

## Chapter 1



In the land of This-and-That, there lived a princess who...Listen, I understand that these types of stories usually begin with some beautiful rhyming scheme. That is not going to happen here. It is not that I'm a lazy narrator, it's just that the premise seems a bit pretentious, is all. So...moving forward.

In the land of...Look, it is just difficult, OK? As your narrator, I feel that the rhyming might take away from this brilliant story that I am about to tell. I mean, have you ever tried it? What rhymes with princess? I'll tell you what. Nothing. It's a pain, and if the rhyme isn't good, it seems like you're cutting corners. Britney rhymed "calling" with "warning" and Usher rhymed "floor" with "go", and that's just plain criminal. On to the story.

In the...I'm just asking that you cut me a little slack here. Narrating jobs are scarce enough as it is, and I don't need your high expectations undermining my gig. I've got bills to pay. So, let's just have a little fun, alright?

Thank you.

In the land of This-and-That, there lived a princess named Nightingale. Princesses are depicted as having hair of spun gold and eyes of violet-blue who flutter around in their castle, summoning wildlife through melodious caterwauling. They gallop through glens of green on a beautiful stallion named Chestnut or Champion or some other regal-sounding name, where they inevitably meet the Handsome Prince, Sir Whatshisface of Whatever. They chat about scones and dancing for about three paragraphs, and by Chapter Six, a beautiful wedding, happily ever after, the end. They have twenty-seven kids, all of them gorgeous, and none of their children suffer from anxiety. They can totally get into all the good clubs without calling ahead first. Nightingale was all of this and more, except the complete opposite.

Our heroine is short with average brown hair and average brown eyes. Our heroine hates her nose but has come to grips with it. Our heroine drinks power drinks and stays up all night

playing online war games such as Scabs of Destiny. She routinely kills players with nicknames like PizzaBoi, DeathFist, and N00bmaster, who camp by spawning sites and deserve to be dispatched with reckless aplomb. Our heroine loves her high-speed ping rate and eats cookie dough ice cream for breakfast. She wears a hoodie, despises high-heeled shoes, binge-watches streaming services, and loves to sleep until the crack of noon. Take a moment to close your eyes to imagine this girl. I'll wait. Are you back? Good. That's EXACTLY what she looks like.

Nightingale enjoys her life. She lives in a tower, but not because she was cursed by a witch or hidden from the world by an evil stepmother. She lives there by choice. She comes and goes as she pleases. Her tower has satellite TV and a fantastic mini kitchenette. A comfy couch and throw pillows of all sizes and colors are littered about the main room. The bathroom has excellent water pressure, a claw-foot tub and is decorated with a few plants. The bedroom is cozy enough, with a princess-size bed and plenty of closet space to harbor the fancy gowns and shoes she rarely wears. Pictures of family and friends are scattered about on the walls and dressers, with silly frames for the friends and royal ones for her parents. Adorning a wall in the living room is a magic mirror named Reflexa, who is hooked up to her Wi-Fi and is ready to answer the worldly questions that may burden a princess, such as “when is Scabs of Destiny 2 being released?” and “what power drink pairs well with a robust cheese puff?”

The tower is your basic round, white stone type with a red clay tile roof and tendrils of vines and bean sprouts climbing high along its walls. A heavy red oak door faces a flower-lined path leading to the Woods of Nevermore, which begin at the edge of her glen. Set high, the tower has a window facing each direction, and they overlook the beauty that is the kingdom. One on the south side to the Woods of Nevermore and one west facing her parents' castle, Castle Beckett. The castle sits far enough away to feel comfortable yet close enough to feel...well, comfortable. Her bedroom window faces north, and the sea could be seen on most nights. The smell of the salt air rides the breeze into her bedroom, and the morning sun's reflection off the waves would dance along her ceiling. The bathroom has a small window, big enough to let in enough sun for the plants but small enough to stop her from imagining serial killers peeking in on her while she is in the shower.

Hopefully, I, the narrator, have painted a clear enough picture of the princess' domicile. You're going to have to meet me halfway if we're going to get this done, so use your imagination a bit and fill in whatever blanks you have. Wondering what color her comforter is? Figure it out for yourself. That is literally how reading works. Moving on.

Upon graduation from high school, (You had no idea that princesses attended high school, did you? Well, some do. Most importantly, this one did), Nightingale's parents asked her what she would like as a present. Our princess chose solitude. It wasn't that she didn't like the castle or that she had an issue with her parents. She just wanted to try it on her own. No parents waking her up, no expectations, no responsibilities. She would have to do all her own chores and cleaning and food shopping. In return, she would have peace of mind and the ability to try herself.

