

Prologue

She first stumbled across the nest while she was out walking. The ruined nest showed no signs of life; only strewn twigs, leaves, and eggshell shards remained. The shards themselves were worth a small fortune on their own, but what she found shortly after was far more valuable. As she gathered the scattered remains of the nest, a sharp sound echoed through the lifeless cavern. Her head snapped up as she ran from the cave. After several heart-pounding moments hiding in the thick surrounding underbrush, she moved to investigate the source of the sound, which had now faded to a soft rumble, more of a purr.

She approached the source of the sound carefully. As she grew closer, her skin began to crawl as she heard the ravenous sounds of tearing flesh and smacking jowls. Surely, some poor forest prey had fallen to a mountain lion or wolf. Every fiber of her being told her to flee, but her curiosity won over. She stood to peek over a bush, mouth agape at what she saw.

A forest green dragon was looking directly at her, lapping at its blood-soaked muzzle. She knew she should run, yet her feet remained frozen in place. The small dragon licked its muzzle as it continued to watch her. However, the beast showed no signs of aggression. In fact, the creature seemed more curious than anything.

Under any other situation, she may have laughed at the absurdity. Dragons in the wild were exceedingly elusive. Now, this true predator and a human were watching each other with relative interest as the dragon casually feasts upon its latest catch.

She finally felt herself regain control of her muscles, but as the time passed her curiosity only grew greater. Fear morphed into wonder when the creature showed no signs of aggression. In fact, if not for all of the blood and gore, the little dragon would have been almost cute. It looked quite young. However, she had no real frame of reference since this encounter was truly unprecedented in recent history. Any recorded encounters with dragons happened so long ago that they had, passed into legend.

A single, strange compulsion began to germinate deep inside her mind. Before her conscious mind could protest, she felt herself take a step forward. The dragon lifted its head to watch her approach but did nothing to stop her. Step after step she took, until she was nearly upon the scaled beast. The dragon protectively pulled the limp body of the fawn closer to itself. Without realizing, she reached forward to touch the beast. The young dragon scrutinized her with primal intent as her hand approached. It hesitantly moved its head closer to her hand.

When their flesh made contact, it was as if some cosmic signal was exchanged between them. The dragon began to purr and rub its muzzle into her touch. She should have been terrified or disgusted as the bloody snout of this apex predator soiled her palm, but she instead smiled, looking as content as the dragon for the affection.

Somehow, in a manner she had trouble comprehending or remembering, she convinced the dragon to follow her back to her home. The characteristically speculative and suspicious community was hesitant to accept the dragon. Not just was this reportedly intelligent creature a new face, but it was also a distinct threat. They had all heard the stories of dragons. Rarely in those stories did any humans remain. However, those were just stories. Perhaps reality could be different.

The community made a deal with her. She could keep the dragon there, but the beast either had to remain by her side or in her home at all times. She agreed, but the cost was great. For some time, she and the dragon were treated as outcasts. They were outsiders in their own village. Everyone avoided them either out of fear or disgust. This should have been a great torment to the two, but it instead only furthered their relationship.

After catching the small dragon relieving itself one day during one of their excursions, she discovered that her dragon was a male. She promptly named him accordingly.

"Aarnik," she called him, gently stroking his neck. The dragon looked up at her when she said the name, a glint in his brown eye. He approved; Aarnik approved.

"Aarnik," she repeated with a smile, tapping the dragon on the snout. He opened his muzzle in a draconic smile and let out two syllables sounding roughly like "ah." She laughed; he was trying to repeat his name.

What started with just two syllables slowly grew into a simple vocabulary. She hadn't even thought to try teaching Aarnik to speak. Now that he could, she felt foolish for not trying sooner. The more the dragon learned to speak, the more open the others became. Community members started to greet the two as they passed, laughing when Aarnik would warble out a response with a distinctly chipper tone. The two gradually were welcomed back fully into the fold as Aarnik grew more tame. The more human the dragon grew, the less bestial he seemed to the others. However, she made sure to never let Aarnik lose sight of his own nature. She wanted to civilize Aarnik, but she never wanted him to lose sight of what he was, his true nature.

Before too long, Aarnik was able to express himself as well as any young human child. The others would often talk to him to tap into his seemingly endless excitement, energy, and optimism. Aarnik spoke with a distinctly draconic accent caused by the limitations of his vocal anatomy, but those who understood him found it endearing.

Aarnik continued to grow into a fine young drake with his human comrades, his family. He would sometimes lay by the fireside, reflecting on his early memories as she stroked his neck lovingly. He could not remember much from his youth as a hatchling. Faint memories of his dragon family occasionally drifted through his mind. However, one prevailing thought always tainted his memories: loneliness. He could recount memories of his family, but there was a distinct point where those memories simply stopped. So many times, he would work himself up, trying to figure out what happened to his family. Did they leave him? Did he do something to upset them and make them leave?

