

## **Be a Dragon: Redefining the “Fairy Tale”**

Pragya Jamie Marich

Once upon a time, a feisty girl was born in a small kingdom. Nothing exciting ever happened there, and from as early as she could tell—probably age four—she never seemed to fit in. Her village, which was known for its yearly apple festival never felt like home to her—and the fact that she could barely stomach apples should have been an early sign!

In school, they told her stories, indoctrinated she and her classmates, with the land’s history and legends. Hundreds of years before there were these creature driven out of the kingdom. They were called dragons, and they supposedly did evil things like eat dogs and breathe fire and torture the pretty little princess up in her palace. Then one day, George W. Dragonslayer (later dubbed the Father of the Kingdom) drove the dragons out.

And he taught others to do the same.

And he planted apple trees in the fields to keep the dragons away.

The feisty girl was fascinated by the idea of breathing fire. She always felt as though she had a fire deep inside of her belly; she wondered if that’s what made her different than everyone else. She wondered how it would feel to just breathe the fire out of her? To blaze a trail for herself out of this godforsaken place where boys could only marry girls and you had to go to church every Sunday. In this place, girls could go to school but could never become as successful as the boys. The leaders were corrupt and everyone only seemed to think in numbers, not in colors.

The people in this godforsaken place seemed to really have some messed up ideas—she started to wonder if they got it wrong about dragons too? What if the dragons only seemed dangerous on the outside and held oceans of magic inside of them? Maybe she actually belonged to the dragons and got dropped here by mistake?

Life got painful for the feisty girl when she was in school—she even thought about cutting her own wrists when she was nine and piercing herself in the heart so that she could bleed and bleed and never have to live in this place again. There was, after all, no way out—unless she married nobly one day with a man who had the means to travel. But even that possibility was years away. And if the boys in her school were any indication of the marriage pool, she didn't particularly like any of them and they didn't seem to care much for her either.

When she was eleven, two of her friends from school showed her a book they found hidden in one of their basements about dragons. The feisty girl was mesmerized—the dragons were gorgeous creatures and the fire emanating from their lungs reminded her of that fire she'd always known to live deep inside of her. The friends who taught her about dragons also showed her it was possible for girls to kiss other girls and her feistiness loved that too! Even though her parents made her go to church every Sunday and she sometimes felt shameful about her underground activities, she wanted to learn more. She was hungry for it.

The feisty girl educated herself. She kept searching the underground for books to read about dragons, for paintings to study and old, hidden folk songs to sing. Every Sunday in church she would hear about dragons being evil yet she knew, deep down inside, that the dragons understood her better than her parents ever would. When the feisty girl moved to the upper school she started to feel a little better. She even met a new friend, the first boy who seemed to understand that she didn't really belong here. The boy was similarly awkward and when he kissed her and held her she felt things she had never felt before. That fire inside of her stirred up and grew large, so large that she grew afraid of it.

He loved her, but knew he couldn't keep her here where she didn't belong. He would always be her friend, and one day she trusted him enough to tell him about her fascination with

dragons. He affirmed her, concurred that the way her mind worked didn't quite mesh with the people in their home kingdom. He, however, was destined to stay and to protect it. And he knew that keeping her from flight was the least loving thing that he could do to his friend.

As the feisty girl became a young woman she continued to study in the underground and lead a double life. At one point, she felt so confused and felt so trapped, others introduced her to strong mead so that she could feel better for a while—and she did. Until it made her very ill. And then she thought if she could just settle down like other girls and get married, that would put all this dragon nonsense to rest. And she tried it.

Twice.

And it didn't work. Eventually she realized that her sweet friend was right all along. She would not have peace in this life until some way, somehow, she could meet a dragon.

After returning to the underground she found an old, gray mystic who offered to take her on a special journey one night to an area just over the hills where he had something to show her. She took great care to cover her tracks, telling her family that she was going over to the other side of the kingdom for a few days to care for a sick friend. They traveled through the apple fields on the land where it was flat, sneaking past the border knights. She was glad that the old gray mystic told her to wear good shoes and to bring water. The hills certainly were steep!

When dawn broke as they traveled down their last hill, they arrived at a cave. The gray mystic invited her in, assuring her that there was nothing to fear. The feisty girl was amazed by the stone formations on the wall and by all their radiant colors! The hair stood up on her neck for she knew that she was entering someplace special, sacred even.