I don't mean to make it sound as if living on her own was an easy sell. Her parents didn't graciously give her the keys and kiss her goodbye. The pushback on the idea was formidable and caused quite a rift within her entire family. Nightingale is an only child, and the king and queen are very protective, which is what they should be. What seventeen-year-old lives on their own a month after graduating high school?

Her father, King Killian, was enraged and took the planned departure as a slap in his face. As protector and provider, the king felt slighted that his efforts weren't good enough for his daughter. Meticulously, he itemized every worst-case scenario he could find, including a massive flood and invasion by hostile forces. Her mother, Queen Evelyn, was concerned for her daughter's virtue and reputation. How would it reflect on her if her only child ran out at such a young age? Her rebuttals included health concerns and "invasions" by "hostile forces," if you catch my drift.

The debate continued for weeks, with many a slammed door and tears shed on all sides. Nightingale pleaded her case that the new living arrangements would help round her as a woman and that she was eager to face the world head-on. How would she eventually become the leader of a kingdom if she didn't experience being the leader of herself first? Surely, her parents had

armed her with enough knowledge and maturity to withstand living alone. This was a chance to take all of that knowledge for a spin around the block.

Countless discussions were had between the king and queen when, finally, they succumbed to the idea. Nightingale would use an old tower just outside of the castle walls. It was once an outpost for sentries during harsher times, when the threat of said hostile forces was prevalent. The princess would stay in contact with her parents, and they promised to keep her bedroom handy in case she needed to retreat. The king was certain that this would only be a fleeting fancy and that after some scary nights alone by the woods, his daughter would return home safe and sound.

Queen Evelyn was much brighter than her husband.

Once the princess tasted her freedom, the queen knew she would never return. She was once a seventeen-year-old princess herself and knew how they thought and acted. It broke her mother's heart to see her go, but she swore to support her daughter in ways that her own parents never had. In the end, the queen convinced her husband to loosen the ties a little and let their daughter spread her wings.

For the most part, Nightingale was happy with her simple life. When she was lonely, she would call her friends to hang out or just to chat. Occasionally, she would ride over to the castle to see her mom and dad for a hug and a snack and to hear the latest gossip of the kingdom. Mom would tell her who had the pox and who was dating whom, and if they had the pox. Dad would ask about her friends and discuss who was champion of what and whether the crops had gotten the pox. Frankly, upon reflection, there was way too much talk about the pox.

Today was going to be one of the days when she would ride over to the castle to see her folks. She had promised to help her mother bake some chocolate chip cookies for a charity event, and if her father was home, she would like to drop a hint or two about what she wanted for her upcoming birthday. Nightingale was turning eighteen in a few weeks, and she figured that now would be a good time to casually mention the new sneakers she had been eyeing up. They were low tops in marshmallow with a petite floral design and so adorable that she had to have them. If

she didn't say anything about her gift preference, her father would bestow upon her something traditional, like another tiara or that horrific crossbow that she got for a tower-warming gift when she moved in.

Baking was a fun bonding time for Nightingale and her mom. The king would always find an excuse to leave them alone in the kitchen, where they could talk and relax without the constraints of the parent-daughter relationship to hold them back. Among the mixing bowls and measuring cups, they were two friends enjoying each other's company, and laughing and complaining filled the time between batches. Many a crisis was thwarted in that kitchen, and Nightingale was counting on the good council.

Sometimes, you need a mom, and sometimes you need a friend, and a good mother can sometimes figure out what role is needed at the right time. Nightingale was in need of both, and she was hoping that her mother would recognize that. Our princess was facing a monumental dilemma, and she thought that today would be a good day to address it. You see, our princess wasn't sure she wanted to be a princess.

Ever since she was small, Nightingale was groomed to take over the family business. That's one thing if your dad is a cobbler or a district supervisor in charge of mass production and distribution of eastern markets for future gains in accordance with sectional titles and regulations, or, you know, a cobbler. It was another if he was running a kingdom. There is a ton of responsibility, and actual lives are at stake. One misstep and people starve, or have no water, or end up in a war, or even lose their unlimited cell phone coverage.

In a princess' world, there are countless balls, events, and meetings with people who think fresh-smelling breath is a luxury. Itchy silk gowns and tortuous high-heeled shoes are displayed with the proper protocols and traditions. Fake smiles and laughing through your teeth while balancing a small chandelier on your head in the guise of a crown was commonplace. None of this was appetizing to Nightingale, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to try.

She was showered, dressed, and ready for the short ride to the castle. Peering at herself in the mirror, she practiced what she would say to her mother about her abdication. How she would

lightly feather it into conversation with phrases like: “Hey Mom, what has two thumbs and doesn’t want to be a princess? This gal.” or “You know what would be cool? Not being a princess. All my friends are doing it so I thought I would give it a shot.”

Then there came the noise. A noise that would change her life. Not a “pah-poom” or even a “wat-wahhh.” This was a special new sound. A sound with a lemon wedge and unlimited refills.

