screaming, "You little Bitch!"

"Back off, big sister! I've got the gown and I'm even going to let you use it. Now what have you done to my dragon?"

"Your stupid lizard is OK. It's only in a fear cage. Now give me the gown!"

"First, I've asked you repeatedly not to refer to Georgine as 'it' or 'stupid lizard'. Georgine is a 'she' and some times I think she has more common sense than you do."

"Well, if you ever hope to fly on 'it' again, you'd better get off that dragon and hand me the gown."

"First you release Georgine."

"First you get off that dragon and show me the gown." We were at a stalemate. "Remember, I can make the cage smaller and drive your pet lizard insane with fear." Round one went to Princess Katrashkip.

I slid off the rented dragon, holding the pack with the gown. "Where did you get that portable cage spell?"

"It's really simple, you just add water. Daddy gave it to me." she looked pleased. "He said it might come in handy if I were ever assaulted - you know, by some sex starved maniacs." I mused that anybody sexually interested in Katrashkip would have to be certifiably insane and perhaps legally blind so I guess it made sense.

"OK. Here's the gown. Now, release Georgine."

"Not until I'm on the rented dragon - with the gown."

I smelled a rat but I had the Air Force backing me up so I let her get on the dragon. "OK. Now how do you nullify the cage spell?"

She nudged the dragon upward into flight and shouted, "You think I'd tell you, sucker?"

The dragon had made one tentative flap of her wings and was about to make her takeoff thrust when I shouted the secret command which only dragons and a few humans know. She was commanded to land immediately and she faltered, falling on her chest and dumping Katrashkip in an unglamorous heap on the ground. I ran to my ungrateful big sister and knocked her down with a flying body slam (and Daddy said I wouldn't ever learn anything by watching professional wrestling!)

Katrashkip had the wind knocked out of her and I grabbed her in a half Nelson. She managed to get a good elbow into my ribs but I held on, fighting for supremacy and finally turned it into a full Nelson. I rolled her over onto her face and spat, "OK, big sister, either you tell me how to release Georgine or you die right here. Right now." I really wasn't going to kill her but I gave her a knee in the ribs to remind her just how serious I was.

She sobbed and said, "Can't ... Can't breathe!"

I let up on her and she squirmed out of my hold, scrambling free. I backed away warily, remembering previous fights with her in which she merely sat on me, allowing her considerable bulk to win the battle. She had grabbed my dagger and was brandishing it toward me in a rather amateurish manner. Sometimes an amateur can be fairly lethal but I was well trained in unarmed combat. It was a simple kick maneuver to free the dagger from her grasp. I'm proud to say that I did it without damaging the blade. As to Katrashkip's wrist, well, her backhand will never be the same.

Her face contorted with frustration. "By the Old Ones, I'll get you for this, Irulana!" She used to employ foul language like that for its shock value but it's become her standard fare.

She came at me again, fighting like a girl fights. It's no match for somebody who has trained well. In a few punches it was all over. She was lying on the ground and I stood over her. "Well?"

"Well what?" She put her hand to her face. Her nose may have been broken but I thought it could be a definite improvement.

"Well, how do you release Georgine?"

"Oh. Just whistle. You know how to whistle, don't you?"

I stuck two fingers in my mouth and let loose. Georgine shot into the air and wouldn't come near the cove again. The Air Force boys gave me a lift back to the castle where I soothed Georgine for a week before she would fly with me again. Oh yeah, the Air Force Boys; well, I convinced them it was all just a big misunderstanding - family squabble and all. No charges pressed.

And the moral of this tidy little tale? Sometimes you have to damn near kill the Princess just to rescue the dragon.

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