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GENEVIEVE AND THE DRAGON

ANGELA SLATTER

It must be nice, thought Genevieve, *to be a dragon.*

Shiny scales with a green and purple iridescence, pearly teeth, nice and sharp, elegantly shaped claws, and large eyes with so many facets it was like looking into eternity. It might be nice, too, to look into those eyes and see yourself reflected over and over again — right up until the dragon ate you, of course. You were probably pretty scared and not looking your best either; so perhaps it wouldn't be so special.

She rested her head on her palms and stared out the window of the tower, watching the young knight try in vain to slay the dragon that had waddled out of its cave on the hill. The dragon, she thought, was playing with the tin man, a bit like a cat with a mouse. She'd watched this often enough before and knew that the knights never won. Genevieve cheered silently for the dragon, always proud to see it triumph, turning jauntily, its tail flicking behind it and swiping the toasted tin man away. He rolled down the hill with a clatter and joined the pile of bones and molten metal.

Genevieve sighed and went back to reading the male order catalogue her mother had delivered this morning, accompanied by her usual exhortation: "For the love of God, choose one. You have to have one,

you know. If you don't marry what will the neighbours think? What will people say about *me*?"

The male order catalogue was a stroke of genius, she had to admit. Much easier than simply having princes turn up on the doorstep willy-nilly; in years past kingdoms with marriageable princesses ended up having to host and feed hordes of princes-on-the-make and quite a few had gone broke. So, one clever woman (a Queen of course, sick of having her home over-run by knights putting their grotty boots on her furniture), thought up the male order catalogue — princes and knights could register for inclusion. Soon there were branch offices in all the capital cities and the mailing list grew and grew.

Nowadays, if you had a princess in need of a husband, you just checked the catalogue: princes were listed first by location, then alphabetically by name; their age, talents and a general physical description (with a small thumbnail sketch) were included, and you could cross-reference for any major triumphs (dragons slain, tournaments won, etc). Whenever one went off the market (marriage, dragon winning the argument, etc), an amendment parchment was dispatched to subscribers. All very handy if you wanted a prince.

Not much use if you didn't. Or if you were really bad at making decisions. Or just didn't know what you wanted so ended up choosing anything in order to have *something* because you thought you should. That was how Genevieve had ended up with a horse she didn't really like, a dog that didn't like her, a cat that showed her nothing but indifference (but then, it was a *cat*, after all), several dresses that looked awful, and a lot of shoes that pinched. Pinchy shoes did nothing for one's mood and made you look at the bad side of everything — which was how Genevieve came to be known as the grumpiest princess in the land.

To be fair, it's hard to get what you want when you don't know what it is.

That being said, when she forgot to be grumpy, she really was very sweet and kind and lots of fun. So, people liked her quite a lot in spite of the grumpiness, and had a lot of time for her. She just didn't realise it.

Still, it wasn't helping her chances in the marriage stakes. Her mother just kept bringing the latest catalogue and saying quite pointedly that people would think *she* was a bad mother (because

she was). Her father was no better: he just used to pat her on the head, ask her how she was, then not listen to her reply before saying, “Splendid, splendid, keep it up, there’s my girl” or something along those lines. Then he’d go back to gambling, which was his favourite hobby. The king would bet on anything: horses, dogs, the length of a marriage — if two flies were crawling up a wall, he’d put a bet on the left one winning the race to the top.

On page forty-seven was a prince she thought might be all right but, on closer inspection, she decided he was a bit spotty and threw the catalogue into the corner (it landed on a pile of previous editions). She poked her head out the window again, hoping for another glimpse of the dragon, but there was only a thin trickle of smoke wafting from the mouth of the cave. She thought about leaving her rooms but then she’d have to choose something to wear (her maid was on her rostered day off for the month), so she rolled back into bed and drew the sheets up over her head.

Her planned day of sloth was interrupted by a knock. One of the pages stuck his head around the door and announced that her parents demanded she attend in the throne room forthwith. Grumbling, she dragged on a crumpled gown, didn’t bother with her hair, and stomped down the grand staircase to the throne room, the least regal sight to be seen in many years.

Her parents sat on their thrones eyeing a youngish-looking man in hand-me-down armour. Genevieve thought he looked a bit like Mr Page Forty-Seven, but with more spots. He didn’t look very royal, in fact he looked as if he’d stolen the armour from a knight fallen on hard times. He had a nice voice though, when he spoke.

“Fair Princess Genevieve!”

“Err, hello,” she said.

“She’s everything you promised, sire,” he declaimed to the king. Her father cleared his throat and her mother kept muttering “Whatever will the neighbours think? How terrible for *me!*” under her breath.

“Genevieve, dear, we’ve, ah, got a husband for you. Here he is: Sir Giles.”

“But I don’t think I want that one,” she said uncertainly.

“Oh, come, come. You never know what you want, poppet. This way the decision is made for you and your mother will stop complaining — about this at least.” He leaned forward and added

sotto voce. “And this will get Daddy out of his little gambling debt problem. Be a dear and help Daddy out, will you?”

“But I’m pretty sure I don’t want to, Dad,” she said, more firmly this time, but to no avail.