They went a little farther into the cave and she saw him—a beautiful, splendid dragon! She startled slightly just because she had never seen a living creature so big. The dragon

examined her and then he smiled. With that smile, the old gray mystic said that it was okay, that the dragon wouldn't hurt her. She ran to him and nestled into that sweet spot between his belly and the insertion point of his wing. He reached his head down to gently knock against hers, just like a dog or a cat might. How could such a creature ever cause harm to a dog?

After she came to a place of rest the dragon draped her with his wing, covering her with the warmth of blanket that welcomed her home. She knew, without a doubt, that she could never return to the land of her birth. Not after experiencing this connection.

All day she and the old gray mystic explored the caves, playing with the baby dragons, and even stepping outside to take flight on the back of a smaller mother dragon.

It was freedom.

When the day ended, the old gray mystic said he must begin the journey back to their kingdom.

“You're allowed to stay,” he said.

“Why don't you stay with me?,” she pleaded, “You seem to belong here just as much as I do.”

“I have to go back,” he said, “To show others the way.”

And with that she cried in gratitude and wished him well for the journey.

The next day mother dragon took her on another ride, this time to a land far, far away where humankind, dragons, and other creatures lived together in peace.

“Surely this must be heaven,” the feisty girl thought, and she knew that if there was a home for her, this had to be it! And while she stayed for a while—learning how to ride on a dragon and to fly herself—studying the fine art of attuning her inner energy to dragon fire,

summoning its explosive powers to protect her. The dragon mothers, her new teachers, told her that she had other places to explore.

So the feisty girl kept traveling the universe on Daenerys, the somewhat unoriginal name she gave to her own dragon, honoring the first dragon queen who brought dragons back to life ages ago. In her travels, the feisty girl learned that her family and her kingdom had not been totally incorrect in their assessment of dragons. Hundreds of years ago, an old sorcerer turned a family of dragons into weapons using dark, evil magic. There weren't many of them, maybe six in the whole universe of dragons, and it was one of them who likely wreaked havoc on her kingdom. And they didn't know any better. They judged this entire magical race of creatures by the action of a vicious few. In the process, they kept the feisty girl from fulfilling her destiny.

One day, word spread through all the lands and kingdoms she frequented that turmoil was afoot. The feisty girl began working as a teacher, known for her ability to teach other refugees from kingdoms like hers how to ride and how to harness their own internal magic. She supported herself nicely this way and never once thought about returning home. Becoming acquainted with her fire and her flight made that impossible.

Sometimes she missed her dear friend, who now worked as a border knight, and of course she missed her sweet old gray mystic friend and others she had come to know in the underground. But she never missed them enough to think about returning, for by doing that, she risked losing her fire.

The turmoil that began about 18 months before had boiled over into an all-out war. The factions were kingdoms like the land of her birth—the dragon haters—versus those kingdoms that envisioned a more progressive future. As the war raged on she continued her work as a teacher and shepherd for refugees. One day, a general learned where she was born and became

aware of her skills with fire. He attempted recruiting her as a fire thrower. She could navigate the terrain around her native kingdom and set fire to it if battle required.

Although she was honored by the invitation, all she could see was her friend's face. Yes, he was a border knight and thus her enemy. Yet she could still feel the memory of his beautiful hands on her body. She thought of her dear old gray mystic and became concerned for his safety. And even though she couldn't stand her parents and her brother served as a monk in the high church that opposed dragon magic, she couldn't dream of setting fire to them. She had learned to use her fire to clear a path of obstacles that stood in her own way, but never to kill people with it. Certainly, not people she loved dearly...

Because they wanted the feisty girl to travel clandestinely and not in a uniform of any kind she devised a plan. She would take Daenerys and answer her order. She would leave Daenerys near the cave where she first met the dragons and travel on foot over the hills, sneaking into her kingdom dressed in their garb, trying to rescue as many as possible.

Over the next month she let her hair grow out to its natural color; it was hard to let the multiple colors go. She got accustomed to wearing the stifling, conservative dress of her homeland again. One of the other teachers showed her how to apply makeup to cover her tattoos. She moved through her days with nervous excitement, knowing damn well she would be defying orders, yet secure that Daenerys and her own internal magic would help everything turn out the way it was supposed to.

The day arrived for her to fly with Daenerys to the kingdom of her birth. Dressed in the garb she hated as a young woman, the feisty girl was diligent in savoring every moment of the flight, knowing that if things went wrong, she might never fly again. The air passed magically through her lungs and into her whole body.

Freedom.

