

The Princess and Dragon Business

The girls waited for the announcement. Those who had been eliminated formed ranks around the throne, and the top five shifted and fidgeted to one side, casting glances at one another. Two of them, old friends from previous contests, held hands.

The MC and the panellists were discussing and adding up numbers, and consulting some more. Then the MC nodded, the panellists nodded and names and numbers were written on a piece of paper. The MC looked at the panellists and nodded a final time.

He turned and walked towards the microphone.

“Now we come to the finale of the Miss Greenville beauty competition. Thank you to all the lovely ladies who have taken part today.”

He turned to the assembled girls and applauded them, and so did the audience. He cleared his throat.

“In third place...” The MC called the names of the runners-up and the girls came up and received their sashes and tiaras and took their places on either side of the throne.

“This is the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The winner of this year’s Miss Greenville pageant is...” He paused, and the crowd went silent. “Number 19! Sandra Masters! Come forward, Sandra.”

The winner put her hands to her face and stepped out of line. The second place winner draped a cloak around her shoulders and the third place winner advanced with the sash, and at that moment the dragon swooped down and carried Sandra off into the sky. Her shriek drifted down from the heavens.

“Let me go, you stupid dragon! On second thoughts, please land first!”

Sandra had been shouting insults at the dragon since the moment that she had been kidnapped, but she didn’t dare to struggle too much. She was, of course, being carried through the air. She was, she thought, surprisingly comfortable, carried in a cage formed by the dragon’s claws.

The dragon’s wings went up and down, but the dragon’s body stayed fairly level, so Sandra was not too affected by the motion. She stopped struggling and looked around. She grabbed the dragon’s talons, looked through them, and watched the fields and forests passing beneath them. It was so beautiful. But a long way down. They were heading for a range of craggy mountains, and beneath them, the small fields of sheep and the solid farmhouses constructed of the native rock faded away. The houses were replaced by heathery moors and rocky outcrops, dissected here and there by fast flowing streams. The dragon tilted its wings, and they spiralled down towards the rocks and Sandra held tighter to the dragon’s talons.

“Woah!”

The dragon’s claws opened and Sandra tumbled out.

“Oof! Stupid dragon!”

“I’m sorry, your majesty,” said the dragon. “Are you OK?”

“Yes, I suppose. ‘Your majesty’?”

“Ah, good, good, Princess. I’ve made you a dwelling place. What do you think of it, ma’am?”

“Wait. You think that I’m a Princess?”

“Are you not, ma’am?” The dragon gave her a puzzled look. “But I kidnapped you from a ceremony where you were about to be crowned!”

Sandra quickly reviewed her situation. She was standing next to a large scaly monster who thought she was a Princess.

“Er. Well, let’s see this dwelling place. Er.”

The ‘dwelling place’ was a rough square of logs. There was no roof.

“Erm, OK. Let’s make a few changes. Ah, first, that long log. Can you bring it out here, please?”

Err, what’s your name, dragon?”

“Name? I don’t have one. Other dragons call me...”

The bellow echoed around the small valley.

“Right,” said Sandra, “I’ll call you Eric. Call me Sandra.”

Eric and Sandra toiled away and turned the ‘dwelling place’ into a passable hut. Well, Eric did most of the toiling and Sandra did most of the directing, but they got it done.

Sandra was forming an opinion about the dragon. Eric was large and scaly, it was true, but there was something immature about him.

“Eric, how old are you?”

“I’m quite grown! Three years out of the egg!”

He smiled, showing an impressive array of teeth. So, young and naive, thought Sandra. She could work with that.

“Right, Eric. I need a bed. You wouldn’t have a bed hidden away somewhere would you?”

“A bed? Can’t you just curl up on the ground? Err.” He’d caught the look on her face. “Well, I might have something in my hoard.”

“Princesses don’t curl up on the ground,” she said. “Hoard? You have a collection of gold and jewels? Treasure?”

“Err,” said Eric again.

They walked into Eric’s cave.

“This... This is your hoard, Eric?”

“Yes, it’s magnificent, isn’t it? I bet you’ve seen nothing like it before, have you?” asked the dragon excitedly.

Sandra had seen something like it before. The town dump. Spread around the various chambers of the dragon’s cave was a miscellaneous collection of junk. Broken furniture. Old carpets. Bicycles missing wheels and other parts. Sandra saw something glinting and picked it up, and no, it wasn’t a jewelled necklace. It was a necklace made of cheap plastic beads. Not even glass! She tossed it back.

