



CHAUVINIST KNIGHTS AND *Feminist Damsels*

By Selene Smith

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**"It's time you
grew up and left
your tomboyish
ways behind!"
her father
bellowed.**
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I won't marry that wretched Lord Kevin!" Kayla stormed out of the room and down the stone corridor. Her gold-red tresses streamed behind her, and without breaking her stride, she grabbed two big handfuls of dark green velvet and hitched it up above her knees to keep from tripping.

As she ran to her chamber, she could hear her father in the dining room where they had been eating dinner. She heard his chair scrape against the polished floor as he stood and moved heavily to the door.

"You *will* marry Lord Kevin, and you *will* be happy!" he bellowed.

Kayla stopped around a corner, breathing hard. As she listened to her father continue his tirade, she reflected on the inconvenience of women's clothing. She decided that she would much rather dress like a man, at least when she was moving about.

"It's time you grew up and left your tomboyish ways behind!" continued her father. "I won't have you embarrassing me like this again, do you hear? Just be glad that your husband will be a rich and powerful lord who can get you anything you want!"

"Too bad I can't stand him," she said to herself. She flipped off the bothersome heeled shoes that were way too small for her large feet, gathered up her skirt, and began running down the candlelit hall toward her room. Her bare feet slapped against the old stones, but she paid no attention. Tears stung at the back of her eyes but pride kept them from falling.

She slammed her door shut and flung herself onto the high, canopied bed. How could Father do this? Couldn't he see that Kevin was an egotistical and chauvinistic little wimp? Didn't he know he was committing her to a loveless marriage with a man she utterly despised? How could he give his only daughter away to a gold-hungry man who spent most of his time in front of a mirror, greasing and curling his moustache? Surely Kevin was already gloating and bragging about some exploit to prove his manhood: it was expected that a man requesting to marry the daughter of a noble would present a large treasure to the girl's father, and it was usually won in some sort of battle or journey.

"What a crock," she thought. "I won't marry Kevin if there's anything I can do about it!"

Kayla, being not nearly as naive as women were supposed to be, knew that Kevin wanted her for more than her somewhat average prettiness. It was doubtful that he had fallen in love with her. That left only one reasonable answer: he wanted her dowry and the money that would be left

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to her when her parents died.

She thought, with grim satisfaction, that the person she despised most in the world, Kevin, was shallow. His motives were clear to her. But it hurt her deeply that her own father was just as shallow and transparent. He was obviously after the riches that Kevin would offer.

Kayla stood stonily between her parents and a little behind Kevin on the rough wooden platform in the town square. Her mouth was puckered, sourly showing her discontent, but her parents seemed to be smiling and waving enough for all of them. "Nobody knows," she whispered, looking over the crowd of people. "No one suspects that I could be unhappy about marrying 'the handsome Lord Kevin.'"

The city folk had gathered for two days of feasting to celebrate the engagement of their Lady Kayla to the dashing, foreign Lord Kevin, who was much admired for his fortune. This was the evening of the first day, and as the sun set over the mountains, Kevin announced his plans for an adventure.

"Halloo, good people!" shouted Kevin above the cheering. "As you all know, Lady Kayla and I will be joined in holy wedlock in one month's time!" He reached for Kayla's hand and pulled her close. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he waved a mug of ale in wide arcs with his free hand. Kayla bared her teeth in an animal-like snarl and tried to pull away. Kevin smiled drunkenly and tightened his grip. He continued his speech.

"I am here tonight to announce my plans to defeat the famous dragon that lives among these mountains." He gestured with his mug and swayed uncertainly, spilling beer on the platform and on the hem of Kayla's dress. "I intend to confront that foul beast and bring back his treasure in exchange for this beautiful hand in marriage!"

The crowd oooed respectfully, hiding their disappointment. This was a task so often tried that they were beginning to be bored with it. Kevin, however, reignited their passion by lifting Kayla's hand to his lips. His hot breath smelled of rancid beer. She quickly snatched her hand away and wiped it on her skirt. She was disgusted, unable to imagine giving up her freedom to spend the rest of her life with this man.

Before she could protest, Kevin led her down to the center of the crowd where couples were forming, preparing for a dance around the bonfire. He took her arm and they began to whirl and stomp with the others. Had it not been for Kevin, Kayla would have enjoyed herself. Dancing was one of the few lively activities that women were allowed to engage in, and she loved it.

But not this time. She could feel Kevin's sweaty arms on her; the combined odors of his ale and moustache grease mingled unpleasantly in the air around her face, causing her to feel woozy and nauseous. When the dance finally ended, she was relieved to find that Kevin had to hurry off and prepare for his journey.