A soft embrace and quiet "shush" would always help ease him from his distress. Neha always knew how to comfort him. She was everything to him: a mother, a sister, and a friend. She, an entirely different creature, was able to fill that hole left in his heart. Her community was now his new family. This family worked hard to ensure that Aarnik would develop into a fine young adult and a fine young drake. He would help where he could around the village. Aarnik was no farmer, but he tapped into his feral instinct to assist the hunters of the community. Together, they were able to guarantee that the village would never suffer for meat again. Aarnik proudly held his decorative title of "chief huntsman." The hunters even strung together a bone necklace as a symbol of Aarnik's title. The artisans of the village sniggered at the lousy and grotesque attempt at jewelry, but Aarnik wore it with pride. This imaginary title didn't really change anything, but it did make Aarnik feel like a valuable, wanted, and productive member of the community.

He was out on a hunting mission with one of his friends when he first noticed that something was off. What started as a few brief coughs earlier in the morning soon became a deep, dry cough. Concerned for his sick friend, Aarnik rushed him back to the village. A dark cloud of emotions descended upon the entire camp. Their healers did all they could, but nothing seemed to work. This was

something new, something that they did not have the resources to cure. That was assuming that it could even be cured.

Aarnik watched the community split as his friend's condition continued to worsen. Some wanted to go to find help and supplies from other communities; others refused to leave and wanted to remain isolated. Some wanted to quarantine the sick man; others wanted to visit and care for him. Regardless, it was too late. Their infirmary went from being nearly empty to being full within the month. Aarnik went to pay his friend one last visit just one day before the man became the first casualty.

Scared, Aarnik tried to keep his caretaker at home. Seemingly nowhere in the village was safe anymore. All over, people were showing signs of illness. Only Aarnik seemed to be immune from this new plague. The doctors theorized that this sickness did not affect dragons. Based on their limited contact tracing, he also did not seem to be a carrier. Because of this, Aarnik was more active than ever before. Between hunts, he would run supplies and information all over the camp. The remaining leaders in their community told everyone to stay home. With hope, perhaps at least some of their people would remain uninfected.

A small group defied the orders of the leaders. Aarnik caught them escaping one night in the darkness. They told him that they were going to find help. There was nothing more that could be done there, but they may be able to find help before this disease killed them all. He thought of Neha and of the loneliness he suffered before. Aarnik let them go.

Aarnik told the leaders the following day. Though the group went against their original orders. It was the last hope they had. Perhaps the thought of help coming would give the people the will that they needed to keep fighting. Aarnik continued pushing himself forward until one night it was just too much to bear. He just finished burying several bodies when he was signaled by the last remaining healthy doctor. There were several more fresh bodies to be summarily buried. At first, the community held group funerals. Now, there were so few

healthy people left that the dead were laid to rest alone with no ceremony nor celebration for the lives that were. Aarnik intended to assist the doctor that night, but he did not have the emotional capacity to do so. He promised the doctor that he would be there early the next morning and went home.

He laid and wept in her arms. Neha stayed with him all night. When he rose early the next morning to do his rounds, he heard her cough in her sleep. Aarnik lowered his head and left, hoping that it was just a coincidence. He found the doctor standing over yet another dead body, but this was one of the few deaths not caused by the disease. The elder woman had killed herself late the previous night. The doctor found her body during his morning rounds.

The more people who died, the more time Aarnik had with his thoughts. This once vibrant community was reduced to a quiet hallow of death and fear. The healthy dwindled down to just a handful of people. Every night when Aarnik went home, he watched Neha's condition worsen. He begged the doctor to give her special attention, even though they all knew that it wouldn't help. Aarnik was permitted to leave his duties and stay by her side, but it was too painful for them both. The last remaining villagers who could walk decided to gather together. There was no point in being apart. They might as well spend their last days together while they still could.

She died shortly after with Aarnik by her side the whole time. He was devastated, but he kept himself distracted by caring for the last of the villagers, the last remaining family that he had. The help they sent for earlier never came. One by one, the stragglers faded away until only that last doctor and Aarnik remained. Aarnik stayed with the doctor as his life faded away. With his remaining strength, the doctor encouraged Aarnik. He told the dragon did all that he could. It was a pleasure watching him grow into a young drake. Though they will be gone, the village shall live on through Aarnik. He must keep their memory alive.

Once the final body was buried, Aarnik collapsed into a knot of scales, tears, and despair. He laid there for hours weeping until his

eyes could yield no more tears. As the dawn rose, he surveyed his now desolate surroundings. A thriving village reduced to destitution. Aarnik forced himself to stand and return home. He was able to make it to his bed before his emotions overtook him once more. His draconic sense of smell could pick up her lingering scent. His eyes again grew wet as he curled up.

He was alone.

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