

TWISTED TAIL

By Adaline Griffiths

So there I was, sitting against the wall, my arms crossed as I watched the giant play with my tiara. In his hands, it looked like a plaything. I frowned. It wasn't as if I was fond of the crown, in fact, I dreaded wearing it. But it was mine, and Ulith had taken it.

I glanced around the huge room. The fluffy walls stretched up far beyond even the giant's head, and the ceiling sparkled with artificial stars. When Ulith had first brought me to his cloud castle hidden in the sky, I had been amazed. I still was. But now hours had passed and the novelty of the situation - and the relief of escape from my father's castle - had worn off. Even though I knew that when I returned home I would have to return to my stiff duties as a proper princess, staying locked up in a room with a giant was almost equally agonizing. I sighed and examined my nails.

"Ulith," I shouted. "Just curious, when are you planning on letting me go?"

Ulith bent down and his face loomed before me. I waved my hand in front of my face as his rancid breath overwhelmed me.

"What'd ya say?" Although he didn't speak loud, my head pounded and I covered my ears with my hands.

"When are you letting me go?" I repeated.

"Whenever your daddy gives me that Star Sapphire out of his treasury," the giant replied.

"But that antique is worthless to you....clearly you have the talent of architecture, you don't need the jewel."

"Don't care about the money. It was made by giants, it belongs to giants. It's my right."

I groaned. I hoped I would be liberated soon.

"Ulith!" An unknown voice bellowed from outside.

My head snapped up, and my eyes widened at the sound. The creature's voice was so deep it was almost melodious. The call was closely followed by a roar and I shrank back. I

hoped Ulith would have the decency protect me from an attack. Was that part of the kidnapper's code?

Ulith tramped over to the window. "What do you want, Rex?"

"I want Princess Isabelle."

I straightened. Now things were getting interesting. I stood up, trying to see out the window. Who was it that was trying to take me? I jumped up but to no avail, the window was stubbornly too high.

Ulith let out a harsh laugh. "Well you ain't getting her. She's my property until the King trades for her."

A stream of fire burst through the window and Ulith jumped backwards. He cursed. "You stay here," he ordered me and then left the room.

I heard him tromp outside, his footsteps shaking the foundation of his castle. Ignoring his instructions, I sprinted across the floor towards the door and then crawled underneath the doorway, which was just tall enough for me to fit under. I looked around, finding myself faced with another room to cross. I spotted a huge set of double doors stood on the far wall. Yes! It was my route for escape, and I sprinted toward it.

"Ulith, I want the girl," Rex growled, his voice echoing from just outside the castle wall.

"What do you want her for?" Ulith asked, his harsh voice filled with suspicion.

"That's none of your business," Rex replied. "But if you're worried about the safety of the girl, I promise not to harm her."

Ulith snorted.

As I listened at the door, my heart lightened. That was more of a promise than I had received from Ulith. Maybe if I went with this Rex character he would return me to my home. Maybe not. But it wasn't as if I had many options, and my boredom was at a limit. Then again, I didn't know what sort of creature this Rex was. If he could spurt fire and roar with such power....what other dangerous deeds could he perform?

I shook my head, I was getting no answers just standing inside. I got to my knees and crawled underneath the front doorway. Then I stood up, shaking off my skirts. As I looked at the scene before my eyes widened, and I stumbled back.

Ulith was standing, his back straight as he glared at the dragon. Sharp ridges pointed up from dull maroon layered scales down Rex's spine and white fur lined the edge of his face. Perched on his hind legs, his curled horns were almost as tall as Ulith, and with his wings open, Rex was even more intimidating.

"She's the only chance I got at getting that treasure," Ulith said, spreading his arms wide.

Rex opened his mouth to respond but then he stopped. He squinted in my direction and then his golden eyes grew wide. "Princess Isabelle," he cried, a note of relief in his voice.

Drat. I had been spotted. There was no returning to the "safety" of the castle now.

"I thought I told you to stay inside." Ulith stepped towards me, his fists clenched by his side.

"Well, I don't have to take orders from you." I lifted my chin but took a step back.

Rex growled at Ulith. "Let her be." He bent onto one knee and bowed his head.

"Princess."

I curtsied in response. "Sir Rex." Even if he was a dragon if he was bold enough to attempt a rescue he deserved the title. I tilted my head. "May I ask, why do you want to rescue me from Ulith?"

"Because he's pulled stunts like this before, and I watched from the sidelines. I won't let something happen again."

"Excuse me, *again?*"

"One of the other princesses I took fell asleep and she never woke up," Ulith admitted. He jerked a thumb in Rex's direction. "This fool thinks it was my fault, that I killed her."

A lump rose in my throat.

“Because you did Ulith!” Rex said, his body shaking. His long tongue slithered out. “Face it, you don’t know how to take care of a young girl!”

Ulith groaned and rolled his eyes.

I bit my lip. The situation looked more and more pressing with each passing moment. I needed to persuade Ulith to free me. “You see Ulith,” I spoke up, “keeping me here won’t do you any good. It would be better for you to let me go.”

“But then me getting nothing,” Ulith complained.

I racked my brain. “I know!” I held my hands out. “I’ll see if I can convince my father to still give you the Star Sapphire, or at least let you borrow it from time to time.” Father would *love* that. But if I could convince Ulith, I could convince Father.

Ulith furrowed his broad and shiny forehead. He scratched the wisps of hair remaining on his head. “Maybe,” he pondered.

“Great,” Rex jumped in. “That’s the plan. And I’ll act as the messenger, so you won’t have to crush any more houses.”

Ulith opened his mouth to protest, but I was already running across the courtyard towards Rex. I didn’t expect my first encounter with a dragon to go like this, but I had to choose the lesser of two perils, and Rex seemed to be looking out for me.

Sweat dripped down my face as I drew nearer and I pushed back my hair. Rex knelt on the ground and dipped his head so it was low enough for me to reach. I hitched up my skirts as I clambered onto his neck.

Ulith’s upper lip curled and his eyes bore into me. “You give your word?” he asked.

I met his gaze and held up my right hand. “I promise.”

“Okay, Ulith?” Rex asked. He turned to the side, preparing for descent and I almost fell off, only barely managing to balance myself in time.

My heart pounded. Was Ulith truly going to let us go?

His eyes blazed and he frowned, but then he nodded. “Fine,” he said begrudgingly.

I bent down, grasping onto the fur on Rex's neck. Falling off the dragon mid-flight would defeat the purpose of the rescue.

"Here we go, Princess," Rex warned. He jumped off the edge of the clouds and we plummeted. I screamed and my heart dropped to my stomach. We were going to crash!

But just as a large pair of evergreen pines became in danger of becoming a dragon landing pad, Rex spread out his wings and we soared above the trees. I let out a sigh of relief.

After I gained my balance - and my confidence, I lifted my head slightly. The wind rushed past my face as we circled above the forest. I broke out a smile and whooped. While I had been freed from one prison, I would be returning to another: the prison of society's expectations. So, as long as I could, I would relish my freedom.