She sat down on a bench near the fire to regain her composure. But soon she was surrounded by a group of young women from the village who sighed and gushed over her engagement. She smiled politely and gave only the necessary retorts to the questions directed at her. Then, as quickly as they had come, they drifted off to join other groups of merrymakers and soon forgot all about her.

She stared into the fire, listening to the sounds of people enjoying themselves all around her. Old men guffawed at funny stories told for what seemed like the hundredth time, young men raised cheers as they drowned their troubles in casks of ale, and mothers called to their children who were chasing each other through clusters of adults. Abruptly, her reverie was broken by a hand on her shoulder. Above her shone a pair of the bluest eyes, eyes that seemed to be laughing secretly at the whole world! They belonged to a young man she had never before seen. He was taller than the average man, with black, wavy hair and a clean-shaven face. He smiled at her gently and asked for a dance.

Gathering her wits about her, she nodded and stood up. He led her to the dancers, where they began to move to the beat of the music. Kayla was thankful that the constant movement kept their eyes from meeting . . . She might not be able to turn her eyes away!

They remained silent throughout the dance and when they grew tired, they walked away from the crowd to the edge of the woods. The sun's last rays flickered and dipped. For a moment, Kayla wondered if she should

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**He was committing her to
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say something to break the silence between them, but their silence was a comfortable one. She sat on a log across from the mysterious young man and gazed down shyly. Her fingers fiddled with the creases and folds of her soft white dress. She looked up when her companion spoke.

"So—you are duly excited to be engaged to the oh-so-elegant Lord Kevin?"

Kayla was not quite sure whether he was teasing or trying to be polite, but she suspected that he was laughing at her behind those mocking blue eyes. She felt her face grow hot as the flush moved from her neck to her cheeks, and anger boiled inside her. She stood abruptly



Kayla was not nearly as naive as women were supposed to be.



and began to walk quickly in the direction of the crowded square.

A hand gripped her arm, stopping her mid-stride. She stared at this hand, a tanned hand contrasting boldly with her white skin. She could see that his expression had changed dramatically; now he looked unsure of himself, and almost sorry.

“I’m sorry if I offended you, but I couldn’t help but notice that you weren’t as thrilled with your engagement as everybody else was.”

Kayla’s feelings were suddenly mixed: On the one hand, she wanted to turn her nose up at this self-assured stranger and run. But on the other, she knew she needed *somebody* to confide in. This unlikely person seemed to be the only one who even noticed her unhappiness.

“I guess I haven’t been as happy as everybody thinks I should be.” She half-smiled in an attempt to hide her feelings.

“I’d pity any woman who married Kevin.”

“Then you know him?” she asked, startled.

“Yes, actually. I have the dubious pleasure of being his cousin. My name is Lance. And you, of course, are the ill-fated Kayla.”

She nodded slowly, warning bells sounding. *Trust no man!* Look what Father had done to her! And Kevin was so odious! Surely this Lance, Kevin’s own cousin, would hurt her in some way, too. But even as part of her warned against him, she felt deep inside that this man was different. The part of her that was walled off to others began to crumble before this stranger, whom she had known for scarcely an hour . . .

“At ease, men! You can all stay in camp. I won’t be long,” said Kevin importantly. The young men accompanying him showed their disappointment. They would like to have shared in the glory of a dragon-slaying.

“He just wants all the attention,” one young man whispered to another. The other nodded in agreement as they fixed Kevin with their resentful glares. He didn’t notice.

“If I’m not back in camp by tomorrow, send somebody up.” His tone implied that this was not something he expected. He hitched himself up in his saddle and nodded at the men. Then he turned and rode off into the forest.

When he arrived at the cave, he tied his horse to an oak tree and unsheathed his sword. Any occasion to show off the jewels embedded in the golden hilt was welcome, even when he had only himself and the squirrels to admire it. He ran a hand over his hair to smooth it into place and twisted his moustache reflexively. Then he strode to the mouth of the cave, tripping rather ungracefully over a rock, and cursing under his breath.

As he stepped inside, he was struck by a sort of swampy smell, and he began to feel a little afraid. “Oh great and fearful dragon, I *command* you to come out and do battle!” The challenge rattled uncertainly down the tunnel and died away, sounding more like a question than a demand.

He walked more carefully now, to avoid tripping. As he neared a turn, he could hear a deep, vibrating rumble. He pressed himself against the cold rock and waited, so filled with terror that his eyes were much rounder than seemed natural. He began to hiccup. Then, so slowly that he seemed not to be moving at all, he inched up to the curve and peered around the edge, ready to meet death face to face, but determined to see the fabulous treasure.

