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The Dragon's Daughter

By Lex N

Long ago, in a time untouched by men, there stood eight Dragons. One still stands today. Each was given a prophesy by a cruel trickster and each tried to escape it only to fall into their own demise. One still stands today. He has been known by many names as he has persisted through many languages. There are very few constants in the world, but one stood today before Aali. The Monarch as his most recent name. The name of Aali's father.

The man was larger than he should have been. His stature broad and the picture of masculinity. Or rather he modeled for the picture of masculinity. He didn't glance at Aali as he entered the room, nor should he with Aali being dead and all. Aali stood in the room anyway. This was not her usual stomping grounds, no Aali normally kept to Lari's room. Especially when it was still light in the day. It was hardly thieving time yet. But today she had come to witness something truly incredible. The Monarch would become human, just for a moment mind, but human nonetheless. The man walked awkwardly towards the bed where his daughter lay. She was still feverish from the operation, her body reassembled into one that fit. She rose slightly, her muscles straining to attention in a way no child should meet their parent. The Monarch waved her down. His muscled arms revealed from under the ancient style wrap he bore.

"You know it has been some time since I bore a daughter." The Monarch said, his voice calm and measured. Yet his words still pulled a smile from the girl's fragile body. The man paused slightly, a glimmer flashing in his eyes that Aali could have almost mistaken for affection. The display brought a soft grin to her lips. A small welling of tears collecting in her eyes. Lari would be next and the small gesture would mean the world to her as it did to the girl in front of her. Aali felt a deep excitement for her. The type of thing only an imaginary friend could feel.

"Long ago I was given immortality," The man spoke. Aali was taken aback slightly, The Monarch hardly spoke and when he did it was an order for more wine, more women and more everything. He never spoke about his origins. "The spirit told me that one day I would curse her, and I of course told it that I would never curse one who bestowed such a gift upon me." The creature was suddenly ancient again. His years showing behind the pensive air. "they told me that I would hunger and hunger until nothing could sate me. And in seeking that which I wanted so, I would meet my end." Aali's heart almost stopped, it was a rare occurrence when she was speechless. Unable to find the words even in her mind. The Monarch dying was something many spoke of. Like the sun going out and the tides turning away. Yet

the man who had barely said two words to zer now spoke of it himself? A chill ran down zer spine as ze stepped forward, his words almost lending credit to the phenomena themselves.

The Monarchs fist blurred slightly, a strange warping in the air as it jagged forward. His skin melding into a soft green scale and his arm shifting into a deformed talon. Aali screamed out but no one would hear. The girls magic flared up in a moment, a confused blare of light. But it was too slow. The claw ripped down to her flesh and gorged a red splatter from her. She barely whimpered as she went. The look of betrayal frozen across her face. The Monarchs arm returned to normal, nary a twitch of emotion on his face. He ran a stained hand across her cheek, dying her terror stricken features before he turned and left the room. Aali's heart thundered through zer chest. Zer eyes still darting across the room in a daze. The questions began to batter away at zer mind like a drum. Then zer mind turned back to the woman, her new body carved. Lari would be next. They had both been changed at the same time. The had come out together. Aali ripped zer eyes from the corpse and bolted from the room.

Their family lived in a sprawling complex of hundreds of buildings, each connected by their own walkways and separated by expansive and exotic gardens. For years Aali had made those grounds zer hunting grounds. Sneaking through kitchens and store rooms of every possession that had ever caught The Monarch's fancy. Always Aali had been quiet, even if ze was imaginary it was nice to pretend to go unseen, to pretend it was zer choice, but now ze thundered past walls of hedges and roaming creatures. Ze ran until the world almost swirled around, the pathways curving and shimmering in zer exhausted vision. Lari was easy to find, you could feel her pull from a room away, the soft comfort of her emotions on yours. Aali burst through the door, the splintering wood almost shattering under the force. Lari of course jumped, it was natural when a ghost popped up, she was remarkably more spritely than her sister and scrambled up against the back wall before eventually realising who had entered.

"We need to go." Aali blurted, half hoping that zer words and current panic would be enough to spur Lari to action.

"What's gotten into you?" Her voice calming as the initial panic flushed from her system. "You look like you've seen a ghost!" Aali would not find the time to appreciate the irony and instead rushed to the side of Lari's bed. Ze snatched her hand and tried to pull her out of bed, an incoherent spray of words and an exhausted panting did not make for a good argument. "Slow down for a moment will you," Lari said, her arm half dragged from the sheets. A small wave of calm pressed over Aali as Lari worked her magic, the pounding rhythm of zer heart stilling and zer breaths deepening.

