

THE SNOW DRAGON

by

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NOVELS BY WENDY L. KOENIG

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THE SNOW DRAGON

My name is Nalia. I was born in a little village just outside Minsk. Russian-born. My mother was a blue dragon shapeshifter, but my father is human. He is still alive. Of my siblings, there are no shapeshifters, they all took the human qualities. I am the only one who is a dragon. In my childhood, I was a violet, like my mother's father.

But I became a Snow Dragon.

I turned twelve on the third of May, 1922. We went to the city – as we called Minsk – for dinner in a real restaurant. It was a birthday present from my father's rich brother. My father's hope was the rich uncle would take a liking to me and keep me, alleviating by one the mouths my father had to feed.

My mother put her best dress on me, hemming and tucking it so to fit my child body. Her mind spoke directly to mine, coaching me in the proper way to behave, to show respect, and how to seduce a man. But I took a violent dislike to the man with ice cold hands and a deformed ear.

I mimed his effeminate speech patterns, flopped into my chair, knocked my elbows on the table, and brayed loudly at everything anyone said. I reached across other people's plates for food, chewed with my mouth open, and slurped from my glass. My crowning touch was a long, loud belch over dessert.

By the time we left, neither of my parents would speak to me. That was okay, though. At least I wouldn't have to stare at that ear the rest of my life.

The next day was unseasonably warm, especially for the beginning of May in Minsk. I chose a lightweight dress and came to breakfast to discover my father had already left to join my two eldest brothers working in the mill. My mother looked at me with sad eyes, but she said nothing. Not with her mouth, nor her mind.

I was suddenly angry, more than I ever had been before. I stormed out of our small cottage, not caring that it left my mother to care for the three smaller children by herself. It wasn't my fault there were so many to feed. I wasn't the one who was pregnant with yet another child. They'd made the decision to live in the country, where there was no money to pay hard workers what they were worth. I would have chosen to live in Minsk. How could they expect me to fix their mistakes?

By the time I reached the school, I was soaked in sweat, my fury adding heat to my fast pace. My friends all gathered around as I told them every juicy detail. They tsk-tsked with me and agreed that no one could expect me to be mistress to a man with a deformed ear.

It wasn't until halfway through the school day that I began to calm down. Sweat was still building on my skin; my dress nearly dripped from it. And I was sucking in cool air through my pursed lips. With a start, I realized it wasn't just my anger and indignation that was making me so warm. Something else was wrong.

I reported it to my teacher, who in turn sent a messenger to my mother, who then took me to see the doctor. He found nothing wrong with me other than my steadily climbing temperature. They put me in ice bath after ice bath, but in the end, he finally sent me to the hospital in Minsk. By then, my skin was bright red, and heat billowed from me. This is not normal. Not for any child. And not for a dragon shapeshifter.

Most of the people around us were normal humans. A few neighbors – those that were various other-bodied shapeshifters – knew of our alternate bodies but most didn't. And we needed it to stay that way.

The doctors in the Minsk hospital didn't even give me a bed, they just stuffed me into an ice

bath right away. I heard a soft hiss as I lowered into the water. Steam lifted from all around me. The ice melted quickly and was constantly refreshed. My pregnant mother sent a steady string of reassurances into my head.

The rich uncle arrived. I guess my mother had called him from the hospital phone. By that time, everyone who came near my heat broke into a sweat. He stared at me through narrowed eyes for a while, then pulled my mother into the hallway. They argued, but every time someone came near, they quieted until they were alone again. Mother kept her hand pressed to her throat, something she only did when upset.

It was then that the doctors decided I should be outside in the cool, evening air. So, I rose from the tub and walked down the hall, alone, soaking wet, and radiating heat like a blazing fire. Steam rose from my clothes. The doctors and my mother followed well behind. The uncle had disappeared. The rooms near where I had bathed no longer had any occupants. It seemed the temperature had gotten uncomfortable.

I never made it to the outside.

The paint on the hallway walls blistered, then smoked, and finally caught flame. I looked behind me to see the doctors and nurses drag my crying mother in the opposite direction as fast as they could.

