

Here is an excerpt from

A PRINCESS OF LANDOVER

by

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A new adventure in the  
Magic Kingdom of Landover series!

HEADMISTRESS HARRIET APPLETON sat straight-backed behind her desk, a huge wooden monstrosity that Mistaya could only assume had been chosen for the purpose of making students entering this odious sanctum sanctorum feel uncomfortably small. The desk gleamed beneath repeated polishings, perhaps administered by girls who had misbehaved or otherwise fallen afoul of the powers that be. Surely there were many such in an institution of this sort, where fair play and justice were primitive, possibly even passé.

“Come in, Misty,” Miss Appleton invited. “Take a seat.”

*Said the spider to the fly*, Mistaya thought.

Wanting nothing so much as to tell this woman exactly what she could do with her suggestion, she nevertheless closed the door behind her and crossed to the two chairs placed in front of the desk. She took a moment to decide which one she wanted, and then she sat.

Through the window of the headmistress’s office, she could see the campus, the trees bare-leaved with the arrival of December, the ground coated with an early morning frost, and the stone-and-brick buildings hard-edged

and fortresslike under temperatures well below freezing. New England was not a pleasant place for warm-blooded creatures at this time of year, and the buildings didn't look any too happy about it, either. Hard to tell with buildings, though.

"Misty," the headmistress said, drawing her attention anew. She had her hands folded comfortably on the desktop and her gaze leveled firmly on the young girl. "I think we need to have a talk, you and I. A different talk than the ones we've had previously."

She reached for a folder, virtually the only item on the desk other than the telephone, a stone image of an owl, and a school cup filled with an assortment of pens and pencils. There was a framed picture, as well, facing away from Mistaya. Although she was interested in who was in the picture, she could not see without standing up and walking around to the other side of the desk, something she would under no circumstances do.

The headmistress opened the file and made a point of shuffling through the pages it contained, even though Mistaya was quite certain she had already read it enough times to have memorized the contents. Miss Appleton was irritating but no fool.

"This is your third visit to my office in less than three months," Harriet Appleton pointed out quietly, voice lowered in what Mistaya could only assume was an effort to convey the seriousness of the situation. "None of these visits were pleasant ones, the sort I like having with my students. Even more distressing, none of them were necessary."

She waited, but Mistaya kept quiet, eyes locked on the other's sharp-featured face. A face that reminded her a little of Cruella De Vil in that dog movie. Were there no beautiful headmistresses in the schools of America?

"The first time you were sent to me," the headmistress of the moment continued, "it was for fomenting trouble

with the grounds crew. You told them they had no right to remove a tree, even though the board of directors had specifically authorized it. In fact, you organized a school protest that brought out hundreds of students in support of stopping that removal and shut down classes for three days.”

Mistaya nodded. “Trees are sentient beings. This one had been alive for over two hundred years and was particularly well attuned to our world, an old and proud representative of her species. There was no one to speak for her, so I decided I would.”

The headmistress smiled. “Yes, so you said at the time. But you will remember that I suggested that taking up the matter with either the dean of students or myself before fomenting unrest among the other girls might have avoided the disciplinary action that followed.”

“It was worth it,” Mistaya declared, and sat up even straighter, chin lifting in defiance.

Harriet Appleton sighed. “I’m glad you think so. But you don’t seem to have learned anything from it. The next time you were in this office, it was the same story. You didn’t come to me first, as I had asked. You simply took matters into your own hands once again. This time it was something about ritualistic scarring, as I remember. You formed a club—again, without authorization or even consultation with the teaching staff—to engage in a bonding-with-nature program. Instead of patches or other forms of insignia, you decided on scarring. An African-influenced art form, you explained at the time, though I never understood what that had to do with us. Some two dozen scars were inflicted before word got back to the dean of students and then to me.”

Mistaya said nothing. What was there to say? Miss Applebutt had it exactly right, even if she didn’t fully understand what was at stake. If you didn’t take time to form links to the living things around you—things besides

other students—you risked causing irreparable harm to the environment. She had learned that lesson back in Landover, something the people of this country—well, this *world*, more correctly—had not. It was exceedingly annoying to discover that the students of Carrington Women’s Preparatory were so poorly informed on this point that they were virtually ignorant. Mistaya had provided their much-needed education in the form of a game. Join a club; make a difference in the world. The scarring was intended to convey the depth of commitment of the participating members and to serve as a reminder of the pain and suffering human ignorance fostered. Moreover, it was accomplished using the sharp ends of branches shed by the trees that were part of the living world they were committed to protecting. It made perfect sense to her.