It was a noise like a sail unfurling or someone shaking out a very large blanket. Before she could identify the offending sound, it was gone. Then, she heard it again. Nightingale crept to the window facing the sea and peered out into the afternoon sky. Nothing. Then she checked out the view overlooking the woods. Again, not a thing. The sky outside her window had darkened, but not all at once. First, the shadow was in the south window, then the east. Quickly to the north, the west, and then south again. Great winds fought the leaves in the forest across the small glen, rustling and protesting mightily. At once, the shadow and the wind were gone.

The princess stood in the center of her tower, unsure of what to expect. Curiosity had outwrestled nervousness in her mind, and once again, she walked to a window, the south one this time, and leaned out to get a solid look-see. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The sun was once again shining high in the afternoon sky. No shadows or winds as far as the eyes could see.

Nightingale pulled herself back inside.

*Perhaps the wind was playing tricks with me,* she thought as she scooped up her phone to call a coach to give her a ride to the castle. Before she could dial, the phone made a series of annoying chirps. It was a text:

**!!DRAGON WARNING IN YOUR AREA!!**

**FROM THE DRAGON OFFICES IN MT. HOLLY: A DRAGON WARNING HAS BEEN ISSUED FOR THE FOLLOWING KINGDOMS: TOURIN, WILDERLAND, NOWHERE, AND THIS-AND-THAT. DRAGON(S) HAVE BEEN SPOTTED IN THE AREA COMING FROM THE EAST. PEOPLE ARE ASKED TO SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY AND NOT**

TO DO ANY UNNECESSARY DRIVING. WHERE AVAILABLE, HEAD TO A ROOT CELLAR FOR SAFETY. TRY TO AVOID SCREAMING AND RUNNING IN TERROR.

*Well, she thought, that would explain the noise.*

Nightingale had never experienced a dragon before, although she knew that it was an “occupational hazard.” Princesses usually encountered a dragon during their lifetime in one manner or another. One princess she knew had a dragon living in her kingdom for weeks until she could finally shoo it away. Another princess employed a team of knights to ride out and beg it to please go home and stop squishing all the peonies. During their stay, dragons would often scorch crops and feast on livestock, causing quite a nuisance for everyone involved, especially the livestock. After a neighboring kingdom was infested with a dragon, the place reeked of brimstone for months, putting a huge damper on their annual Tex-Mex festival. This incident prompted a new rule of thumb amongst the kingdoms: *When inhabited by a dragon, never under any circumstances feed it chili.*

Nightingale grabbed a chair from her kitchen table and dragged it across the floor to her front window overlooking the woods. Sitting down, she could not help but wonder why a dragon had chosen to visit her. She had no evil stepmother, nor was she a captive in her tower. No witches had cast a spell in her direction, and there was a vacancy in the Prince Charming department.

Speaking of which, Nightingale hadn't had a steady boyfriend since a boy named Brenton in high school. In fact, the only remnant of Brenton was a couple of pictures and the ratty sweatshirt she stole from him and was presently wearing. Women have a marked propensity toward lifting a hoodie from their ex-boyfriends so if any boys are reading this, let that be a warning to you all. Once a girl gets your hoodie, it is magically theirs, and there is nothing you can do to change it.

Truth be told, if the stars aligned and the moon was in the proper house, she missed Brenton just a little. When Nightingale weakened, replete with memories and a pinch of self-pity, she would become angry and immediately cleanse herself with a mouthful of whipped cream straight

from the can. Then she would play a few rounds of Scabs to destroy something beautiful. This process, repeated as often as need be, seemed to help her convalesce.

No amount of canned cream nor avatar mutilations was going to help her stay strong in the face of a dragon. Nightingale would need to summon all of her princessly powers to stay her chin from an occasional quiver. Surely you have read the same books and seen the same movies as our heroine. Dragons were rumored to be big nasty beasties. Breathing fire and whatnot. Smashing through castles and ravaging kingdoms. Melting thrones and icy walls and being decidedly awful dinner companions. Nightingale would rather eschew the rumors and judge for herself.

Having never seen a dragon up close, Nightingale was a little excited to see what the big fuss was about. Sure, they looked terrible in pictures, but how bad can they really be? Maybe they were just not very photogenic, or they might have been having a bad hair day. Had anyone ever sat one down and tried to take a good picture of a dragon? Probably not. All the ones that Nightingale had come across were always action shots, and they'd never come out good. Action shots are all sweaty and blurry, with strange facial expressions and awkward angles. She had learned that from her days on the high school archery squad. Her yearbook photos from archery were a disaster, with lots of squinting and matted hair.