A blinding shockwave ripped from my body, quieting my mother's voice in my head, leveling the walls and blowing off the roof. And then there was a shuddering silence. There were no screams. Nothing, but the thud of falling debris. Torn and burnt flesh lay everywhere, but which parts were my mother, I couldn't tell. The terrible heat within me was gone, disintegrated with that one exacting burst. I looked around. The whole hospital was rubble; not a single wall was left standing. Other nearby buildings had taken a horrible beating as well. Most would have to be rebuilt on the near side. A block away, I saw a man claw out from under a collapsed store corner. The rich uncle. Of course.

He slowly walked to where I clutched a piece of human that may or may not have been part of my mother. His eyes were piercing, speculative, and he took off his coat and draped it around my naked body. Held out his hand. I thought he wanted to take the flesh I held, but then he took my free hand in his and led me back up the same block to the store with the collapsed corner. He helped me into a car parked there – his, I guess – started it, and drove north out of town. He drove all night, always north, always silent.

I must have dozed, because I woke in the bright morning light, still clutching the roasted part of a person. We were in snow country now, and I saw we had been steadily climbing into the mountains.

I was numb. I kept thinking about how my mother had been there, and then there was that blinding flash, and suddenly my mother wasn't there. Her voice had been in my head, then suddenly not. As the car clattered higher in elevation, I wondered where that flash had come from. And why I was carrying a stinking piece of human body that might not even be my mother.

The rich uncle with the deformed ear was kind enough to stop when I asked, and I wrenched open the car door and tossed the human chunk to the side of the road. It landed with a wet 'splock'.

In that moment, something inside me broke. It could have been hope or innocence; I don't know and have never been able to figure it out. But whatever it was, it was a physical fracture, as surely as an egg breaking against a table. I honestly didn't know if I'd ever be whole again. I'd killed a lot of people, including my own mother.

My stomach heaved and I fell out of the car onto my knees, vomiting. When my belly was empty, I wiped my mouth and climbed back into the car. We drove on for another hour, maybe

two. Then the snow became too deep to go on, and my uncle parked the car right there in the middle of the road. We got out and he pointed up the steep slope to where the top of the mountain met the treeline and turned into a sheer cliff wall. There, in the shadows, was a cave. He told me there was a man who lived there who could help me. Then he got back in his car, jockeyed it back and forth until it was facing downhill again, and he left.

I watched until the car was a tiny black speck in the distance, surrounded by nothing but white, then I turned back toward the cave and saw movement. I squinted my eyes, willing my dragon sight to the surface. My gaze sharpened and I saw a man standing in the mouth of the cave, staring right back. He was very tall, black-haired, olive-skinned, and very handsome. Italian, I thought.

I trudged up the mountain, but soon got bogged down in the snow. And I was cold. Though I wore the rich uncle's coat, it was lightweight and made for a warm spring day, not glacial hiking. I stopped and turned to look in the direction the car had gone, suddenly hoping the uncle had changed his mind. But there was no car to be seen. With a sigh, I again looked at the man who now leaned against the mouth of the cave. If I wanted to get up there, I'd have to fly. And given I had no other real choice open to me, I reached for the dragon inside.

It was a wild thing, with a thrumming deep cadence for a heartbeat. I was flooded with the knowledge of all things natural, earthy, and untamed. As my senses sharpened, I saw farther past the man on the cliff into the depths of the cavern, smelled the fire from the belly of the earth, heard the wind whisper over the mountains. All the blood of my ancestors boiled in my veins. My coat split and sloughed away as my body grew wide, strong, and heavy.

This whole change from human to dragon or back took quite a long time. Probably close to an hour. Changing is painful, even more so when done quickly. So I usually took my time. I've been dragon plenty before – my mother taught me all things dragon when I was young – but it always affected me the same way. And it always felt like the first time. Still does.

I opened my maw and let loose a roar to tear thunder from the skies. Snow and rock shook loose from the nearby mountainsides and tore down onto the feeble human towns below.

