

PAX ASTERIAE

*Rescuing  
the  
Princess*

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# Rescuing The Princess

The grappling hook clattered its way through the window and scraped back across the floor until it caught on the ledge. Sir Alba, both hands resting on his hips, stared up along the length of knotted rope that led to the lone window at the top of the tower and smirked. This was going even better than expected. All he needed now was to scale the stonework, rescue the princess and he'd be the richest man in the kingdom.

It would've helped if the tower had a door he could have kicked down, but no one ever expected this kind of thing to be easy. Still, manners dictated that just barging in would be rude. Cupping one hand to his mouth, he called up in his deepest, most powerful bellow, "my princess, your saviour has arrived."

He'd expected, at the very least, a joyous shriek. Not for a bread roll to come flying through the window, plummeting towards his head.

Must be a mistake. She must have dropped it in her excitement at her impending freedom; he could understand that. Fifteen years trapped inside a tower, anyone would be desperate to be free. Odd that she wasn't already leaning from the window though. Perhaps she was shy. "My princess," he tried again, somewhat uncertainly this time. "I'm here to rescue you."

When the response finally arrived, along with a shape at the window, it wasn't all he'd been hoping for. "I was *reading*," a grumpy voice shouted down.

Sir Alba paused, squinting up at the window. "My princess . . . you're a *man*?"

The figure in the window leaned forward and huffed, shoving a long blond tress carelessly over one shoulder. "The hair. It's a common mistake. Confuses everyone."

In the bright summer sunlight it was unmistakable. Despite the fine features, the full, sensuous lips and the shimmering golden curls that reached to the waist, the princess gripping the ledge with elegant fingers was, most certainly, a *prince*. Sir Alba

did the only thing he could: he gaped.

The prince squinted down at the knight, then sighed. “You’ve had a wasted trip. If you leave now, you can get back to town before nightfall.”

For one long minute Sir Alba stared up at the increasingly irate man before, with a shake of his head, he grinned and wrapped both hands around the hanging rope, testing it. “Well, it’s been a long journey and I’ve always liked boys as much as I do girls.” Sure it would hold, he adjusted his grip and swung both feet up against the stonework.

It was the prince’s turn to gape, not that his surprise lasted as long as the knight’s had: he snapped his mouth shut again and began to tug desperately at the splayed hooks of the grapple digging into the ledge. “No, you don’t need to worry about me. Be on your way and find a more worthy cause!”

Sir Alba was oblivious to the note of desperation in the prince’s voice, moving easily hand-over-hand. “My princess—*prince*—” that might take some getting used to, “—you are far worthier a cause than you imagine. Your parents have promised to richly reward anyone who returns with you. There are even rumours of your hand in marriage.”

“Gods no!” The prince exclaimed, gritting his teeth as he yanked at the hooks again. “Anyway, you can’t marry me, I’m a man!”

The knight grinned again. Not far to go now. “Maybe not in your country, but things are a bit different in mine.”

The damn grapple had wedged in a gap in the mortar; it wouldn’t budge. The prince kicked it. “Would it help if I said I wasn’t interested in you?”

“Nope. You know how these things work.” He was almost there. So near... when the prince’s head reappeared, chin propped on the backs of his hands. Sir Alba stopped in his tracks, supporting himself from one of the knots. “Yes, my . . . prince?”

“You’re not bothered about the dragon, then?” The prince tilted his head to one side, smiling down at the knight.

Sir Alba snorted. “There’s no such thing as dragons.” Up close the man was even more handsome, far in excess of the rumours of the princess’s beauty. This could work out very nicely indeed.

The prince let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “And can you

assure me that I'll remain *untainted* on this journey back to my parents?"

Without showing any signs of strain or fatigue from hanging from the rope for an extended period of time, the knight mulled it over. "Sorry, no. It's been a long journey here and any maiden who spends even one night with a knight is believed to have lost her virtue, so we might as well do it anyway."

"I'm no maiden," the prince muttered and, pressing his fingers to his lips, released a piercing whistle that sent distant birds clattering and squawking into the sky.

Sir Alba winced, grip tightening on the rope, as an answering shriek immediately filled the air. It almost—but not quite—drowned out the pounding *thrum* of massive wings as a huge form came rolling and diving straight at him.

Only his iron hold kept him on the rope as the crimson beast whirled past him, its speed breathtaking. He wasn't so lucky the second time. Its back grazed his own, jolting him from the rope; the ground came flying to meet him—

—A wordless shout from the prince and talons closed around his waist, gentler than expected. The wingbeats filled his body as the creature lowered him towards the ground.

Then dropped him the last couple of feet.

Sir Alba landed on his back with a thud and a groan, winded and too stunned to move as the beast settled a short distance from him. He couldn't even express surprise when, in a plume of orange smoke, it vanished.

Boots crunched over the grass. A shadow fell across his face; Sir Alba squinted up but with the sun behind them all features of the figure were indistinct. All but its gender, and that he could only infer from the rich, melodious voice that came from it. "Til, why'd you keep attracting these lunkers? Lookit the size of him."

From the window, the prince barked out a laugh. "It's not *me* they're after. You know that." With no knight weighing it down, the grappling hook came easily free and was promptly pitched back out the window. Sadly, it didn't hit the knight.

Pushing himself into an only slightly swaying sitting position, Sir Alba took a closer look at the new speaker.

The first things he saw were thick shoulder-length red curls above a stunning tanned face. If possible he had even finer features than the prince, somewhat marred by both the functional red-scale armour that covered his upper chest and clung to

mostly preserve the modesty of his lower body, and the way both hands burst into flame as he flexed them. “Shame you ain’t wearing heavy armour. Always wanted to know how people cook when you heat ’em in it. Whether it makes ’em tender.”

Sir Alba found the strength returned to his legs much faster than he’d anticipated: he shot back across the grass in horror. “What?!”

The handsome redhead bared sharp teeth in something that may have been a grin—one that abruptly vanished as the prince called down to him, “I told you before, you can’t eat them.”

Slack jawed, he could only stare vacantly as the redhead pouted, looking for all the world like a scolded child. The flames engulfing his hands died away. “But — he’s so *big*, he’d be perfect—”

“*No.*” The one word carried all the princely disapproval at his disposal.

The other man’s shoulders drooped. “*Fine.*” He glowered at Sir Alba, who could only quail under his fiery stare, the sword hanging from his belt completely forgotten. “Piss off, and next time someone tells you ’bout the dragon, maybe listen to ’em, eh?”

The knight nodded, face pale, and scrambled into a sprint for his horse.

Both men watched him go, the prince leaning from his window with an amused smile, the dragon a lot less cheerfully. “Not had a good warrior in years. And,” he glared at the grappling hook, “he even left bloody *litter.*”

The prince snorted. “I’m not enough for you any more?”

When the dragon looked up again, it was with a genuine grin that transformed his face into something open and beautiful. Something that made the prince’s heart skip a beat, just like every other time he’d seen it. “You’re always enough,” he laughed. Rolling his shoulders forwards, golden-red wings burst from his back. A few long, easy beats carried him up to the window.

Prince Til caught his lover’s hands, helping him through the opening. “Good.”

The dragon intertwined his fingers with Til’s, leaning forwards to press his lips to the prince’s. “I’ll keep on saving you from knights, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Til murmured, smiling and kissing back. “I have you, and that’s all I need.”

# *About The Author*

Pax Asteriae is an English writer with a terrible habit for naming, and then adopting, inanimate objects. This does not entirely include computers, as everyone knows computers have souls and therefore demand names.