She propped her feet up on the stone windowsill and waited for her uninvited guest. The sky grew eerily dark, and the sail/blanket sounds grew louder and louder. A flash of red and white raced past by in an instant, too fast for Nightingale to get a good glimpse of the monster as it glided past her window. The force of the wind that followed nearly took her breath away as it fled out of sight, releasing the sun from its shield. Then darkness shrouded the tower once again, followed by more wind and the far away flapping of wings.

“I might be in a little trouble here,” said Nightingale to no one.

She grabbed her phone and dialed 9-1- and kept hovering her finger over the remaining emergency digit. If it was the dragon, it had her undivided attention. Nightingale again leaned out of her window, eyes darting in every direction. No sign of the creature anywhere. She



contemplated leaving the window, but curiosity had riveted her in place. Her father did not raise a coward, nor her mother a fool. With a deep breath, she embraced the inevitable and prepared herself to meet her visitor.

With a loud thud that shook the stone tower, the beast landed in the glen directly before her window. A dragon it was, and an impressive sight at that. Twenty feet tall if it was an inch. Its coloring was deep blood-red with white feet and stripes of white running from its feet to its long tail, which put the dragon's length at a good fifty feet. No scales like in the storybooks, but a fine fur covered its body. A high ridge of hair raced along its spine, thick and white like the mane of a horse. The head was enormous, easily the size of an ox, and it housed the eyes of a cat, but rimmed with a fiery glow. Beneath its chin sat a white tuft of a beard. The face pulled forward in a snout like an alligator that failed to keep a frightening number of teeth at bay.

If Nightingale weren't a princess, she would have piddled there and then. I almost piddled writing that last paragraph, and I am a grown-up narrator. But a princess she was, and she was not about to show fear no matter how magnificent a beast landed on her front lawn. Our heroine stared directly into the eyes of the massive creature, resolute and unbending.

## Chapter 2



In the land of This-and-That, the dragon spread its wings and sent an ear-splitting roar toward the heavens. Nightingale watched without so much as a tremor of nervousness. Inside, she was scared witless, but outside, she remained cool as a cucumber, whatever that means. In fact, she was getting a bit annoyed at the obvious attempt to garner attention. Drama was not something that Nightingale stomached for very long.

Light puffs of pink smoke fumed from its nostrils as it eyed the tiny princess in the window. It stared for some time, first examining the tower, reexamining the princess, and then back to the tower. Its eyes had a hint of confusion and disbelief as it seemed to attempt to gather its bearings. A glance at the tower, up at the princess, a look toward the woods, then back at the tower. After a few rounds of this, Nightingale had seen enough and decided to get to the bottom of things.

“Can I help you?” she said, unsure if the beast could answer. Instead, it ignored her and continued searching for a clue as to where it was, as befuddled as ever.

She tried again. “Hey, Dragon, do you mind telling me what you’re doing on my lawn?”

“Sorry,” it responded, “just trying to make sure I’m in the right neighborhood. They all look alike from down here.”

Nightingale was slightly startled by the pleasant voice from the dragon. Not nearly as terrifying as she would have expected. *Well, she thought, that’s what I get for being presumptuous.*

“Who are you looking for? Maybe I can help you.”

With a puff of pink smoke, a large pair of reading glasses appeared and were perched on its formidable nose. A piece of paper the size of a bed sheet was unfolded, and the dragon traced over the words with a long, black claw, looking for information. With a gasp of recognition, it found what it was searching for.

“Ah! Here it is. Princess of This-and-That, edge of the woods of Nevermore... large tower... near the sea... east of Castle... named... Nightingale. Is she in?”

“You’re looking at her,” said Nightingale.

“Are you sure? I’d hate to be in the wrong place.”

“Of course, I’m sure. She’s me. I am Princess Nightingale.”

“Well, you’ll have to excuse me. You don’t look very princessy. Any chance I can trouble you for identification? License? Major credit card?”

“And what, may I ask, is a princess supposed to look like?”

Nightingale had heard this before, and every time she did, it irritated her a little. Just because she didn’t wear frilly gowns and have bluebirds circling her butt didn’t make her any less of a princess.

“Well,” answered the dragon, “usually, they have a frilly gown and bluebirds circling their butt.”

“I guarantee you I am one hundred percent princess.”

“Just to make sure, though...” the dragon said, “let’s revisit the paperwork, shall we? Father is King Killian the Stout-hearted, and mother is Queen Evelyn the Just?”

“That’s Mom and Dad,” answered Nightingale with a tired sigh. “And who might you be?”

“OH! Very sorry. Where are my manners?” The dragon cleared its throat, and the glasses disappeared in another puff of smoke. It stood on its hind legs, spreading its vast wings, and roared with such force that the pictures on Nightingale’s wall vibrated and rocked on their hooks. Winds swirled around the beast, and dark smoke filled the air. It was an attention-getter, to say the least, and, might I add, a bit intimidating. The dragon bellowed with an otherworldly voice:

“I AM WRATHNAROK! SLAYER OF VILLAGES! DEVOURER OF HOPE AND TORTURE TO ALL WHO LAY BEFORE ME! HARBINGER OF DOOM AND—”

“Hang on!” interrupted Nightingale. “My mom’s calling me.”