"Dad... He's coming." Aali heaved out, zer chest on fire. The stealthy life of a thief did not prepare one thoroughly enough for a run like that.

"I know, He's at-"

"He killed her... You're next." Aali said, zer words stunted and short as ze tried to suck in more air.

"Why would he-"

"I don't know we need to go!"

"Stop interrupting-"

"Get changed!" Ze yelled finally, letting zer trembling body fall to the ground as ze confirmed Lari had started moving.

* * *

The night was brisk, a soft sea breeze drifting from the harbour and into the soft rolling hills the compound inhabited. Lari had stuffed herself into a long coat and a far too puffy dress that she had wrapped above her calfs to run.

"We shouldn't be out here." Lari protested, her anxiety seeping through her words.

"Who cares, what's the worst that could happen?" Aali snapped, the implication clear in zer words. They had made their way from the house and now pushed through a dense garden of impossibly tall flowers, each seemed to catch on Lari's impractical dress and slow them down further.

"I'm sure you were mistaken." Lari protested, but she couldn't hide much as her doubt filtered through their bond. "Maybe it's a prank?"

"Yes, the man who united the eastern continents is notoriously a jokester. Do you remember last year when he placed a whoopee cushion under an ambassador's chair?"

"Right right, I get it now shut up." Lari said, the annoyance in her voice either from Aali or the brambal lodged in one of her hems.

"He changed forms Lari. I won't let him take you too." Aali steeled zerself, trying desperately not to let Lari feel zer fear.

"What's the plan." Lari asked, her voice hushed slightly and almost hidden by the rustling of leaves.

"First we need to get out of the complex." Aali replied.

"And then?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're supposed to be the thief!" Lari exclaimed, a sudden fear rearing its head.

"Right, well, I've never stolen a princess before."

They pressed through the wooded garden. The children often encircled the main house in the center. The older children were permitted to be closer, their magics more under control and contained. The pair had passed three or four houses moving outwards towards the small harbour town that Aali aimed for. There was a small party raging on the horizon, its movements sounding from the small orchestra that would perform and the odd lights told Aali exactly who it would be. They were only a few houses from the edge where they could scale the wall and escape into the night. Suddenly Lari stilled, her arm reaching out to grab Aali's and pull zer from the edge of the forest. Lari pulled a finger to her mouth motioning for Aali to be quiet, which of course was foolish as ze was imaginary. Her reason revealed itself in a moment as a duo of guards wandered down the pathway. One swayed slightly and the other stood firm in a hushed conversation. They both stopped suddenly, a strange feeling of anxiety and fear obviously coming over the two as they entered Lari's influence. The two should have brushed it off, strange occurrences were common in the grounds and no one would be stupid enough to try stealing from Him. But at that moment a small bramble ripped through the fabric of Lari's ridiculous dress and flung backwards, a soft rustling of leaves drawing their attention and letting the sensation of anxiety increase tenfold. Aali could feel Lari's pulse bursting from her hand as the obviously drunk guard stumbled forward.

Aali strode from the bushes, making the guard jump backwards in fright. Ze adjusted zer fly and straightened zer back slightly to impose on the swaying man.

"Good evening Goodman." Aali said, a strong southern accent hitting zer throat where they pronounced every 'G' as if it were soft giving a desirable flow to their words.

"State your business!" The man roared, his confidence obviously shaken by the surprise and Lari's influence. The guard was looking for Aali, or more specifically someone hiding in the bush and so he could see zer. Ze basked in the attention for a moment, the man's eyes settling over zer form. It was a marvelous sensation which ze hoped could be felt by Lari.

"I was looking for a place to relive myself goodman, This place can be a maze I say." Ze said moving around the guard slightly and shifting their gaze from Lari's hiding spot. That small comfort may alleviate the fear from her and in turn the guards.

"You'll be coming from Kovic's party then?" The guard asked, a subtle squint in his eye as he tried the small test.

"Goodness no! I am here attending Hobart's soiree." Ze replied, trying zer upmost to be as highborn as... well as ze was. Ze felt some of the tension dissipate as the man calmed. Clothes aside ze made quite the noble impression, and it was dark enough the clothes hardly made a difference.

"You'll be wanting escorting back to the venue then?" The taller less inebriated man said, his diction far more refined than his colleague and well ze had almost forgotten about the man he was so quiet. But again Aali would not be swept up in the irony and put on zer fakest and noblest of smiles.

"Oh it is no need good soldiers," Ze said, a soft chuckle breaking out and a slight pat on the drunk guards arm. "I couldn't possibly take you away from your duties, besides I can see Hobart's little light show from here."

