

My Dragon's Name is Grief

A witch with control issues runs from her problems but must learn to confront them when an unexpected visitor throws her perfect day into chaos.

Every morning, Nyxie had to write intentions in her spellbook, or the world would end. The moment she awoke, hazy-eyed, still half-asleep, she trudged to her desk and opened her spellbook to a new page. She picked up her quill and wrote in impeccable calligraphy her intentions for the day. Calligraphy was not her only ritual. Nyxie had at least 12 more throughout the day she needed to follow in a precise manner: dust the potion bottles from top to bottom and then left to right on all five shelves, water the herb garden for three seconds per plant, count her scrolls four times to ensure they were safe and sound. It was only her and the forest, yet she needed to go through her list. Everything in her tiny cottage had a place to live and a schedule to follow. Neat. Tidy. Clutter-free. Alone. In control.

So one could imagine Nyxie's disdain when she checked her mailbox—a routine she only did to ensure her mailbox remained empty—and found a letter. Ordinarily, she would toss the letter in her compost bin to nourish her garden with pamphlets from potion peddlers for half-off elixirs, ads for hex insurance, and brochures for enchantment services. But this envelope wore her name with urgent and familiar penmanship. She stared at it while she chewed her already unevenly short nails. The letter now cluttered her kitchen table, and clutter would end the world.

She waved her hand, sending the envelope floating before her. She flicked her hand, and the envelope ripped open.

Nyxie, it's your mother—

Her hand trembled. Her breath fell shallow, and her heart raced with each inhale. She bit her nails harder as she read.

While I cannot understand why you left the minute your grandmother fell ill, I need to tell you that—

The roof ripped open. Wood collapsed onto the table, snapping it in half. Straw and debris confetti scattered about. Nyxie stared at the disaster unfolding before her—her kitchen now barely recognizable. The pile of rubble began to breathe, rising and falling rhythmically.

Emerging from the debris writhed a creature no bigger than a dog. As it wriggled free from the splintered wooden beams, Nyxie caught a glimpse of shimmering gradient scales of dusky lilac. The creature released a screeching noise and broke free from the wreckage. Its legs were short and stout like many newts Nyxie had thrown into her cauldron, but its tail, long and thin, thrashed around the kitchen, slamming clumsily into the sage green cabinets. Drawers popped from their openings. Utensils flew into the air and collapsed in a cacophonous orchestra. The creature craned its swan-like neck around the room, gathering its bearings. Two wings like those of a bat spread from its back, knocking over Nyxie's collection of mugs and introducing them to the cutlery on the floor. One wing folded awkwardly, bending in a direction different than its twin. Her intruder was a baby dragon unlike any she had seen before.

Nyxie grabbed a nearby broom and wielded it as a sword. Perhaps the dragon had an irrational fear of brooms.

The dragon did not happen to have an irrational fear of brooms. Rather, it hissed at Nyxie, sending her startled and stumbling into the wall behind her. The dragon noticed the letter still floating in the air between them. Before Nyxie could grab the letter, the dragon lunged forward, latching onto the paper then crashed through her kitchen door. It escaped into her garden.

Nyxie gave chase. Its four legs were too fast for Nyxie's two. Its claws clacked against the stone path like hard rain, and Nyxie's boots stomped not far behind. The two of them barreled through the garden like a storm. They ducked under tomato vine trellis arches and delicate paper lanterns strewn from persimmon trees. They weaved between planter boxes of squashes and pots of vibrant hydrangeas. Nyxie watched in horror as the dragon tore through her cucumbers and lettuce bushels, turning her quaint garden into the aftermath of a hurricane.

The dragon headed toward her garden shed. It nudged the door open and squeezed inside. Nyxie seized the opportunity to slam the door shut behind the monster. It screeched and slammed against the door, rattling the shed, but Nyxie held the door tenaciously. She locked it and wiped the sweat from her brow.

Nyxie spent the next few hours returning items to their rightful place, patching the roof with magic, and clearing rubble from her kitchen. Methodical. Clean. In control. But the missing letter loomed in her mind like the encroaching shadows from the forest, stretching before the setting sun. Nyxie thought back to dinners in her family home. The sunset was the supper bell for her family before she left. Now, many sunsets came and went, some often without supper since her grandmother fell ill. It wasn't quite dinner without Grandma at the table.

The dragon ceased attacking the door and let out tired groans that Nyxie could hear from the kitchen. Her grandmother raised her to never allow a visitor to go an evening without a meal, no matter how odd or unexpected that visitor may be. Nyxie harvested surviving vegetables from her garden. She chopped carrots and potatoes, tossing them into a boiling pot of water. In went sprigs of rosemary, thyme, garlic, and bay leaves. She added cuts of beef from the cellar, and soon,

the aromas filled the kitchen with a warm embrace. Suppers used to feel like this in Grandma's house. Nyxie ladled stew into two clay bowls and carried them over to the shed.