Wrathnarok slumped over, defeated that the grand entrance was rudely interrupted by the princess. With all that was going on, Nightingale completely forgot that she was holding her phone, and the thought of making cookies with her mom had become a distant memory.

“Hey, Mom.” Nightingale answered the phone and looked at Wrathnarok with a shrug as if to say, “what are ya gonna do?” The dragon responded with a silent eyeroll.

“Hey, honey. Just wanted to let you know that I’m running a little late due to the Dragon Warning in effect, so if you get there before me…”

“Mom, it’s here.”

“What’s there, hon?”

“The dragon. From the warning. It’s here. Apparently, it’s my dragon.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted the Dragon. “It’s SHE, not IT.”

“What’s that now?”

“Although I abhor labels, Wrathnarok is a decidedly feminine name. I am a female dragon, complete with feelings that you have insensitively trod upon.”

“Yes, of course. A girl dragon. A beautiful, wonderful, symbol of feminine magnificence.”

“Don’t patronize. It demeans us both.”

“I’m just saying that it was wrong of me to presume. Apologies,” said the princess. The dragon continued to look away, ignoring her completely. Way to go, Princess. You’re off to a great start!

“Honey! Are you OK? Should I call your father?” The queen answered nervously.

The last thing the princess needed was for her father to think she was in danger. This would be an excuse to have her return home, and she needed to show that she could handle herself.

“Mom, no. Don’t call Dad. It’s under control.”

“I can’t believe you’ve got a dragon. Ok. Stay calm. Does it have the pox? Ask if it has the pox.”

Nightingale leaned out the window to see the Dragon drawing pictures in the dirt with a claw and waiting patiently.

“Hey! Grassandrocks! Mom wants to know if you have the pox.”

“It’s Wrathnarok, and no, I don’t.”

Nightingale returned to the phone. “No, Mom. She said no pox.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” exclaimed a relieved queen. “You can never be too sure nowadays. Old Lady Jenkins just got over the pox, and Sir Reginald the Rank had it and didn’t tell anyone. No one knew because he smells so bad that no one would get close to him, which is a good thing because...”

Nightingale cut her mother off. She knew that once her mother started off on a tangent there was no stopping her.

“Mom, I’m going to go. I don’t want to keep the dragon waiting. I’ll give you a call later, OK?”

“Of course, dear. Be safe, and call if you need anything. Remember, your dad bought you that crossbow in case the dragon gets a little cheeky. Love! Love! Love!”

“Love! Love! Love!” Nightingale replied and hung up the phone.

She liked that her mother gave her enough space to try to deal with things on her own. She also liked knowing that, if things got out of hand, she could call her parents to help her out. What she did not like was the realization that she had returned the crossbow to the store the day after she had been given it and traded it in for a sweet pair of jeans.

Wearing an apologetic smirk, she peered back out the window. The dragon was inspecting her long black talons, digging around at little bits of dirt under the nails.

“Sorry, hon. You know how moms are. So where were we?”

“I was introducing myself,” said the dragon. Once again, she hopped onto her hind legs and, spreading her vast wings, let out a roar.

And once again, Nightingale interrupted.

“Yo! Pop’n’lock! I think the moment is gone. You want to just move on from here?”

“Fine,” said the dragon, a little disappointed that she would not make her grand introduction but realizing that the moment had indeed left them. “And it’s Wrathnarok, and you know it.”

Nightingale giggled at being caught.

“So, what brings you to these parts? I’m not sure I am in the market for a dragon. I mean, I’m not here against my will, and there’s no evil spell or valiant princes trying to rescue me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, smarty. Princes ARE coming to rescue you. Your birthday is coming up, and tradition says you will wed soon. Right here on the invoice, it says...”

Poof. Magic smoke. Reading glasses. Paper.

Wrathnarok cleared her throat again and proceeded to read with a very regal and rehearsed tone. She seemed to clear her throat an awful lot. Maybe it was all the magic smoke choking her.

She read:

*“Princes come from far and wide,*

*To seek the hand and take a bride.*

*At eighteen, so tells the tale,*

*The princess known as Nightingale.”*

Puff. Smoke. Glasses and paper gone.

Nightingale stared at Wrathnarok for what seemed like a lifetime. She was sure that her mouth was hanging open by the look on the dragon’s face. No words would form in her brain as thought after thought raced around, screaming as if there was a tiger chasing them and the tiger

was on fire. She tried to speak, but each sentence pushed the other out of the way and left her mouth moving but saying nary a word.