The orange torchlight didn't let Aali see the small blush that parsed the guards cheeks but ze was certain it was there.

"My liege with all due respect it is our duty to escort you." The taller man said.

"If they said they are okay, then they are okay! We have important business to be on." The shorter guard snapped, his head turning back to Aali with a slight smile. The two pushed forward, their footsteps hushing the taller man's protests. Finally Lari emerged from the bush with a deep grin on her lips.

"Who isn't a thief now." Aali whispered before moving forward and into another garden, basking in the slighting in the amusement Lari felt.

* * *

The fence would always be more of a suggestion to intruders. Its regal black steel curving upwards in thin jet spires with a sweeping thornlike pattern interlinking each spear. Its intricate nuance seemed to say 'you are about to rob The Monarch and that is an incredibly stupid plan.' The imposing aesthetic, however, did nothing to ward off escapees. Why would it? Who would try to leave.

The pair still stood a few kilometres from the town. Its lights hovering in the blackness of night like fireflies. Aali could barely catch the shimmering reflection of the town in the waters beyond, the harbour lit up in some festival. Ze pushed forward, hoping the tourists a fete could attract would be enough to hide two strangers from suspicion. Lari held a firm hand against zer sleeve her eyes fixed on the horizon, on the smattering of orange lights that held countless people.

"It's a celebration Lari, it will be happy. I promise." Aali whispered, zer eyes flashing back towards the manor. It loomed on the hill, gently raising towards the sky. The sky polluted with stars that flickered. The stars were flickering, Lords He knew. He was searching with his giant wings that blotted out the lights in a cruel sweep as he moved. Aali forced the fear from zer heart and pulled decisively on Lari's wrist transferring her grip into zer hand. The two kept low, the darkness would hide them from his eyes but the moment he was in range of Lari he would feel them.

They traveled quickly, Aali practically towing Lari across the gentle sloping of hills. Ze could feel her exhaustion but the princess made a good job of hiding it. Aali did not. The

hours of running and moving were getting to zer. They hadn't taken anything, nothing to eat or drink. No money. Ze could steal and scrimp but every second they stayed in the town would be danger. They needed to get out of The Monarch's reach or they would constantly be hiding. Constantly staying low in the hills, waiting for the talons to descend. They could bribe their way onto a ship or a caravan moving off from the festival but stealing wasn't a stable life. Anyone who met Lari would know what they were. They would realise she was touching their emotions. It would only take one, one to find the reward. Ze couldn't think about that. Ze forced the emotions from zer mind, the anxiety and fatigue. Ze had to focus on escaping The Monarch's grip, its own impossible task.

They were but a stone's throw away from the town when it began. Lari hunched over and yanked Aali to a stop. The end to the constant motion felt so good. Ze longed to fall down in the plush grass and sleep. Sleep for as long as it would have zer. But the night was ending. The dawn would find them, exposed in a mess of skirts and aching muscles.

"Come on, I'm tired too but-" Aali started zer words quivering in zer parched throat.

"It's not that," She muttered, her hand trembling slightly in Aali's "Its just, there's so many people."

"It's a celebration Lari, focus on the joy, the ecstasy, all the good things, the foreign delicacies, the wonderful decorations, the fresh sights." Ze urged, a soft pleading in zer voice. With a slow nudge ze managed to get her moving again, but each step became more laboured and forced. The adrenaline of the escape had long worn off leaving Aali frightened and tired.

They got so close to the town before Aali broke down, zer legs tumbling from underneath zer. There was a soft thud as ze fell into the pillowed grass around them, the blades inviting zer to comfort. Each breath felt like heaving out steam. The inside of zer throat scratched and parched. Ze could barely hear zer companion through the thundering sound of zer heart, the aching pain in zer side, the howling of each escaped pant.

"Please Aali, please it hurts." Ze heard the muffled scream that punctuated Lari's plea. But the world was swirling around, zer head felt light and heavy all at the same time. Ze couldn't tell if the world was still the night or if ze closed zer eyes, time slipped through zer fingers like sand. Ze could feel the soft glimmer of hope from within Lari, the almost desperate sensation of joy that tried to urge zer on. That fleeting light gave Aali breath, it gave zer life for just a moment more. Ze rose from the grass hesitantly and gingerly. Every facet of zer body screamed that ze should stay down, that ze should embrace the rest ze so desperately needed. But what did zer body know? it was imaginary afterall. A ghost. Nothing but a companion to Lari. So how could ze stay lying as zer friend suffered. Ze sat up in the springy soil and ze pressed zer head against Lari's. She had her eyes pulled shut, the tension turning her face into a scrunched mess of emotions.