The cave opened up into a huge cavern lit by torches along the walls. Chests and barrels and bags were piled in huge drifts that overflowed with gold, silver, and gems such as Kevin had never before seen, and which his eyes greedily caressed.

Near the middle of the room, sprawled on a cushion of velvet and satin, lay the dragon. It was only slightly



He wrapped an arm around her waist and waved his mug with his free hand.



larger than a horse and covered with shiny brownish-green scales that glinted in the torchlight. The tail was long and thick, like a huge spiked club, and was curled up to the creature’s head. From there issued the terrible, jarring sound. The dragon was snoring.

Kevin pulled his head back around the curve and thought quickly. Maybe he could take advantage of the sleeping dragon and manage to come away with most of the treasure without even waking it! He had never actually promised that he would *kill* it; besides, outsmarting the dragon would still win him a reputation for being brave, daring, and quick-witted.

He sheathed his sword and crept inside the chamber. Then, turning his back to the rumbling beast, he grabbed a large bag filled to the brim with precious jewels. He began to drag it backward, but it was very heavy and moved slowly. So intent was he on his task that he didn't even notice when the dragon's snoring abruptly ceased. Frantically pulling to free the bag from a snag, he tugged and yanked until it ripped and sent him sprawling—right to the feet of the dragon. Cascades of gold pieces and rare jewels fell upon them both. Kevin saw his reflection in the golden cat-eyes of the dragon.

“Kayla, where have you been?”

Kayla saw the anger in her father's eyes and decided to tell the truth. “I've b—”

“No, don't even say it. You've been with Lance again. He's a nice enough young man, but you've been spending too much time with him these past two weeks. For heaven's sake, you're going to marry his cousin!”

At this, Kayla's mother, who had been pacing the floor, began to sob behind her hands. “It may be that Kevin will never marry anyone!” the lady cried, nearly hysterical.

Kayla looked at her father questioningly. He glared at her as if her mother's outburst was somehow Kayla's fault, then turned to comfort his wife. “We received word today that Kevin is being held prisoner by the dragon. There is a demand for ransom, and a meeting of the Lords' Council was called this afternoon to decide what to do.” Kayla's mother, Lady Gwen, lost all control and had to be taken from the room by one of her ladies.

“And you decided—?” Kayla asked impatiently.

“We decided that we must send someone to take Kevin's place until we can gather enough gold to pay the dragon.”

Kayla gasped in astonishment. “But who will you send? It must be somebody of nobility or there would be no assurance at all!”

Her father found it impossible to continue looking Kayla in the eye, and so his eyes shifted, darting here, there—everywhere but on his daughter. “I want you to understand that it was a very difficult decision, especially for me, but having examined every possible solution—” his voice petered out. He looked pleadingly at Kayla.

“No!” She took an involuntary step backward and raised her arms, as if defending herself from a physical blow. “You can't send me! You can't do this!”

“Kayla, sweetheart, there's nothing I can do. The Lords have decided. We need all of our men right now. It won't be for long, I promise.” He tried desperately to comfort her; he hadn't realized how hard this would be.

She would not be comforted. She was angry, her eyes like knives that cut her father to the bone. “When must I be ready?”

Struggling to regain his composure and authority, her father croaked, “An escort will be sent tomorrow at dawn. It may take several days to get there, and you will need to bring some food and clothing.”

Kayla turned her back to him and called over her shoulder, “Yes, I suppose I should, but first I am going to find Lance. He'll want to know. Don't expect me back too soon.”

Her father hung his head and looked down at his feet. He knew he'd been hard on her lately, but the truth was, he had been afraid to turn down Kevin's offer for fear he wouldn't get another. Now he saw it was pos-



**From the creature's head,
there issued a terrible,
jarring sound. The dragon
was snoring.**



sible for Kayla to make a match that would provide both wealth *and* love, or at least tolerance. “Kayla, I know you don't like Kevin very much, and I'd hate to back out of it now, but perhaps I can talk him out of this marriage—make an arrangement of some kind. That is, if you don't mind a little scandal. I want you to be happy.”

Kayla rushed to his arms, all of her anger gone. Shining eyes and the glow of hope, so long gone from her face, filled the dark room with light.

Kayla stayed up late into the night, her maid packing her plainest dresses and strongest boots. Downstairs, the cook packed enough of her favorite foods to feed a party of young men for a month. She didn't expect to be gone that long.

In the morning, a procession of knights and nobles accompanied Kayla to the dragon's cave. Passing through small villages along the way, they were watched by peasant farmers and their wives who came out to line the

roads. Kayla resented their stares and the air of excitement. She felt as if she were on display and the cause for a holiday or celebration.