Besides, the scarring was done in places that weren’t normally exposed to the light of day.

“I didn’t see the need to bother anyone about it,” she offered, a futile attempt at an explanation. “Everyone who participated did so voluntarily.”

“Well, their parents thought quite differently, once they found out about it. I don’t know what your parents allow you to do in your own home, but when you are at Carrington, you have to follow the rules. And the rules say you need permission to form clubs or groups actively engaged on campus. The students are underage girls, Misty. *You* are an underage girl. You are only fifteen!”

Well, technically, perhaps. If you measured it by how she looked. Her real age was a matter of debate even in her own home. There was the age you were physically and the age you were mentally. There was the number of years you had lived and the extent to which your mind had developed. When you were born from a seedling nourished in the soil of a land where magic was real and a part of you, the commonly accepted rules about growth

did not necessarily apply. No point in getting into that, however. Miss Harriet Half-Wit would never understand that, not if Mistaya spent from now until the end of next year trying to explain.

“Which brings us to the present and the point of this third visit,” the headmistress continued, shaking her head to emphasize the moment. “Even I didn’t think you would ignore my second warning about not acting on your own when it had been made clear to you that doing so would not be tolerated under any circumstances. What were you thinking?”

“Is this about Rhonda Masterson?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes, it is about Rhonda. It is exactly about Rhonda. She’s hysterical! She had to be sedated by the nurse. Her parents will have to be informed. I can’t imagine what I am going to tell them. That you traumatized their daughter by threatening her? That you scared her so badly that the entire school is talking about it? I am appalled, Misty. And I am angry.”

Mistaya could tell that much. But she still didn’t see the problem. “She called me a name. She did it in front of everybody. She did it to make me angry, and it worked. She got what she deserved.”

“For calling you a name? What name?”

Mistaya tightened her lips. “I can’t repeat it. I won’t.”

“But what did you do to her to frighten her like that?”

Well, that was hard to explain, and Mistaya knew she’d better not even try, if she wanted to keep the truth about herself a private matter. Princess of Landover, born of a human come from this world and a sylph who occasionally turned into a tree—how could she explain that? Telling them the truth about her father was out of the question. Telling them about her mother might give some credence to her claimed commitment to saving trees, but it wouldn’t do much for her overall credibility.

Telling them about her real life, which was not in Landover, Maryland, as they all thought, but in the Kingdom of Landover, which was another world entirely, would only lead to them locking her up for evaluation. There just wasn't much she could say.

Still, she had to say something.

She sighed. "I just told Rhonda that if she kept this up, I was going to get her, that's all."

But Harriet Appleton was already shaking her head. "It had to be something more than that to frighten her the way you did. You whispered something to her, and then—this is what some of the other students told me—you . . . you did something else to her."

Other students. Rhonda's sycophantic followers, all of them blueblood East Coast snots from lots of money and little brains. They had been on her case since she arrived at Carrington, making fun of her, teasing her, pulling mean tricks on her, doing anything they could to make her life unpleasant. This time they had pushed her too far. Though forbidden to do so under any circumstances, she had used her magic. Just a little of it, but enough to make them sit up and take notice. A quick conjured image of someone she knew from Landover, someone they should hope they never encountered in real life.

She had shown them Strabo. Up close and personal. Especially Rhonda, who had been made to smell the dragon's breath.

"What is it that I am supposed to have done?" she asked, deciding to turn this around.

"The girls said you made a dragon appear right in front of Rhonda."

Mistaya feigned disbelief. "*I made* a dragon appear? How am I supposed to have done that? Magic or something?"

Miss Appleton frowned. "I don't know, Misty. But I think maybe you did what they said. You are an unusual

young lady. You have demonstrated a capacity for commitment that exceeds that of the other students. You are a natural leader and a determined, if all too frequently reckless, advocate of the causes you believe in. Once you have set your mind to a task, it seems nothing deters you. You are a brilliant student. Your grades are excellent. If anyone could make Rhonda think she saw a dragon, you could.”

She leaned forward. “The point is, you did something that terrified this girl. This isn’t the first time you’ve broken the rules, and I am quite certain that if things continue on as they are, it won’t be the last. I cannot have this sort of disruption. This is an institution of learning. In order for that learning process to function as it was meant to, the students must adhere to the rules for proper behavior and apply themselves accordingly. I don’t like putting it this way, but students must find a way to *fit in*. You don’t seem to feel that this is necessary.”

