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opening extract from

Creaky Castle: Tom's Dragon Trouble

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Chapter One

The King's Message

Thomas Bailey was beginning to feel more than a teensy bit frustrated.

He was having lunch with his family in the Great Hall of their ancestral home, Creaky Castle. But as usual, Thomas just couldn't seem to get a word in edgeways. Sir John and Lady Eleanor and his big sister Matilda were all far too busy talking to take any notice of him.

"Mother, I was wondering if I could—" Thomas started to say.

"Ugh, what is this foul muck?" said Matilda. She wrinkled her nose and poked at the food on her plate. "You can't possibly expect me to eat it. I mean, not even Mott would eat anything this awful, would you, Mott?"

Matilda offered a forkful of food to the family's ancient wolfhound. Mott sniffed it, whined…and slunk off to a distant corner of the hall.

"I'll thank you not to wave your food about, Matilda," Lady Eleanor said. "It's not that bad. Cook has made a special effort today."

Thomas took a deep breath and tried again. "Father, there's, er—"

"Really?" Matilda replied, talking across him. "What, to poison us?"

"Oh no, I don't think so, my lambkin," said Sir John, smiling at her. "Cook wouldn't do anything like that. Well, not on purpose, anyway."

"HEY, WILL SOMEBODY LISTEN TO ME?" Thomas shouted.

"There's no need to be so loud, Thomas," said Lady Eleanor, wincing.

"It's vulgar, and you know how much I hate raised voices."

"Huh, except when she's doing the shouting," muttered Matilda.

"I heard that," snapped Lady Eleanor. "I never shout, except when it's absolutely necessary, of course. Which it often is with the inhabitants of this castle, sadly enough. Now, Thomas, what exactly is on your mind?"

"I was wondering if I could, er…have a pet," Thomas said nervously. "I was down in the village this morning, and I saw something I want at Peasant Pet Stores. It's on special offer, a really amazing bargain, and I've got enough money saved, so you wouldn't have to pay a penny…"

"Well, I don't see why not," said Sir John. "A boy needs a pet."

"Oh, great, Father, thanks!" said Thomas, amazed that it had been so easy after all. "I'll go and get…I mean, I'll go and buy him right away!"

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“Hang on a second,” said Lady Eleanor, looking at Thomas through narrowed eyes. He paused halfway out of his seat, caught in her gaze, and slowly sat down again. “I notice you didn’t mention what kind of animal it is you’re in such a hurry to buy,” said Lady Eleanor. “I’m afraid I’m going to need more detail before I give my permission, young man.”

“It’s a, er…dragon,” replied Thomas, practically whispering the word.

“A dragon?” said Lady Eleanor, frowning. “No, Thomas, definitely not. They’re nasty, dangerous beasts, and they eat colossal amounts of food.”

“Oh no, we definitely can’t afford any high-maintenance pets,” Sir John added hastily. “We’ve been spending rather too much recently as it is.”

“I feel another cut in pocket money coming on,” Matilda groaned.

Thomas opened his mouth to argue with his parents. But at that precise moment, the doors of the Great Hall were suddenly flung wide open and a short, rather squat soldier came running in. It was Mouldy, Sir John’s senior man-at-arms. Mouldy hurried towards the table, almost tripping over his sword a couple of times, and skidded to a halt beside Sir John.

“Sorry to interrupt your lovely lunch,

My Lord,” he said breathlessly, “but a knight has brought a message for you. What shall I do with him?”

“That should be obvious, Mouldy,” sighed Sir John. “Send him in!”

“But dragons aren’t nasty or dangerous,” Thomas went on, as Mouldy scuttled out. “They can be very loving and loyal, and they often—”

“Read my lips, Thomas,” said Mother. “The…answer…is…NO.”

Thomas scowled, determined not to give up.

But then he heard hoofs clip-clopping up flagstone steps, and a tall knight in splendid armour burst into the Great Hall on his horse. Mouldy came stumbling in after him.

The knight leaned down from the saddle, handed Sir John a rolled parchment, then, without a word, swung his horse round and clattered out again.

“How many times have I told you to make them leave their horses in the stables?” Lady Eleanor hissed at Mouldy, who turned and fled. “I don’t know why we bother to have any stables at all,” Lady Eleanor muttered. “No one ever uses them.” She turned to her husband. “Well?”

“It’s from the King…” said Sir John. “He’s, er…coming to visit.”

“WHAT?” squealed Lady Eleanor, horrified. “When does he arrive?”

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"Next Monday," Sir John said gloomily. "He'll only be staying a few days, thank goodness, so we probably shouldn't make much fuss."

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Lady Eleanor.

"We'll have to redecorate the entire castle, of course. We'll need new furniture and hangings in here and in the bedchambers, new outfits for us, and for the servants, too. In fact, we might need to get some new servants. Especially a new cook."

"I hope you're not expecting me to wear a horrid pointy hat, or some hideous snood," Matilda muttered, her top lip curled in disgust. "I mean, it's bad enough having to go round in stupid girly dresses all the time."

"You will if I say so," said Lady Eleanor. "And another thing…"

"Could we get back to what we were talking about?" said Thomas.

"I'm not sure we can afford to redecorate the entire castle," murmured Sir John. "It's a big job, and as I say, money is a bit of an issue…"

"But we have to!" said Lady Eleanor. "And you have to make a good impression on the King. If everything goes well, he might promote you. We wouldn't have to worry about money if you were a rich baron."

"Oh dear," muttered Sir John, sighing and looking unhappy. "I really don't think I'm up to it, my love. It all sounds a little too energetic for me – you know I like a nice, quiet life. Can't we, er… just stay as we are?"

Lady Eleanor went onto the attack, Matilda sided with Sir John, and Thomas realized he had less chance now than ever of being listened to.

"May I get down from the table?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer. He left the Great Hall, emerged from the Keep, crossed the empty courtyard…then slipped through a back door into the stables.

And there, hidden in a heap of old straw, was the small dragon – well, smallish – that Thomas had already bought and sneaked into Creaky Castle. Buying the dragon first and asking permission later had seemed like a brilliant idea at the time. But now Thomas wasn't so sure.

"Are you all right, Sparky?" Thomas whispered. A woeful noise came in reply, a cross between a cow mooing and the purring of a giant cat. "Sorry, but I might have to keep you hidden here for a while longer," Thomas said. "If Mother finds out what I've done, I'll be in big trouble. In fact, I don't even want to think about how much trouble I'll be in…"

Sad little puffs of smoke emerged from the heap of straw. Thomas stood there brooding, wondering what to do. How could he persuade Mother to let him keep Sparky? Then suddenly it came to him…

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