She held her head high, her features composed to mask her inner thoughts. After a mile or two she felt as if her skin were concrete and about to crack. She tried to block everything from her mind but the rhythmic click of the horses' hooves, but Lance's face kept arising within her. She remembered their conversation from the night before, when she told him of the Council's decision. He had clenched his fists until the knuckles were white and his eyes turned wild. When she closed her eyes she could still feel the warmth of his arms around her and the pleasant roughness of his shirt against her cheek; but when she opened her eyes she was still on her horse, headed for the dragon's lair.

Kevin sighed heavily with relief when he heard hoofbeats and voices outside the cave. His first thought on seeing Kayla being brought ceremoniously into the cave was that his lovely fiancée had come herself to bring him home.

He approached, smiling, and took her hands in his. For once she did not back away from his touch but seemed to cling to him, reluctant to let go of part of her world. He noticed her nervousness and misunderstood it.

"It's all right, Kayla. Soon we'll be out of here—and married! Just remember that this is only an adventure of our youth," he said gently as he stroked her hands.

She looked at him sadly and it occurred to her that beneath his chauvinistic exterior he might not be as bad as she had thought. She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, but before she could speak, her father came between them.



LORI-JO CALISE, EIGHTH GRADE,
ALDRICH JR. HIGH SCHOOL, WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND

"Kayla will be staying here in your place, Kevin, until we get the ransom together." He took a deep breath, drawing inspiration from the piles of gold he imagined as a bridal payment from Lance. But then he remembered his promise to Kayla. "I think we'd better have a talk about the marriage. You might wish to reconsider . . ."

Kevin's face showed his hurt and disappointment. Kayla, instead of feeling the freedom she had expected, was embarrassed and ashamed. She hadn't meant for her father to humiliate Kevin publicly, and a dragon's cave was hardly the place to discuss his future, especially considering all that he had been through.

"Kayla can't stay here! I won't hear of it! Take her back at once! You can't expect me to let a woman stay here by herself."

She took a deep breath to control her rising emotion and stepped forward. "No, Kevin. You go back with them. They need you. I'll be fine." Her voice was confident and her eyes gleamed with stubbornness. He began to argue, but the men in the rescue party insisted on leaving the cave immediately. Kayla could hear his protestations growing fainter as they led him away.

Life with the dragon was not as bad as Kayla had thought it would be. At first she felt very angry, and to cover this she snubbed the dragon who, in turn, sat silently, staring at her. This doubled her anger and she had all she could do to keep from screaming at the creature.

A small, gnomelike man who could not or would not speak, and whom Kayla assumed to be a servant of the dragon, showed her to a small side room off the large cavern where she made herself comfortable in the various velvet and satin robes scattered throughout the cave. With water drawn from a nearby stream, she worked hard to clean the area, then spent hours carrying in blankets, pillows, and even a small table and chair, inlaid with gold and silver.

After this labor, Kayla was too exhausted to feel angry. Although she hated to admit it, she was curious about this famous dragon who was said to be the most ferocious of his species. Unable to contain her curiosity, she wandered back to the dragon's apartment and sat down on a barrel well across the room from this mysterious roommate. She waited respectfully for several minutes to be spoken to, then, growing impatient, decided to risk starting the conversation.

After clearing her throat loudly to gain his attention, she introduced herself. The dragon nodded his head in affirmation and watched her expectantly. She had always felt that the only way to get things done

was to get straight to the point and so she did. She began to ask the dragon many questions; with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, the dragon answered her without hesitation. She began to feel comfortable and almost trusted him.

It turned out that the dragon was very considerate, and did not mind at all when she poured out her troubles with Kevin, her father, and Lance. He sympathized and agreed with her appraisal of Kevin. He did not think her foolish or immodest for discarding her heavy garments in the heat and going about in only her loose cotton pantaloons and shift. He let her sit in the sun on sunny afternoons and accompanied her on evening walks through the woods.

If truth be known, the dragon was well past his prime and no longer pillaged surrounding villages as he had in his youth. He was actually glad for the company of this cheerful young girl to keep life interesting, and she began to think of her time with him as a vacation rather

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**Closing her eyes, she
could still feel the pleasant
roughness of his shirt
against her cheek.**
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than a prison. They agreed that they would miss each other when the ransom was found. But that would be a while yet.

One warm afternoon Kayla was sitting in the cushiony moss under the spreading arms of a huge old oak tree, weaving a garland of flowers for her hair. The blossoms were dark, purple-blue stars, the same color as her eyes, and the leaves were a rich, glossy green. She had just washed her hair in the stream and it hung loose and damp down her back. She was humming to herself and didn't hear the footsteps until they were very close behind her. She stopped humming and spun around.