She unlocked the shed and stepped inside. The interior was dim, but she could see the lilac scales shimmering in the sparse slivers of light. The dragon backed into a corner and hissed. Putting the stew down, she slid the bowl to the dragon and sat across from it. She ate her stew first. The dragon cautiously approached the food, but caved and dug in.

"Are you hurt?"

Nyxie extended her hand toward the dragon's wing. It hissed again but relented under her touch. She conjured a healing spell, and the wing folded back into its normal position. While it ate, she looked around the shed for the letter, but no luck.

After their meal, Nyxie opened the shed door and stepped outside. She motioned to the forest. The dragon stared at her blankly.

"You can go now. I'm not stopping you."

But it refused to leave. Nyxie took a step toward the cottage. It took a step after her. It followed Nyxie inside the home and cozied up against her leg like a cat.

"Fine. You can stay for tonight. But you have to behave."

However, the next morning, the little monster did quite the opposite. As Nyxie groggily dragged herself to her desk, she reached for the calligraphy quill only to find it missing. Instead, her hand landed on a puddle of ink. If she couldn't write her intentions, the world would end. She bit her nails anxiously. She turned and found the dragon had the quill between its teeth, gnawing on it like a dog with a bone.

“Drop it!”

It clamped down on the quill and sprinted into the next room. Dragons were not known for being compliant. She relinquished a sigh and looked at the tattered spellbook. A sharp pain shot through her hand. Looking down, she realized she had chewed her thumbnail down to the nail bed. The other rituals—she could still do the other rituals.

Nyxie checked her mailbox. Empty. At least that was one good thing this morning. Her thoughts returned to the letter. Maybe she was better off not reading it. Maybe by not reading it, none of this was truly happening. Her grandmother wasn't sick, and Nyxie was still in control.

Nyxie returned inside and found the chewed-up quill waiting for her. Just dust the potion shelves, and everything would be alright. As she neared them, she found the dragon precariously slinking on the top shelf.

“How did you get up there?!”

It knocked over a bottle. Nyxie dove to catch it—and safe! But another came flying. She waved her hand, but the bottles were raining down too fast for her or her magic to stop. They hit the ground, shattering. Anger swirled in her like the potions spilling onto the ground. As the dragon leaped from the top shelf, she caught it and shook it in her hands.

“Look what you’ve done!”

The dragon shrank in fear, slipping out of her grasp and scurrying away.

“Wait,” Nyxie said, her tone steeped in remorse.

She searched for the dragon. She heard the rustling of papers from within her scroll chest. Lifting the lid, she found it holding a scroll in its mouth. She knelt in front of the chest, chin resting on the edge.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

She spoke softly and reached for the scroll, but the dragon clamped its maw harder. She stood and entered the kitchen. Nyxie fished bits of beef from the stew pot. She returned, offering the meat to the dragon.

“Please give it back,” she bargained.

It slowly released the scroll and took the beef. Then, it slithered away. Nyxie counted the scrolls and closed the chest. All accounted for. Clean. Orderly. In contr—Wait, where did it go?

Nyxie let out another exasperated sigh. From her bedroom, she heard clattering. Pushing open the door, she found the rascal rummaging under her bed—nose buried and its rear sticking out.

“What are you—”

It pulled out a framed picture of Nyxie’s grandmother. It was Nyxie’s favorite photo of her, but she had hidden it under the bed like she had locked the dragon in the shed—to avoid facing it. Nyxie’s eyes widened.

“Don’t touch that.”

It started to scurry away, but Nyxie was quicker this time, grabbing hold of the corner.

“Put that DOWN,” she commanded.

The dragon did as it always did when faced with resistance: latched on harder. Its teeth clamped down on the edge. The glass frame cracked under the pressure. Nyxie could no longer breathe. Everything had gone wrong, and she could not stop any of it. She let go of the photo.

“I can’t stop it...” She whispered. “I couldn’t stop any of it.”

Her hands found their way to her teeth as she bit her remaining nails. Nyxie collapsed to the ground and wept.

“Everything is out of control. The spellbook, the potions... If I did everything right, things would be okay. Grandma would be okay. But I can’t do it... I can’t do anything to make her better... She’s going to leave this earth, and I can’t stop it... I can’t control it...”

The dragon approached her. It nudged her hands away from her mouth and put the photo into her hands. Nyxie hugged the photo to her chest and sobbed harder.

This feeling—this was the world ending.

The dragon scampered away for a moment and returned with a crumbled paper in its mouth. It nudged the paper at Nyxie. It was the letter.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and sat up.

Nyxie, it’s your mother. While I cannot understand why you left the minute your grandmother fell ill, I need to tell you that she doesn’t have a lot of time left. She just wants to see you before her time comes. Please come home.

The dragon nuzzled Nyxie’s ink-stained hand. All the rituals, the routines, the control—none of them would stop her from feeling the weight of her grandmother’s loss crashing down on her. But...she could at least be by her grandmother’s side when it did.

Nyxie picked herself up. She pulled out the broomstick she once wielded against the dragon and stepped outside. She hopped on her broom, and the dragon spread its wings beside her. Together, they flew home.