

*Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess, the fairest maiden in the land, imprisoned far, far away by an evil dragon . . .*

“Never fear, fair maiden, for I have come to rescue you!” the knight cried, his armor glinting in the light of the afternoon sun. He had already come so far, through treacherous mountains and plunging canyons and barren deserts. A mere tower prison would be nothing. “I will prevail!”

“Oh, good knight, hurry! The dragon will awaken soon!” the flaxen-haired princess cried from the window of her prison, high above. The knight began to scale the tower walls with ease. He pulled himself - heavy armor and all - over the window ledge and into the tower.

“I have been searching for you,” he said grandly. Removing his helmet, he bowed gallantly and kissed her hand. “You are more lovely than the stories say.” And, indeed, the princess was very lovely, with skin like porcelain and wide, innocent, cornflower-blue eyes.

“You are too kind,” she said demurely, eyes sweetly downcast. “And to climb all the way up here to rescue me? You must be very strong.”

“I am a knight from the kingdom of Crétin,” the knight said. “We are known for our strength. Come, I will carry you away to freedom.”

“Wait!” the princess cried, putting up one delicate hand in protest. Tears shimmered in her blue eyes. “I am so sorry, dear knight, but I fear I cannot go with you.” She swept aside the hem of her golden skirt, displaying one slim ankle encased in a heavy shackle. The chain snaked across the floor and anchored somewhere under the bed.

“Never fear! I shall break it!” the knight declared, unsheathing his sword with great fervor.

The princess fell upon his arm, stopping him mid-stroke. “It has been tried!” she all but wept. “It is unbreakable by man. The dragon put this on me when it took me prisoner. Only the key can free me - and it is kept in the belly of my prison, guarded by the dragon itself!”

“Where?” was all the knight asked, already striding purposefully towards the door.

“The room at the bottom of the stairs!” the princess called after him. “You can’t miss it!” She stood still, one ear cocked to listen as the sound of clattering metal echoed faintly back to her. Then -

“Dumbass,” she muttered, and bent down to remove her shackle.

The knight crept down the stairs as quietly as he could in his layers of armor, until he turned a corner and reached a landing with an open doorway. He took a few tentative steps across the landing, and poked his head cautiously into the room beyond. It appeared to be a kitchen, but one of the largest kitchens he had ever seen. There were three stovetops, with three ovens, two sinks - one of which was large enough for a horse - a walk-in cold room, tons of counter space, and a giant spit on the far end of the room that could effortlessly slow-roast a cow. From the ceiling hung racks of pots and pans, ladles, spoons, and the odd dishtowel. There was a selection of wickedly sharp butcher knives lined up on the far counter, and a rack for skinning dead animals sitting next to them.

All this, he took in with a single sweeping glance, but the key to the princess’s shackles was nowhere to be seen. His initial scan revealed nothing more dangerous than the pristine gleam of the countertops, so the knight entered, eyes darting about for any sign of the key, his body poised for the slightest hint of danger.

Even so, when the dragon swooped down from the ceiling, landing barely an arm’s length in front of him to letting loose a deafening roar, it took him a second to react, his hands automatically flying up to cover his ears. Quickly, he straightened, bravely facing the fearsome creature head-on, sword raised as he shouted, “Back! Back, foul beast!”

*WHAM!* The knight crumpled, his skull caved in under the tremendous force of a cast-iron frying pan.

“Ha!” the princess shouted triumphantly, frying pan in hand, as the knight bled out at her feet. “He’s MINE!” She had changed out of her shimmering gown into more practical trousers, belted to her slender frame, with her golden hair swept up out of her face.

“Not fair!” the dragon protested. “I almost had him! You snuck up on him while he was distracted! That’s *cheating!*”

The princess just snickered, bent over, snapped the neck of the unconscious knight, and began efficiently stripping off his armor. “You always provide such an excellent distraction. How could I resist?”

*Ketchup on the Side*

“I wanted to eat *prince au poivre* tonight,” the dragon sulked, watching the princess drag the body across the floor to the butcher station.

“Then you should’ve been quicker!” the princess said, grinning madly as she donned an apron. “I think I want *burgers*.” Carefully, she began to skin the dead knight, carving up and packing away the chunks of meat with expert precision.

“Hmmpf,” the dragon grumbled, curling up in a dignified heap in the middle of the kitchen floor. “Fine. Wake me when you need to get the fire going. And I want my ketchup on the side.”

*. . . as it turns out, they got along pretty well.*