“You OK, kid?” asked the dragon. “You look like a puppy trying to bite a football.”

Nightingale was not OK. In fact, she was about 86 miles to the left of OK. In all her reasoning for trying to place a correlation between her and the dragon, marriage wasn’t even a wisp of an idea. Surely this can’t be true. Her parents would have mentioned some archaic ritual where their daughter would be sold off to the highest bidder. When she finally snapped back to reality after a moment or two, all she could manage to utter was:

“Um...WHAT?”

“Yes. It’s all true. Men are traveling from distant lands to woo the sweet Nightingale and win her hand in marriage. You turn eighteen in a few weeks, and as archaic ritual would have it, you are ripe for a wedding.”

“Well, they are wasting their time because I have no intention of getting married.”

“Yeah, I gathered all that when someone hit your mute button a minute ago. Yet come they will. May I suggest a quick shower and perhaps set out tea and sandwiches before they arrive? Speaking of sandwiches, I am a bit hungry. I was going to snap up a farmer on the way over here, but they are notoriously stringy from standing in a field all day, so I didn’t. I’m beginning to regret my decision.”

“I’m already showered, thank you,” said the princess. “By the way, what part do you play in all of this?”

“I am your dragon. I stay here and keep an eye on things in case any of the princes turn out to be jerks. If so, I usually swoop down and eat them. If you find a suitor, I leave you be until the wedding. Then your dad gives me a treasure in gold, and I go home. If no gold, I usually start eating wedding guests until I get paid.”

“That’s extortion!” smiled the princess.

“That is a capitalistic society, missy. I don’t make the rules.”

“You don’t look much like a dragon. You look more like a griffin,” said Nightingale.

“I guarantee you that I am, in fact, one hundred percent dragon. Just take a gander at the tail,” said the dragon.

“I’ve seen dragons. They’re all leathery and mean-looking. They have two hind legs and wings for arms. You look a little blow-dried to be a dragon.”

“Ah. You watch too much TV. No, see, they are what is known as a wyvern. They look like hairless cats with umbrellas taped to their backs. Griffins are a half lion, half eagle hybrid and reign in Greece, Egypt, and some parts of Rhode Island.”

“I’m just saying that you ain’t exactly fairytale caliber.”

“And you ain’t exactly Meghan Markle, but here we are.”

“And you really eat people?” asked the princess. She was beginning to regret returning the crossbow, but the jeans were so worth it.

“What am I? A monument to justice? Yes, I eat people. I am a dragon. It kinda comes with the territory.”

Nightingale had heard enough. Though calm and collected on the outside, inside her stomach was a Gordian knot of nerves. She would need a few moments to process all of this. Maybe readdress it in, say, ten years or so. Stick a pin in it and table it another time. I don’t know, pick a cliché and use that one. She was not about to get married and was not dealing with a farmer-munching dragon. All she wanted was a spoonful of cookie dough and a chat with her mom. She did not sign up for the extended princess warranty. *Time to put this to bed*, she thought.

“Listen, all of this doesn’t work for me,” Nightingale said. “I am not a big fan of the eating people thing, and I am definitely not a fan of getting married. I got a good gig here. I’m relatively happy. I have a nice room. I come and go as I please. I have all the major streaming services. I’m set!”



“Can’t help you, honey. It’s going to happen,” said the dragon. “Meanwhile, I’ll be here if you need me.”

“Oh, I definitely won’t need you. I can handle this myself. I’m not some weak little princess running away from my problems to some igloo or sleeping my day away waiting for some stranger to smooch me up. I’m good. I got this.”

“Fantastic. Glad that’s settled. Very cool,” the dragon said, rolling her enormous eyes again. “But I’m here until I get paid, and that’s that. Did I mention that I’m hungry? Maybe you can point me in the direction of the nearest cattle ranch, and I’ll step out for a bit.”

“No eating cattle or sheep or sheep herders until I figure this all out. If you’re staying, I have a ton of questions for you, so I need you to stick around until we’re done.”

The young princess was perplexed. She had so many questions, and concerns, the most pressing of which was how to keep this monster from terrorizing the countryside and eating livestock like jellybeans. She needed to keep an eye on her somehow but feeding her was an issue. She tried at a compromise.

“It’s a pity you couldn’t come inside. I would whip you up some Mac and Cheese,” said the princess.

“That depends. What kind you got? Powder or liquid cheese?”

“I have both. Take your pick.”

“Well, I could shrink down and come inside if you’ll have me. How small do you want me? Doberman pincher? Toy Poodle? Danny DeVito?” asked the dragon.

“Let’s go with Kevin Hart. Think you can handle that?”

“Ooo! I like him. That man is hysterical!” said the dragon.