"It hurts." She muttered.

"I know. Let me hold them for a moment." Aali said, a soft glow coming across zer body as ze pushed out every positive emotion ze had. All the joy in seeing Lari everyday, the wonderful sensation of being seen, time and time again by one ze loved so dearly. The knowledge that ze wasn't alone. It began as a trickle of people, A family holding one another. then a couple hiding secrets, the shame that held and the pain at the thought of hurting each other. It came faster, a stream of people, their negative emotions overpowering zer, each happy person drowned out by their insecurities and fear. The darkness kept falling, spewing from Lari like a geyser. Lari tried zer best to push past the pain and suffering. To avoid hearing the same notes echoed in zer emotions. But it was so difficult to find the surface in what felt like an ocean of bad. The deep loneliness of those surrounded, their emotions melding together and losing the faces behind them. The starvation, the desperation, the jealousy, the greed. All of it eclipsed everything ze could think. Ze clung on desperately to Lari, an anchor in the pitch black ocean. It felt an eternity. An eternity trapped with no

alternative. But ze was pulled from it as Lari released her grip, a soft smile spreading across her lips.

"Thank you." She whispered, the two of them still out of breath.

"Let's," Ze started, the fog finally lifting from zer mind. "Let's get moving, it's almost morning." Ze said, swaying slightly as ze raised to zer feet.

Then He arrived.

* * *

It had taken years for Lariette to figure out what was wrong with her. She knew what others did before they could tell her. She understood too much. As a child though her range had been small. She could find people in the next room, she could feel those a few metres away. Yet as she grew she began to quest out further. It was a wonderful exploration. She found her brothers across the entire complex. She found people with complicated lives, emotions that could rise and fall. She found pain but happiness too in the lives she explored. When she found the darkness she would push the other way, she could run from it, she could find the light to its darkness.

Then she met him. She felt him. The Monarch. Her father. His mind was unbearable, a horrible swirling mass of greed and loneliness, each feeding into the other. He longed for everything he couldn't have. A longing that had condensed over centuries of life, a life which for once she didn't want to explore. Once she felt him she ran, immediately pushing past the boundaries of her mind. She stretched her awareness farther than it would pull back. She couldn't run from the darkness anymore, the individuals lost to her, replaced by a dark mass of emotions.

She spent days in that everpresent feeling, absorbing hundreds upon hundreds of people, knowing their lives and the pain they all felt yet at the same time knowing so little about them, unable to find the happiness under the swell of sadness. Each time she felt it the joy was ripped away by two more unpleasant feelings. Each time she ate, she felt the hunger of a dozen who would go without. Each time she slept she felt the fatigue of more who would work through the night, of people who would lie on the cold street.

Then ze walked through. An unseen ball of loneliness and fear, yet one so desperate to be felt, so desperate to be open. Aali had spent years being ignored and deprived but ze still felt such elation when ze was noticed. the moment ze found her it flooded Lari with enough joy to drive away the darkness for a moment. A blessed moment where she could feel satisfied. Ze was her saviour, zer mischief and freedom an escape rope from the dark pit she had built for herself. Lariette gradually learned to recede again, to set up walls around her world and to hide from the pain it felt. Aali had saved her.

Now ze lay dead on the hillside.

He was truly horrifying in his full form. Scales washed across his back and pulled out into two wings which spread across the horizon. His right claw dripped softly with zer blood and a smile scored across his lips, fangs poking from behind. Lari held still. Whether out of fear, shock or loss she held paralyzed as the sun began to crest the bay. Its deep orange rays bathed them both in a harsh light. He transformed again, his skin returning to flesh and his wings receding into his back and wrapping around him in clothes.

"Well, my daughter. You gave me quite the fright." He snarled, his bare feet questing across the dewy grass. Lari couldn't reply. Her eyes stood fixed on Aali's corpse. Ze had rushed at the man and Lari had felt the fear. The sheer impassable fear... a fear ze had risen

above for her. A life ze had surrendered in vain. "If I'm honest I had forgotten about this one." He kept moving forward, his foot kicking zer body out of its way with an inhuman strength.

"Why?" Lari's voice was shaking, trembling in her throat. Tears welled in her eyes as the sunlight reached them. It's glare finally making her look away from Aali.