She pulled at something and a cascade started. A suitcase hit the ground and burst, scattering its contents around. The contents were mostly papers, but the case also contained an old sweater.

“Yes, well. Do you have a human bed in here, Eric?” she asked again.

Eric doubtfully led her into a side chamber. “Human beds?”

Sandra sighed. A broken double bunk. A kid-sized single bed. A wood slat bed with broken slats.

“We’ll work something out, Eric. Any mattresses?”

The rescued armchair, with one side propped up on a construction block, sat outside Eric’s cave. Sandra lounged in the chair, eating the Chinese meal she had ordered from the town. She had walked down to the road to pick up her meal and the delivery boy had practically tossed her food at her and roared off, to the extent that his little motorcycle was capable of roaring. There had been rumours about the dragon.

“So, Eric, why did you kidnap me?”

“Hmm? That’s what dragons do isn’t it? Kidnap princesses?”

“Yeah, but what happens now? You’ve kidnapped me. Now what?”

“Err. I don’t know. Do you, Sandra?”

“No! Stupid dragon!”

The dragon slumped. “Sorry, ma’am. I am stupid. I don’t know anything.”

Sandra paused. She didn’t know how the dragon would take it, but she had to come clean.

“Sorry, Eric, that was rude of me. I’m not a real princess, you know.”

Eric’s head whipped round. “What? But you were being crowned!”

Sandra explained what beauty pageants were about, and that the crowning was symbolic.

Eric pondered. “Humans are weird,” he rumbled. “So, it was all a game?”

“Well, I won five hundred dollars. I wonder if I can still claim it?”

“So, I can’t make you stay, Sandra?” He slumped again.

Sandra considered. The dragon did not seem to be threatening, and in some ways he seemed a little pathetic. She decided to test the waters.

“You can’t make me stay. I guess that you won’t eat me, either. So, I could, for example, go home and leave you here.”

Alone, she thought. With your pathetic ‘hoard’. She sighed.

A tear rolled down the dragon’s cheek, and he wiped it away with the back of his clawed foot.

“Eat you? No! I’d never eat a human! I can’t make you stay, either! That would be cruel.”

Sandra smiled. “Yeah, well, I’ll stay the night at least. It’s nice up here. Do you get many visitors?”

“Sometimes people come up here, but when they see me, they run away.”

“That’s a pity, pal.”

“She came back! She came back!” The dragon bounced around with stiff legs, consumed by joy.

“I said I would, Eric! I said I would. Hey, careful.”

Today she was dressed in jeans and t-shirt, and not her pageant costume. She dropped her backpack at the door of her ‘dwelling place’, and Eric lay on the grass and sighed contentedly. She reached up and scratched his ear, and he sighed again.

There was a boy sitting on a rock in front of Eric’s cave.

“Who are you? No, wait a minute. You delivered my Chicken Fried Rice and then shot off as if Eric was chasing you. You’re the delivery boy!”

The boy looked sheepish. “Yeah. I was scared of the dragon, but I thought later that you weren’t scared of it. Him. It’s my day off today, so I decided to come up here and see if I could see the dragon.”

Eric chortled. “I heard Vick coming, so I came up behind him. I asked him who he was and he almost fainted! It was so funny!”

“Yeah, you might have found it funny, Eric, but I thought that I was going to be eaten!”

“Why do you humans all think that I’m going to eat you? Dragons don’t eat humans!”

“We didn’t know that, pal. There are stories of dragons killing knights and kidnapping Princesses. What do you eat, Eric?”

“Um, I sort of go somewhere else, and eat the animals there. They are tastier than the animals here.”

“Somewhere else? Like Africa or somewhere?”

Eric shook his head. “It’s not here. It’s somewhere else. But anyway, the Princess thing is right, but I don’t know why we do it. I guess if a knight were to charge at me with a weapon, I would defend myself, but I wouldn’t do it for fun.”

“Anyway, Vick, nice to meet you,” said Sandra. “It was brave of you to come back, but Eric’s OK.”

“So I found out. He’s like a big kid, isn’t he?”

“You know, Vick, maybe you could help me out with something?”

“Hmm, maybe. Does it involve Eric?”

“Oh yes. It definitely does.”

“You’re OK, Sandra! Thank goodness! I called the police, but they were useless.”

“Thanks, Sam. Thanks for being concerned, but I think that you owe me five hundred dollars.”

“Haha! Yes, Sandra. I was afraid that the police would charge me with something! Wait! Five hundred dollars? What for?”

“I won your darn pageant!”