She already felt the air get heavier and thicker to breathe as she approached the hills on the outskirts of her native land. There was lots of smog and smoke, suggesting that the other fire throwers had been there before her. Still, she remained committed to her plan.

She found the original cave where the old gray mystic first took her to meet the dragons. The cave looked long abandoned yet secure enough to shelter Daenerys for a few days. There was still a trickling little water fall in the cave that could serve as a water source to supplement the food supply she brought for her precious dragon. The feisty girl settled her in, sang her a song, and assured her that Mommy would be back. They knocked heads in that familiar way and the feisty girl set out on foot, walking through the night.

The smell of the smoke and char and burning bodies could not be missed. Sadly, it led her exactly where she needed to go, into the kingdom. When she reached the village at the edge of the kingdom where the old gray mystic lived, her first plan was to find him. He was not just a mystic, he was her savior, her sage, her guide. When she reached his village, it was barely recognizable. She saw no signs of human life and began to worry that if she did, she would look too clean and her clothes would look too new in comparison. She might blow her cover.

She arrived at the old gray mystic's house and it was burned, leveled to rubble.

"Fuck them," she said, "He was a friend."

She spent all afternoon searching the nooks and crannies and hiding places of his corner of the village and he was nowhere to be found. No one was. She eventually made her way back to the ruins of his house and decided to thumb through what was left. The secret passageway to his basement where they and the others used to meet could be opened. When she cleared away

some rubble to open the old storm-style door, she moved down the four steps below ground and was delighted to see that so many of his artifacts were still there.

With tears in her eyes she looked through the books, studied and reexamined the pictures with new zeal, in gratitude for all that he taught her and all that he gave her.

And then, like a bolt of lightning from the universe, the feisty girl froze in her tracks. A picture of her own grandmother, her mother's mother, was in one of the books, almost like a bookmark. She turned the picture over and all she saw was a simple, "Thank you."

How did her grandmother know the old gray mystic? She had died years before and would have been a few years older than him. Was it possible that she loved dragons too?

The feisty girl spent all afternoon until the sun went down in the early evening searching for more clues. She lost track of time and realized she had better move on, or stay there for the night.

Just as she was about to give up she noticed a binder protruding from an almost covered box. The lettering on the binder was unmistakably her grandfather's. It simply said, "Memories," like you might see on a photo album. With renewed energy, she opened the binder and began investigating. Scores of letters between her grandfather and the old gray mystic! Her grandfather had served with him in a long-ago war and they stayed friends afterwards. The tone of the letters seemed to suggest that they could have even loved each other in a more affectionate way than just friends might. Although dragons were never mentioned, at least not directly, it was clear that her grandfather had the magic too, at least in his youth. And that stray photo of her grandmother, what was that about? Did they both love all of this but were too afraid to ever go there with it?

Like a divine spark within her the feisty girl heard them, the voices of her ancestors: "Yes. Yes we loved them. And yes, we were afraid. We are with you now, go get your brother."

But she couldn't go at quite that moment. There was a fire storm starting up outside that she was expected, no doubt, to be a part of. All she could do was hunker down, wait it out, fiercely missing Daenerys and angry that the magic she loved so much was being used in this manner. As she waited for the fire storm to pass she thought about her brother, a holy monastic in the kingdom's church order, the church that opposed everything she was and everything in which she believed. Yet she always loved her little brother, and they quite looked alike, almost like they could be twins. She and her brother protected each other and made each other laugh when times were tough growing up, and she often conjectured that he possessed dragon magic too. But as a proper young man in their culture, becoming religious was one of the surest ways for it to be snuffed out.

When she was sure the storm had passed, she sifted through more rubble and took a lesser known route through another apple orchard to get to the church. Because of its sturdy, stone construction, it was largely intact. The feisty girl snuck around and began peeking in the windows, prepared with a cover that she was there to make a confession if she needed to use it.

Although she thought she was being stealth, another monastic snuck up behind her and started escorting her vigorously into the main church.

"I'm here to confess!" she protested.

"No you're not, you're one of them in disguise! Come with me you filthy whore."

Panicking, the feisty girl kept her breath moving and asked her internal fire to give her strength. Her fire certainly kept her awake.

When they reached the main sanctuary, which had been set up as a POW camp of sorts, the monastic was preparing to shove her in a pew.

"Wait!" she heard a familiar voice cry out.

It was him, her brother.

Older, rougher, and still her brother.

“I know this woman, she is here to confess,” he said.

The feisty girl smiled brightly. Magic and miracles are still alive!