The Monarch smiled. A wide toothy grin. "Long ago I was given a gift. Life eternal. Power beyond my measure. In exchange she would take all I had and one day I would try to get it back and that would be the very thing to kill me." He stepped closer, his imposing form eclipsing the rising sun behind. "A wonderful trade. A pathetic life of squalor for the life of a god. But when I got home to tell my wife, to tell my daughter I found them gone. She had truly taken everything from me. The others were weak, they yearned for their old lives, Not I." He was so close his arms stretching out to grab Lari's shoulders. There was an almost human look in his eyes as he regarded her. "They all searched for pieces of their past, and they died in doing so. I long for her Lari. I long for them both, every night when I turn my eyes to sleep I see their faces. I see their faces after thousands of years as clear as I see yours now." He drew back one of his arms, and behind it Lari could see Aali again. Zer motionless body. His hand became a claw. A long black talon withdrawing from his skin. "A god cannot allow himself to be tempted."

Lari felt her mind pushing away. A desperation to escape as the pain came. But there was nowhere to run. She had ran and it had led Aali to death. She had hidden and it had led to misery. So instead she let her mind push out again. There were glimmers of happiness, a mother plucking a noisy child into her bed. A brother waking his brother to play. Then the darkness came. She felt an urchin on the street, the sun kissing his skin to raise him for the day of rejection. She found a wife, her arms cold as she held a husband she didn't love. She found a boy raising from a dream life he could never have. She felt her brothers surrounded by affluence and wealth, all so alone. She felt everyone's isolation. She felt their pain. She let her eyes open but her mind continued outwards, the emotions of a nation pooling inside. She turned her mind away from the pain inside, the pain of his hand ripping through her stomach and instead she quested further. She pulled the hunger, the anger, the fear and insecurities of a continent. She found them all. She had found their happiness, their pain, their sadness. Yet in the muddle of stories and confusion she found a common bedrock.

She saw squalor and hunger. Squalor and hunger that He could fix. Everyday thousands would sacrifice and scrape together what they could whilst He held more than they could imagine. She found the resignation in their minds. The soul crushing monotony some had to go through to simply survive. The people who worked to the bone for a silver of what He held. They were the lucky ones. There were those abused, those hurt and those feared as a distraction from his tyranny. He took and took and took for no other reason than his own greed. A greed which had lasted centuries.

She felt the life fade from her and found that she couldn't see Aali anymore. He had taken that from her. The rage seeped through her connections. Her mind a centerpoint for all of their grief. All the anger and resentment that he had caused. The conditions he had laid for his people. There an anger, an anger that surprised Lari. But she wasn't Lari anymore. They were all one for a glorious moment. Even then her mind grew, she found more emotions, more stories. Each person pushing from behind her.

Then she felt him, she felt his greed, his insanity, his complete avarice. He truly didn't care as he looked into her eyes. He didn't care as she forced the pain of others onto him. So she pushed forward. She drove her emotions into him, every single pinprick of pain he had caused. She made him feel the luxury he lived whilst he left others to rot. She pushed herself further. Countries encompassed in moments. Nations swallowed by a sudden awareness. She felt herself slipping away, a numbness spreading from her fingers and toes. But as she was

pulled back to the present, back to her own eyes she saw him falling away. He screamed and cried out as she pressed their very souls into his.

For a brief moment the world was whole and it engulfed the two of them.

* * *

There were four bodies on the hillside when Mattis came to investigate. Three lay in the grass, a very old man with his arms around a his children. Mattis couldn't quite place why but he knew they were dead at a glance. There was one he felt however Mattis could feel her wisdom, her sadness, her regret. he turned to shake the sleep from his mind, clearly it was playing tricks on him. But as he walked closer the feelings got stronger.

"Who are you?" He asked, his mind clouded by emotions that didn't feel quite his.

"An old friend of his." She whispered gesturing to the wrinkled corpse. "My silly experiment hardly should have gone on that long." She muttered before turning to face him and hold his gaze instead of the man's. "I am truly sorry."

Mattis opened his mouth to object as was polite but in that moment he was overcome by her sincerity. So he said nothing and simply accepted her apology. More came from the city, hundreds, thousands maybe. A sea of people rose from the hill to see the bodies. An inexplicable whim that had caught the whole town. Mattis felt them all before he saw them. A swell of emotions behind him. Some felt tired, or pained but Mattis found a sensation of companionship which echoed through the crowd.

"I doubt the world will ever be the same." The woman said, rising slightly in her posture before turning to leave. A confusion worked its way through the crowd as she left as her words spread through them. Shortly after the crowd worked their way to their homes, a common sense of joy moving around the group, each connected to the rest. That day no one went hungry, for they all shared the hunger. No one slept on stone, for they all shared the discomfort. No one felt alone, for they all shared.