“You were never crowned so —“

“Hmm, the police. What if I were to tell them how you didn’t keep me safe and let a dragon carry me off, Sam? I was SO scared.” Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Sam twitched. “Ah, five hundred dollars? Hmm, I just happen to have five hundred dollars here.”

“Thanks, Sam.” The tears had disappeared in an instant. “There’s only four hundred here.”

“Oops,” said Sam, handing over another note.

“Thanks, Sam. Oh, I’m going to tell the police that it was just a stunt. After all, here I am, completely untouched! Nice doing business with you, Sam. Just make sure that my name is properly engraved on the trophy, and send me my sash.”

She smirked and left. Sam wiped his brow and collapsed into the chair behind his desk. He pulled a bottle and a glass out of the middle drawer and poured himself a drink. He sighed. He never drank in the middle of the day!

“What are you doing, San?”

Sandra took off her glasses. “Hi, Vick. I’m working on the permissions from the Council. Did you get those banners from the printer? And the leaflets.”

“Yeah.” Vick dumped them in the corner of Sandra’s office. “Are we going to get permission from the Council, do you think?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. They have given us permission to use the land, because no one was using it anyway. They might change their minds if we start making money. But, anyway, the inspector gave me a list of safety recommendations, but they’re not too bad. Where’s Eric?”

“Fiddling with his hoard, I think. What was that pile of stones for?”

Sandra stood up and stretched. “We need to paint them gold and get Eric to replace his hoard with them. We need to talk to Eric about his hoard. I think he already half realises that it’s a pile junk.”

“Ah, I know a guy who could do that. The painting, that is.”

“You do? Great, Vick!”

They walked out of her ‘dwelling place’. It was no longer a rough hut, but comprised two prefabricated buildings joined together. One had her office in it, and she was living in the other one, behind it. Her ‘Miss Greenville’ sash was pinned to the wall in her office, and her trophy was installed on top of a filing cabinet.

The dragon came out its cave. “Hi Sandra. Have you got anything for me to do?”

“Yeah, Eric. Can you and Vick go down to the road, where the gate is, and put the banner up? The guy from the sawmill left two big posts down there. We’ll get a proper wooden sign when we have some money.”

“Let’s see it! Let’s see it!” The dragon was bouncing around, but carefully. He’d accidentally knocked her over, and Sandra had told him off.

“OK, pal. Go and get it please Vick.”

Vick spread out the banner on the ground, and they admired it.

“That’s me! That’s me,” squealed the dragon, and Sandra and Vick winced. “What do the words say?”

“‘Greenville Dragon and Princess Experience’” read Vick. “Yeah, pal, those pictures are of you.” Caricatures would have been a better word.

“Good work, Vick! Was the caravan in place down there? That’s where we will take the entrance money.”

“Yeah. It’s a bit tatty though. I know someone who could do it up.”

“Ah, thanks, Vick! Ask him how much he wants. Get it in writing. Do you think that you and Eric can put up the banner?”

The dragon and the human looked at each other.

“Yeah, no problem, San. He can drive the posts and I can fix the banner to them.”

“OK, boys. I’ll leave that to you. Oh, a newspaper reporter might come by. Direct him or her up here, please.”

“Sure, San. See you later.”

Sandra smiled. She went to her whiteboard and ticked a few things off. It was all coming together nicely.

“Hullo, Mr Mayor!”

The Mayor looked from side to side, but there was no escape. “How did you get in? Sandra, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my pal, Maureen, your secretary, told me that you had nothing on at the moment.”

Maureen had actually told her that the Mayor was ‘having a snooze’.

Sandra took a seat opposite the Mayor.

“Errr...” The Mayor was developing a headache. “What can I do for you, Sandra?”

“Well, Gilbert... Do you mind if I call you Gilbert? I’m interested in what you are doing to support new businesses in Greenville? In particular, the Greenville Dragon and Princess Experience.”

“Mmm.” The Mayor was waking up, “I’m for it, in principle.”

“Thank you, Gilbert.” Sandra stood up to leave.

“Umm, I haven’t agreed to anything have I?”

“No, sir. Except that you agreed to support the Greenville Dragon and Princess Experience. In principle.”

“Er, yes. I did, didn’t I? Dammit! I was half asleep! You know that that means practically nothing, don’t you?”

She held up her phone and played him back the conversation that they had just had. Gilbert nodded slowly.

“Is that thing off now? Thanks. Well it still means practically nothing, but for what its worth, I meant what I said.”