With a puff of pink smoke, the crisis was averted. Wrathnarok had shrunk down to border collie size. She walked to the door and waited to be let in. Nightingale sped down the spiral staircase to the front door, and with a loud creak, the door opened, and they were finally face to

face. The shrinking had altered Wrathnarok's appearance quite drastically. The white fur was still there but blended with the red, making her look a bit pink in hue. Her wings had shrunk drastically, and now, instead of covering most of her back, they had become quite tiny in comparison. Her alligator face seemed softer and, with her teeth tucked in, less intimidating. Most noticeable were her feet. The white fur made it seem as if she was wearing little socks and gloves. She was, to coin a phrase, adorable. This did not get past the princess.

"Oh my goodness! Look at your little wings!" Nightingale purred and leaned down to give her a hug.

"Well, it's chilly out here. Don't get smart, princess, remember...I still have teeth, you know."

"And they're so cute!" said the princess, playfully pinching her cheek. "Come on upstairs, and I'll make us some snacks. I'm getting a little hungry as well."

As they climbed the stairs, she remembered the words that her mother had always said: *Trust your gut. If something doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't.* Nightingale did a gut check. All seemed well. The dragon was now puppy dog-sized, and hadn't she said that she was there to protect her? Surely there was no harm in keeping her inside. Besides, it would be easier to stop her from eating the neighbors if she kept her small and well-fed. Plus, it would be nice to have a little company for a while. Living alone in a tower was great, but it did have its drawbacks. Getting homesick and lonely was, without a doubt, near the top of the list.

"Make yourself at home while I cook us up some food," Nightingale said as they reached the living room. Wrathnarok plopped herself on the couch in front of the television right next to a pair of dirty socks. Living alone had made the princess lag in her housekeeping skills. She wasn't dirty, but she let herself be too comfortable, and it may have gotten a little out of control. The dragon pinched them up with two claws and, with a nauseated grunt, flung the socks onto the floor.

"Don't mind the mess," Nightingale said as she recognized the sign of disgust coming from the living room. It was the same one her mother made when she visited unannounced. She waited

for the water to boil and removed two boxes of Mac and Cheese from the pantry. She went with the powdered type since archaic traditions were the theme of the day.

While she was cooking, Wrathnarok sat upright on the couch with her wee hind legs dangling off the edge. As Nightingale tended to the macaroni, she tried to make her guest feel at ease. It was one of those princessy things that she was accustomed to doing.

“Do you like my digs?”

“Very cozy. Warm, too. I like the deco you’ve chosen. Urban Laundromat is an underutilized theme in most households.” Wrathnarok winced as she pulled a bra from between the couch cushions and laid it on the coffee table.

“Sorry about that. Haven’t had much of a reason to clean lately.”

“Do you know what a good reason to clean is? Being clean. It’s a fantastic reason.” The dragon scratched at a brown stain on the arm of the couch with her claw.

“Been in many houses, have you?” asked an annoyed princess.

“Not really, no.”

“I can see why. You’re a fairly rude houseguest. If you want, I can make this order to go.”

“I’ll consider it,” said the dragon. “Don’t you have people who do this sort of thing for you?”

“No. I’m on my own here. I do what I please when I please. I don’t need to be taken care of. I’m a grown woman who enjoys her independence. If I don’t want to clean, I don’t. If I want to cram a dirty pair of underwear under the couch, I do that, too.”

“Did you cram a pair of underwear under the couch?”

“I’m not sure. When I clean, it’s like a scavenger hunt. New treasures hiding in every corner.”

Awkward pause. Not exactly a pregnant pause but a pause that has been on a few fun dates. Finally, Wrathnarok tried to break the ice.

“So, you’re out here in the woods all by yourself? That sounds scary.”

“I am. And don’t get any crazy ideas about eating me. My dad got me a crossbow for my graduation,” said the princess.

“Please. If you had a crossbow, it would have been in my face the minute I hit the ground. All kings get their daughters a token of violence, and they always trade it in for a sweater or purse or something. One princess parlayed a set of daggers into tickets to an EDM festival in Michigan. What did you get?”

“A pair of jeans. They were so choice.”

“Very cool,” said the dragon. “So, Princess, what do they call you? Do you go by Nightingale or Gale or Nighty or something? Nightingale is a bit of a mouthful.”

“My folks and friends call me Gale.”

“Do you have a title? Like Princess Nightingale the Slovenly or something of that nature?”

“What do you mean?” asked the princess.

“Well, your parents are Killian the Stout-hearted and Evelyn the Just. I just wondered if you had a title as well. I’m fairly old, so I have a bunch of titles which you would have known if I wasn’t so rudely interrupted during my intro,” the dragon said, tongue in cheek.

“Yeah, sorry about that. No, I don’t think that I have one. Usually, it’s given to you, right? The people of the kingdom gave my parents their titles. I don’t think I know enough people to get one yet.”