“You’re right, I don’t,” Mistaya agreed. “I think we are here to discover ourselves so that we can do something important with our lives. I don’t think we’re meant to fit in; I think we’re meant to stand out. I don’t think we are meant to be like everyone else.”

The headmistress nodded and sighed. “Well, that’s true for when you are older, but not for when you are in a college-preparatory boarding school like this one. Carington trains you for growing up; it isn’t a chemistry class for the actual process. Not the way you see it, anyway.”

She reached into the folder and produced an envelope and handed it to Mistaya. “You are suspended from Carington effective immediately, Misty. The details of the reasons for this are contained in this letter. Read it over. A copy has been sent to your parents. I have tried calling them but cannot reach them at the home number. I suppose they are traveling again. I did reach a Mr. Miles

Bennett, your father's attorney, and he promised that he would try to get word to them about what was happening. But it might be better coming from you. You don't have to leave until the end of next week, when classes are finished and the Christmas break begins."

"My parents," Mistaya started to say, forgot the rest and went silent. Suspended? For making Rhonda Masterson see a dragon? This was ridiculous!

"I want you to go home and think over what we've talked about," Harriet Appleton continued, refolding her hands on top of the file. "If you can persuade yourself to become a student of the sort that Carrington expects you to be and if you can convince me that you can be one of those students, I will consider reinstating you." She paused. "Otherwise, I am afraid you will need to find another school. I'm sorry, Misty. I truly am."

Mistaya stood up, still in shock. "I understand," she said. "But I don't think it's fair."

"I am certain you don't," Miss Appleton agreed. "Go home and think about it. After you've done so, maybe you will be of a different mind. I certainly hope so. I would hate to lose you as a student at this school."

Mistaya turned and walked from the room. All she could think about as she left the room and then the building was how angry her father was going to be.

SHE STALKED OUT of the building into the mid-morning cold, her frustration building incrementally as she replayed the particulars of her meeting with the headmistress and the events leading up to it. She didn't care all that much about the suspension. In truth, though she would never admit it aloud, she didn't even care about being tossed altogether. She hated Carrington and she hated the other students and she hated this entire world that was her father's and not hers, but that he had forced her to come to, anyway. Talk about misguided thinking!

*It's time for you to learn about places other than this one, Mistaya. It's necessary for you to spend time with other girls your own age. You need to have your education broadened by travel and new experiences. Questor and Abernathy have done what they can, but now . . .*

Blah, blah, blah. Her father. Sometimes, he was just too thick. She didn't need anything other than what she had in Landover, and she certainly didn't need the hassle of living in a world where there was never anything new or interesting happening. She hated the smells, tastes, and much of the look of it. She hated her classes, which were dull and uninformative. Who chose the subjects they studied there, anyway? Was there a single class on connecting with nature in a meaningful way? Or one on the traits and habits of mythical creatures? Was there any book that smiled on monarchy as a form of government and suggested there might be more to it than beheadings and adultery?

Still, none of this would be happening, she knew, if she had been able to control herself. It didn't help that Rhonda Masterson had a building on campus named after her family and that she would be a fourth-generation alumnus when she graduated. Carrington valued loyalty and wealth, and the Mastersons had both. She, on the other hand, had neither. At least, not in this world. She was a princess, but only in Landover, a place no one here even knew about. She had no standing of the sort that Rhonda Masterson had. She was just someone to be brushed aside.

She made up her mind in that instant. If they wanted her to leave, fine, she would leave. But she wasn't waiting until the end of next week; she was leaving right now. She was going home where she belonged.

She changed directions abruptly, breaking off her trek across campus to her English literature class and instead turned toward her dorm. A few other students passed by

on their way to class, casting furtive glances, but none of them spoke. She stalked on, tightening her determination even in the face of what she knew would be waiting for her when she got home. She could already hear her father. But what could he do about it? She was suspended, and she had been told to go home and that was what she was doing. He would have to learn to live with it.

There was no one in her dorm room when she opened the door. Her roommate, Becky, had gone home for the weekend. A tall, athletic girl with a scholarship in basketball, she was always running home to her family in New York. Which was fine. Mistaya liked Becky. She didn't pretend to be anything she wasn't, and she wasn't afraid to let you know how she felt. Becky had been involved in every mishap Mistaya had organized since her arrival, a full accomplice in all of her efforts. But Becky never got in trouble for it. She knew how to be a part of things without standing out. She knew how to blend in—something Mistaya knew she had yet to learn.