With a straight face, he escorted her back to the sacristy. After he closed the door, they embraced quickly.

“What are you doing here?,” he snapped.

“Come with me,” she pleaded, “I have a plan and can get you out of here!”

“You forget yourself, woman,” he responded, “You’re my sister and I’m not going to give you up but get out of here now and don’t ever come back!”

“But—,” she tried.

“Go!,” he shoed.

And with that she snuck out the back, never to see him again. The church would fall during the next day of attacks.

It took her forever to cross the kingdom back to the main orchards leading her out, back to safety. She had left Daenerys too long already and had to get back to her. There was more fire storming during the day and it required lots of hiding and sneaking and careful maneuvering to make her way to the orchards. And she did, just before nightfall.

She heard a moan coming from underneath one of the trees and tried so hard not to be seen, moving around some other trees.

“Look who I found,” she heard, the voice unmistakable.

It was him, her friend the border knight. The first person in their kingdom to ever really see her all those years ago.

She made her way over to him, huddled and wounded underneath the tree. Sure, he was a border knight, but it was him. How could she not go?

“Look who you found?,” she said, “More like the other way around!”

She fell to the ground to check on him and like no time had passed at all they held each other, not a shred of animosity was there or any sign that they were enemies in the same war.

“I know you’re dressed like us but your face looks so different,” he said, cupping her face, running with tears, in his hands.

“Well, I’m kind of an old lady now,” she managed, laughing with joy through the crying.

“You’re incredible,” he said, “I figured you got out when I stopped seeing you around and I’m so happy you did. My feisty, brave woman.

Woman.

Yes, the feisty girl had become a woman at last. Not because of him, because she discovered her own magic.

“I love you, I still do,” she said.

“And I love you,” he answered, “That has never changed.”

They kissed—so simple, so pure. Everything about their love always had been. Obviously, because he had set her free.

“My darling,” she said, “I can get you out if you want—but I need you to trust me.”

Inside, she was horribly afraid that duty would bind him to go down with the ship. Duty had long defined him.

“But I’ll understand if you can’t go with me,” she said through tears.

“Those tears,” he said through boyish giggles, “I don’t ever want to make you cry again.”

“Oh shush,” she replied, “You know me, I’m a crier. And I’m sure you’ll make me cry again. My tears are a power source!”

“Oh they are,” he said before kissing her again and running his uninjured hand down her back. That touch. After twenty years, still pure electricity.

She cried some more, waiting for his answer, and he just took her all in.

“I want you to take me with you,” he said, “I don’t belong here anymore than you do. But I don’t think I can walk very far.”

She kissed him all over his face and ran her fingers over the creases, the lines on his adorable face.

“Do you think you can make it through the night and I can bring her to you?,” she asked.

“Who?,” he replied.

“Daenerys, my dragon.”

“You have a dragon!,” he said, beaming, “Of course you do.”

He smiled brightly and then winced. He was so wounded, she knew he couldn’t possible make it through the night. He couldn’t walk and although she was strong, carrying him would take triple the time and then Daenerys might not make it that long.

They just stared at each other, knowing their options and that they were neither numerous nor wonderful. So they just fell in to each other. Even though he was injured and out of strength, they made love. Finding a way, always finding a way.

They lay there under the apple tree and the smoke in the air from the last fire storming began to clear. The feisty woman was grateful for this one last night with him and he let herself feel his breath on her face.

He felt panic shudder through her body.

“I’m still here,” he teased, kissing her forehead.

Then, through another eerie silence she heard the familiar sound of flapping dragon wings, knowing that another firestorm was likely on its way.

Yet as the flapping got closer, she perked up.

Daenerys!

Daenerys had come for them!

“Wake up, sweetheart...it’s her! It’s *my* dragon!”

“Of course it is,” he said with a smile of complete faith in the feisty woman and the power of her magic.

She carefully lifted him on to Daenerys, who was quickly able to tell that he was a friend. The feisty woman maneuvered herself so she could hold him and guide her dragon’s flight and then off they went, flying toward the sunrise.

She wasn’t sure if this would be a happily ever after for who could ever really tell how any story would end? Perhaps her subversiveness would get found out and they would both die in a prison somewhere. She wasn’t sure. Her priority was to get her beloved to the care he needed. Fortunately, her gift was working with refugees and she was well-respected in those networks and villages and kingdoms.

When dawn arrived she would know more—yet her journey so far taught her that everything would shake out as it was intended to for the greater good...

For the larger purpose...

For the divine right to keep magic alive.