“There’s a good girl. Your mother will fix up your trousseau and all that. Run along. Plenty of time for you and Giles to get acquainted after he slays the dragon tomorrow.”

Genevieve gave her husband-to-be a scornful glance. “Twenty-two knights have tried to slay our dragon in the last three years. The one this morning lasted ten minutes and that was the longest of any of them. What chance do you think you’ve got?”

“Your father said it was only a little dragon.” Sir Giles went quite pale. “He said I could knock it over before the wedding and still have time to tidy up.”

“I don’t like your odds,” laughed Genevieve.

Genevieve found her stoutest pair of boots (the only ones that didn’t pinch), stuffed a few clothes and a sack of gold coins into a satchel, and snuck out of the palace into the late evening air. Having uncomfortable shoes that you didn’t really like was one thing, but having a husband you didn’t really want was another altogether. She didn’t know where she was going but it certainly wasn’t going to be anywhere near Sir Giles.

She was sneaking past the mouth of the dragon’s cave when a deep, sweet voice breezed out of the hole in the hill. “Won’t you come in for tea?”

“Ahhhh,” she hedged, then decided it was best not to offend anyone who lived in a cave as they were probably grumpier than she had ever been. “Yes, thanks. Tea would be lovely.”

“Come along then. It’s very well lit.”

And so it was. Genevieve followed the well-worn path down into the earth until it opened into a high, wide chamber. The walls shone with crystals and in the middle of the room, there was a huge pile of treasure with the purple dragon perched on top. She could have sworn it smiled at her quite nicely.

“The pot’s there and the tea is in the caddy next to it. You’ll have to pour — I have a problem with my lack of opposable thumbs.”

“I quite understand.” Genevieve made the tea, and offered some to her host; the dragon (she said her name was Evangeline) refused, saying that it gave her gas, which, in a dragon, is a terrible thing.

They chatted politely until Genevieve thought she should go. She set aside her cup and stood. “I thought I should let you know, there will probably be another idiot coming to try and slay you tomorrow morning. Name’s Giles.”

“Oh, what a bore,” sighed the dragon. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Well, I’d better be going. Thanks for the tea.”

“Where are you off to then? Any plans?” asked the dragon, shifting slightly on the mound of treasure and causing a small avalanche.

“I don’t know. As long as I’m not marrying some halfwit, I don’t really mind.”

“Mmmm, I have a proposition for you then, Genevieve.” She stretched her long scaly neck out until she could almost touch the princess. “How would you like to become a dragon?”

Genevieve recoiled, but only because of the sulphurous smell of the dragon’s breath.

“Yes, sorry about that. That’s the main problem, the sulphur breath. Well, that and the whole knights-ahoy thing.” She sighed as Genevieve stopped coughing. “So, how about it?”

“Do I have to eat maidens and ravage country-sides?”

“Not unless you really want to. I personally don’t bother.”

“What about those girls they’ve been sacrificing up here for years?” demanded Genevieve.

“Never touch them myself. I always just let them go — release them at the entrance on the other side of the hill and tell them to go off and have a nice life doing whatever they want.” The dragon smiled. “You’ll note that none of them return home.”

“Have you asked any of them to be dragons?”

“One or two,” she admitted. “But you don’t see too many with the right spark. You’ve got it, though, whether you know it or not.”

Genevieve gave it a moment’s thought and realised that it was the easiest decision she had ever had to make in her life — and for the first time ever, she knew what she wanted.

“Yes, please. I would *love* to be a dragon.”

“I’ve waited so long to hear someone say that!” The dragon smiled, heaved herself to her feet, and slid down the treasure pile as if it were a snowy hillside. She placed a talon against her chest and lifted one of the scales that covered the spot over her heart. There was a creak, then a tearing sound, and dark blood trickled from under the scale. “Drink, Genevieve. You need only taste a little.”

Genevieve did as she was told — the dragon tasted like peppermint. For a moment nothing happened, and she opened her mouth to say so but found her tongue was changing, swelling, and her teeth were growing longer and longer. She looked at her hands and saw them become claws, and felt the rest of her growing, and growing, and growing until at last, she was a purple dragon. She laughed — a deep dragon laugh — and looked for her friend.

An old woman stood where the dragon had been. She had long wispy white hair and wore a pale lilac dress, but her eyes were still the dragon’s: purple, multifaceted amethysts. She smiled at Genevieve and put her hand to the girl’s new snout.

“You’re a beautiful dragon, my girl.” She laughed. “I made the same choice as you a hundred years ago and I have never regretted it but I think now it’s time for me to do something different. Can I do anything for you before I go? Tell anyone?”

“No, thanks. My mother will just come down here and start wailing about how could I do this to *her* and my father will probably start taking bets on how many knights I can eat in a week.”

“Good choice. Take care, Genevieve. Have a happy life.”

“Thanks, Evangeline. I will.”

Sir Giles had taken off in the middle of the night. He spread tales of such a fierce a dragon that no one ever came to try and slay Genevieve — and since the only princess in the area had done a runner, there really was no point in coming all that way.

Genevieve, because she was strong and finally knew who she was and what she wanted, never had any trouble making a decision again in her long and contented life. She lived quite happily under the hill for many, many years until one day, another young woman came for tea. But that is another story...

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