She sighed. Miss Appleton had pointed to Becky with pride as an example she would do well to emulate—a clear demonstration of the fact that the woman didn't have a clue about Becky's subversive side.

Mistaya began packing her clothes and her books and her personal effects, and then quit right in the middle of her efforts. Everything she cared about was back in Landover, not here. She left it all where it was and called a cab. While she was waiting, she wrote Becky a short note to the effect that this place wasn't for her and she wouldn't be back. Becky could have what she wanted of her stuff and throw out the rest.

Then she marched down the hallway to the front door to wait for her ride. She found herself smiling. She couldn't help it. She was excited about going home. The reason didn't even matter. It was enough that it was happening.

She rode the cab to the airport, caught a long flight to Dulles and then a short one to Waynesboro. Money wasn't an issue when you were a princess of Landover. She thought about her life as she traveled, measuring the length of the road gone past and estimating the distance of the one yet to be traveled. It wasn't easy to do when you were half fairy. Her differentness from other girls was hard to overstate. Nothing about her life had proceeded in recognizable fashion. She had not grown up at a normal rate, not even by Landover's standards. Her progress from infancy to girlhood was achieved in quantum leaps. Talking at two. Walking at three. Swimming at four. *Months*, not years. Then status quo for almost a year. One of her many dormant periods when nothing seemed to change. She was in one of those periods just now, her body in a kind of suspended animation. Physically, she was a fifteen-year-old with a twenty-two-year-old mind. But emotionally, she was off in the Twilight Zone. She couldn't describe it exactly, couldn't put a name to what she was feeling, only that she was feeling *something*. It was like an itch that kept working at her no matter how hard or often she scratched at it. She was restless and dissatisfied and hungry for something she didn't have and couldn't identify.

Maybe going home would help her figure out what it was. She certainly hadn't been able to do so at Carrington. All of her adventures with trees and nature and Rhonda had just been things to keep her occupied. Her subjects were boring and easy. She was already thinking and working at a college level, so there wasn't much to be learned at a preparatory boarding school, in spite of what her father might think.

Mostly, she thought, she had learned to be rebellious and troublesome. Mostly, she had learned new and interesting ways to break the rules and drive the teachers and the administration crazy.

She smiled. That wasn't all bad, of course. If nothing else, it had certainly been a lot of fun.

On landing, she called a private car service and had the driver take her up into the Blue Ridge Mountains along Skyline Drive. The day was sunny and clear, but the temperature was way down in the thirties. The car drove with the heat on, and Mistaya shed her heavy coat for the duration of the ride, which ended twenty miles later at a wayside turnaround overlooking the George Washington National Forest south of Waynesboro. A small green sign with the number 13 lettered in black, a weather shelter, and a telephone identified the location. She had the car pull over, slipped her winter coat back on, and climbed out. The driver gave her a dubious look when she told him he could leave, but she assured him she would be all right, that someone was meeting her, and so he shrugged and drove off.

She waited until he was out of sight, waited some more to be sure, and then walked across the highway to the trailhead and started up the winding path leading upslope into the trees. She breathed the sharp, cold air as she walked, feeling refreshed and alive as she did so. She might hate some things about her father's world but not the mountains. Ahead, an icy stream trickled down out of the rocks, slowed almost to freezing, the sound faintly musical. She found herself thinking of the weather in Landover, which would be warm and sunny. There were storms, rain, and wind and gray clouds, and sometimes there was even snow. But mostly there was sunshine and blue skies, and that was what she was expecting today. She wondered how long it would take her to reach the castle, and whether she would find anyone to take her there or if she would have to walk.

She wondered, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, if Haltwhistle would be waiting to greet her.

The possibility that he wouldn't show up made her

frown. She had been forced to leave him behind when she left for Carrington. Landover's inhabitants, human and otherwise, could not pass through the mists as she could. Her father was the exception, but that was because he had the medallion of the Kings of Landover, and that allowed him to go anywhere.

She, on the other hand, could pass through because of how she was made—an amalgam of elements culled from the soils of three worlds.

That made her different than everyone else.

She grimaced. Maybe her father would take that into consideration when he heard about the suspension.