"Lance! What are you doing here?" Lance put his finger to her lips and pulled her behind the shelter of the tree.

"Kayla, are you all right?" He held her tightly and she was very aware of his touch, sure he could hear the hammering of her heart as she looked into his probing blue eyes. He had caught her unaware at her silly garlanding, and she blushed with embarrassment.

"Of course I'm okay—" *Now that you're here*, she

wanted to add.

"I was so worried!" He ran his fingers through her damp hair. "Kayla, you have to go away with me! I don't have the ransom but your father will be coming with it shortly. He has convinced Kevin that marriage to you

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**He might not be as bad
as she had thought,
underneath his
chauvinistic exterior.**
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would not work in the long run, but, well, Kevin did throw a terrible fit at first and there's a lot of talk. Your father and I thought it would be best if you and I stayed away for a while until things cool down. I realize that it will be difficult for you to leave everyone; your family and friends and all—"

"Difficult! Don't be silly. I'd give anything to get away from home for a while, away from all those busybodies and their opinions." She blushed and lowered her eyes, then looked up again. "It will be wonderful to be away—with you!"

He smiled at her, obviously relieved. "First, though, we'll have to decide how to deal with the dragon. If he doesn't let us go, I guess I'll just have to fight him."

"Don't even think of it, Lance. Let *me* talk to him. I'm sure he'll understand; he's actually quite nice and I've told him all about you." A skeptical crease appeared in Lance's forehead. "Don't worry. Really! I'm every bit as capable as you to deal with it."

He smiled at this and relaxed a little. "I'm sure you are. In fact, you'd probably be better at it than I. Off to talk to the dragon, then!" And away they went to the dragon's lair.

He didn't seem at all startled to see Lance. He just nodded his head stoically and said, "So you've come to take her at last. I was wondering what took you so long."

Lance's jaw dropped in astonishment, and so Kayla explained, "Yes, he has come, but he doesn't have the ransom. He says my father will be coming with it shortly. I hope that will be all right."

"Hey—no problem! That is, as long as the ransom is coming." He winked at that. "Come to think of it, I haven't much use for gold now anyway. I already have so much! In fact, why don't you take some with you?"

Lance gave a little gasp. "I never dreamed it would be this easy or I would have come sooner. I was always told that dragons were
(continued on page 34)



Syntactic Solutions

G R A N D S O N D O G S O W H A S
 N S O M P R O P G L R N I E C I T
 B R I T H E R P R E A O M M S N G
 E R O S S N M R E F N T R T I E R
 M L O S T S U K A A D H E G S F E
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 F A G R E A T A U N T E O A E O N
 F M O T H E R I N L A W N S W O M

Chauvinist Knights and Feminist Damsels (continued from page 9)

mean, greedy animals who breathed fire and killed for the sheer pleasure of it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have been nearly as nice if I didn’t know Kayla would be happy with you. Don’t cross her, though, and don’t even suggest that women are weak in her presence, or *she’ll* be breathing fire! She’s a good girl who brings some spice into the life of an old dragon. But don’t tell anyone—you might ruin my reputation.” He winked again. “Now off with you before I change my mind and eat you both for dinner!” And with that, he dismissed them both by closing his eyes and going to sleep. ★

The Hungry Winter

A slow-moving train crawls the tracks
 Like a slug
 Soon the hairy beasts are heard
 A rifle’s crack
 A pistol’s bang
 The bison falls to the ground
 Gasping
 The laugh of a hunter
 As his kill lies draining on the prairie
 Steam spews from the engine
 And everything disappears
 Except for the buffalo
 Later the Sioux come
 Searching for food
 They sob over the rotting beast
 Shot in jest
 By white hunters.
 This is not the only time
 The Sioux will go hungry for a winter.

—Adam Booken,
 Sixth grade, Community Day School,
 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Essay (continued from page 23)

about once a month, and it’s different. I never thought that our relationship could change so much, but I guess I never really expected it to stay the same. I can talk to him more openly now and I have learned to appreciate the time I get to spend with him. With my mother it’s changed in a different way. I’ve come to respect her more. She works so hard to make sure that Emily and I are always happy. I also envy the way she keeps her dignity around my father—never losing it when I know she really wants to inside.

I have always dreamed of my parents somehow, magically, getting back together, but I have formed such good relationships and friendships with them that I wouldn’t want that to change if my father were to live with us again. It took a lot of time for me to realize that what they did was for the best and to forgive them for it. I now understand that parents aren’t as perfect as I thought they were, but that just makes them all the better when you realize that they can make mistakes. I have learned that parents are people. ★