“I’m sure you have one. You just might not know about it.”

“Well, that’s a bit concerning,” said the princess. “What if it’s something that I don’t like?”

“It’s not up to you. You just get one. People might be calling you Nightingale the Putrid as we speak.”

“Not sure that I like that. Not a big fan of labels. Do you like being called the Harbinger of Boogers or whatever it is that you were going on about?”

“It’s Harbinger of Doom, and if I don’t eat soon, you’ll know it first-hand,” said the dragon.

Nightingale walked in with two bowls of food and placed them on the coffee table. She gave Wrathnarok a fork, although she wasn’t sure if dragons used utensils or if they just wolfed down their food. She wanted to be polite to her guest since, after all, she was a princess.

Wrathnarok picked up the fork and ate it. Then she grabbed the bowl filled with Mac and cheese and ate it all in one gulp, bowl and all.

“Hey, you sleaze! My bowl!”

A sheepish grin crept across the dragon’s face as she quietly spit out the fork and empty bowl into her paws. She tried to hand the spit-covered place setting to Nightingale, but the look in her eyes made it understood that it was not the right idea. She daintily placed them back onto the coffee table, using a cup of the discarded bra as a coaster.

“Are we done playing games?” Nightingale asked with a chuckle in her voice.

“Sorry, kiddo. Sometimes I forget myself. I am a dragon, after all.”

“See? None of us are perfect,” said Nightingale. She realized her guest felt a little uneasy, so she tried comforting her.

“There’s plenty more. Grab your bowl and go in the kitchen and get some. And this time, try the fork. It’s all the rage.”

“Noted,” said the dragon as she hopped off the couch and made her way into the kitchenette.

“Any chance I can call you Gale?” Wrathnarok blurted nervously. “It would be nice since we’re going to be together for a while, and Nightingale is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Only if I can call you something other than Wrathnarok.”

“Fine. But only when I’m small. When I’m big, I need the name back. I must keep up appearances, you know. How about Tallulah? No, that’s too long. Aloysius? No. Apple? North? Canada?”

“I think Canada’s taken,” laughed Gale.

“Rocky? Or maybe Rocco! It’s a play on Wrathnarok, get it? I kinda like that one.”

“I was thinking maybe...Mittens?” Gale said with a hopeful grin.

Silence flooded the room like a belch of baloney as the dragon slowly turned from the kitchenette to face her host. The look on the dragon’s face was of complete disgust. Gale kept her smile in place though the weight of the moment made it difficult. She stared at the princess for a long time. Like a really long time. Like too long. Then finally...

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Hey, pal, you just ate my bowl. You owe me.”

“No.”

“Come on! I promise to only call you Mittens when you’re small!”

“Absolutely not.”

“Pleeeeeease? I can’t help it! You’re way too cute when you’re small. And your little paws look like little mittens,” Gale said in a cutesy baby voice.

“They’re not paws. They’re talons of terror. And still no.”

“Please, oh please, oh please, oh please? I’ll be your best friend!”

The dragon drew a deep breath and let out a long sigh of defeat.

“Fine,” said Mittens. “But only when I’m small.”

“Deal. Can I pet you?”

“Can I use your throw rug as a Piddle Pad?”

“No!” said Gale.

“Well, there’s your answer,” said Mittens.

Mittens hopped back onto the couch, scooped a big mouthful of Mac and Cheese onto her fork, and ate it with a smile. After a moment, the dragon spoke without looking up.

“I’ve never had a nickname before. I kinda like them,” Mittens mumbled.

“Me too, buddy. Me too,” said Gale. The princess looked at her guest as she struggled to clamp the fork between her talons. Though she was struggling with her food, the great and powerful dragon looked at ease for the first time since they met. Honestly, Gale felt relaxed for the first time in a long time herself. Another gut check was made, and Gale found herself comfortable.

Thus began the tale of Gale and Mittens. The new names certainly helped the narrator, who had become tired of typing Nightingale and Wrathnarok. It’s quite tedious and hard on the fingers. They are very long names, and since it is their story, it was going to be a hassle. I only wish they would have done this somewhere around page four.

Gale and Mittens spent the night swapping stories about the trials and tribulations of princess-dom and the life of dragons. They carried on as if they had known each other for years. They spoke of people that had been met and people that had been lunch. Reflexa was asked to play some easy-listening background music, and the air was littered with the melodies about nameless horses and southern crosses.

While scarfing down a few bags of microwavable popcorn, it was decided that a trip to her parents’ house was in order for the morning, and as midnight introduced itself to the evening, Mittens curled up on the couch with a pillow and blanket and Gale retired to her room. Both were pleased with the new friend that they had made. As Mittens drifted off to sleep, Gale couldn’t help but wonder about what, or more to the point, whom, the new day would bring.