“Thanks, Gilbert.”

When Sandra had left, Gilbert buzzed his secretary. “Maureen, what do you think of Sandra?”

“Bright girl, boss. She’s building a whole business around that dragon of hers.”

Gilbert considered. “Yeah, I know. I think that she is onto a good thing. Find out as much as you can about her business. Oh, and get our public relations head up here. We might need to get on the bandwagon.”

“Sure, boss.” Maureen smiled. She and Sandra had been at school together, and Maureen knew that her friend was going places.

“Hi, Sam. How are you?”

Sam instinctively looked for an escape route. “Uh, hello Sandra. How are you?”

“Good. Good. I wondered, you know all the leaflets that went out for the pageant?”

Sam looked at Sandra with suspicion. “Er, there was nothing wrong with them was there?”

“No, no, silly. How did you spread them around town?”

“Oh, I’ve got a bunch of school kids that put them in letter boxes and put up posters for me.”

Sam was beginning to sense opportunities here, but he was still wary. He suspected that Sandra was brighter than he was, but he also guessed that she could bring a lot of money his way.

“Can you get them to deliver these for me?” She dumped a pile of the leaflets on his desk, and they got down to bargaining.”

“Right, then, Sandra. I’ll get an invoice up to you in the morning. Anything else?”

“Yeah. You mentioned posters. A few of those around town would be good. But can you put them up in legal places? I’ve got to keep on the right side of Gilbert.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ve got to stay on his good side, too, after the dragon carried you off.”

“Silly man! Think of all the publicity that our town got from that! I’ll remind him next time I talk to him.”

“Thanks, Sandra!” Sam was pleased, but he suddenly thought that he would have to pay for the favour sometime. Probably soon.

Sandra smiled and left.

“Come in, come in!” Darshil ushered Sandra through the security door to the side of the line of bank tellers. “I haven’t seen you since school. How have you been, Sandra?”

“Oh, OK. I’ve been good. Have you heard of my venture, up at the edge of the moors?”

“Ah yes. The ‘Greenville Dragon and Princess Experience’. Yes, I’ve heard of it. How’s it going?”

“That’s why I’m here.” She passed over a document.

“A business plan? Hmm, looks well written. Did you write it?”

“No Dar, Colin did. I haven’t paid him yet.”

Darshil quickly scanned the document. “Yes, I remember Colin. He’s doing business plans now?”

“He’s working for that big accounting firm. The one that has that tower block just to the west of town. But he did this for me off the clock.”

“So. I’m guessing that you want a loan, Sandra?”

“Yeah, well, the details are in the business plan. So far I’ve been operating on a shoestring and consequently, I owe a lot of people money. It’s all in there.”

“What if the bank doesn’t give you a loan? Have you thought of that?”

“I could probably open on schedule, but I’d be lucky to last very long. I might be able to pull it off, but I don’t know. I’d be paying back people for ages.” She grimaced.

“Hmm. Let me look at the plan. I need to consult my colleagues about it, of course, and if we need more information, I’ll get back to you. How’s that.”

“Thanks, Dar. I’ll look forward to your call. Come up and see us sometime. I’ll introduce you to the dragon!”

After Sandra left, Darshil’s boss wandered into his office.

“What do you think, Dar?” she asked.

“I think it’s good, June, but I’ve known Sandra for ages. Since school, so I would probably call her a friend. So someone other than me, someone senior, should look over it.”

June had been quickly scanning Sandra’s document. “Yes, yes. I’ll get Freddie to look over it. Are you OK with working with Freddie on it.”

“Yes of course.” Darshil was pleased. He was too junior to be given charge of Sandra’s application, but working with Freddie would give Darshil’s career a boost. Freddie was given all the important cases.

“How’s it going out there, Vick?”

“Good, San. The crew is all ready. I let the Mayor in early as you suggested. And those reporters. My sister’s on the ticket desk. I told her to pretend to ask the reporters for money, and then let them in for free.”

“Good move, Vick,” approved Sandra, “Though they’ve probably seen that tactic before.”

Vick nodded. “Oh, have we got room for another food cart? My old boss at the fast food place wanted to bring his cart up here.”

“Yeah. Let’s have a look at the map. Yeah, there by the hot dog stand. He knows what we charge for a site?”

“Yeah, and I told him 10% off for the opening day.” Sandra and Vick grinned at each other. They were both on the same wavelength.

“Anyway, Vick, what do you think of my costume?”

Her costume for the beauty pageant had been, essentially, a one piece swimming costume, with frills, and her ‘princess’ costume was a more modest, skirted version of that.

“This is for the princess photos, San? It looks good, but you’re not going to be posing for photos all day are you?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. The photographer’s niece, Vivienne, is going to do that, and they’ve got a heap of sequinned clothes that little kids can wear. Viv’s going to help them pose as princesses. Or princes if they prefer.”

“That’s a good idea!”

“Yeah, my costume is only for the opening ceremony and the actual ‘dragon experience’, with Eric, outside his cave.”

“The archery club came! I set them up in the glade below Eric’s cave. But we’d better go, San, It’s time.”

They walked down to the gate.

“Good morning, Mr Mayor? How are you today, Gilbert?”

The Mayor turned, beaming. “Good, good! Ready to go, Sandra.”

He was wearing his chains of office, Sandra noticed. Good! He was here officially.

“Right!” Sandra stepped up to the microphone.

“Welcome everyone! Today is a significant event in our town’s history. We are opening the first Dragon and Princess Experience in the country. Yaaay! Our dragon, Eric, is waiting up at the top for you. Just follow the trail, up the hill. I call on Gilbert, the Mayor, to declare the Experience open!”

Gilbert stepped forward and gave a quick speech, then cut the ribbon. The crowd surged up to the ticket wagon and the Greenville Dragon and Princess Experience started taking money.

It was late. Sandra had closed down the Experience about an hour later than she had originally intended, but many of her friends, helpers, and acquaintances had stayed behind. Vivienne would need some help when they opened again next week, she thought. Viv had done amazingly well, but was almost dozing from exhaustion in the arms of her boyfriend, Peter.

“We’ll need more brochures,” said Vick. “We ran out just after lunch.” He paused to kiss his girlfriend.

“Yeah,” said Sandra. “Can you come in tomorrow, Vick, to discuss how we went today?”

“Sure. But it was a huge success, I think.”

She leaned back against Eric’s side. The dragon was drowsing.

“Yeah, it was. I think we need to allow more time for the kids to be with Eric. They climbed all over him!”

“I liked it,” said the dragon. He sounded sleepy. “Little humans are funny! And they can’t hurt me. But they can fall off me, so we need to be careful.”

Gilbert, the Mayor, strolled up the slope, carrying a large bottle. He’d left the robes and chain behind and was informally dressed. He looked around. He was older than most of Sandra’s crew by quite a bit.

“Is there room for an oldie?” he joked. “I bring champagne.”

“Welcome Gilbert, and thanks,” said Sandra.

Gilbert opened the bottle. “Right, all who are old enough, queue up for a glass! My apologies, I can’t afford any scandal, so if I think that you’re too young, I won’t serve you!”

He served those who wanted champagne then took a glass himself and leaned against Eric. One of Eric’s scales was slightly askew, so he pushed on it, but it snapped off.

“Ooops!”

“Thanks, Gilbert,” rumbled Eric, sleepily. “That was about to fall off. It was itching. That feels better.”

Gilbert sipped his champagne and passed Sandra the scale. It was nacreous and between ten and fifteen centimetres in size. “Can you do something with this, Sandra?”

She looked at the scale. “Yeah. Good idea, Gilbert. Jewellery, perhaps. Souvenir, maybe.”

“You know, Sandra, I was going to tell Maureen off for letting you into my office, but I changed my mind. She’s a good Personal Assistant, and I don’t know what I’d do without her. She was right to let you in.”

Sandra nodded. “Thanks for coming down here to the opening, Gilbert.”

“That’s OK, Sandra. If there’s any way I can help, let me or Maureen know. Ah, that reminds me, Maureen came across this.”

He passed over a pamphlet, and Sandra inspected it.

“‘South Durnford Dragon Park’? Hmm. We have competition? Well, the pamphlet is pretty basic. Ours is better. Their dragon is called Ralph, apparently. Hmm. They don’t have a Princess photo opportunity, apparently, but they do have a dragon show. They’ve got a jungle gym for the kids, but we let the kids climb on Eric. There are differences, Gilbert. I think that I’ll go and see this Jake Swanson guy.”

“They haven’t opened yet, Sandra. Next week. What do you think?”

“Oh, well, we can call ourselves ‘the Original’ then. I don’t see them as serious competition at the moment, because they are a few towns to the West. I’ll put their address in our brochure, if they will do the same for us.”

Gilbert stood up. “Well, I have to be going. Good night all!”

“Good night, Gilbert,” said Eric, and his eyes drooped and he started to snore.