I was supreme among all the shapeshifters. There were no creatures on Earth such as the dragons. I was a god.

I spread my wings, noting my scales seemed to be a bit off their normal brilliant violet hue, bunched my legs beneath me, and launched into the air. With wings the size of mine, it didn't take long to reach the cave. And, as I landed, the man there straightened and stepped back. He returned just as quickly, with a robe in his hands, which he tossed to land on the snow beside me. He turned right around again and headed into the depths of the earth.

I let myself fall back to the puniness of human. The weakness and sorrow of it weighed on me. I wanted to stay dragon always, to rise above the earth and the deaths I'd caused. Once I was able to fit the robe over my still shortening limbs, I climbed into the cave, where I found the man tending an open fire.

He motioned to a rock, which I assumed stood for a chair, and I sat. The man told me his name was Antonio Silvani, Tony for short. Asked me if I was hungry. At my nod, he then asked if I would eat some preserved meat or only fresh on the hoof. I blinked, though it was a fair question. My mother had always – my mother was dead. I paused over that. Why didn't I feel more?

Though I hadn't answered, Tony stood and fetched a haunch of something, ibex maybe. He threw it on the fire. Right on the ashes. He'd dealt with dragons before, that much was obvious. I watched him poke the meat into position with a stick. He was even more handsome up close than far away. I saw his nostrils flair, and belatedly I realized he was also a shapeshifter and could

smell my reaction to him.

I scowled and turned away. When I looked back, I saw he hadn't moved, but a sad frown creased his brow. I thought that must be what I looked like when thinking of my mother.

As if reading my mind he turned his ice-blue stare on me and asked if my mother was still alive. Was he telepathic, like dragons? Surely, if he was, he would have spoken to me that way. Ergo, he wasn't telepathic at all.

It took me a long time to answer him; I kept listening to the silence in my mind where my mother's voice had always been. Kept seeing the 'her there – big flash – her not there' scenario. Finally, I focused on him when he cleared his throat. I shook my head.

He stood and lifted the haunch from the fire. Inspected it. It was nicely charred and ashy, but had been in the fire such a short time, it would still be raw inside. Just the way a dragon liked it. He tossed it to me and told me to eat well because we had a long journey ahead of us. Then he moved to the wall of the cave and sat against the rock. He stretched his long legs, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes.

Between bites of ibex, I asked if he knew what it was that had happened to me. He just shrugged. Kept his eyes closed. When I asked where we were going, he told me we would be traveling west for a few days. Still with his eyes shut. Then he pointedly yawned and lapsed into silence.

I didn't want him to sleep; I wanted answers. I stood and moved over to sit beside him. He opened his eyes and raised his brows. I asked why he was there. He gave a deep sigh and closed his eyes again. Told me of how, centuries ago, there had been a great war among the shapeshifters. The griffins and their supporters on one side, the dragons and their allies on the other. He said that the war was over, but there was still a lot of hostility on both sides. That he and the other shapeshifters in my town were there to protect my mother and I. That my mother had stayed there because of my father. But now that she was gone, he had to move me for my protection.

But why west, I wanted to know. He shrugged and said it was just safer. Opened his eyes again and glared pointedly at the charred haunch in my hands. Asked me if I was going to finish it or if we could leave. Was there anyone I wanted to say goodbye to?

I shook my head, dropped the meat, and stood. My father, though a kind man, barely understood the ways of shapeshifters. I didn't want to see blame-filled eyes when I looked at him. Confusion would be worse, because I'd have to explain what I'd done, and I didn't want to talk about it.

Tony rose to his feet in one smooth move and led the way into the bright afternoon. Told me to change into the dragon, but not to take too long about it; he wanted to cover a lot of ground by nightfall. As proof of his words, his ears lengthened and small tufts of hair grew on either side of his face and chin.

I sharpened my gaze into that of the dragon, saw no one anywhere, and reached deep inside, loosing the beast. As if it were a separate individual held captive in my core, it lunged into me, turning my body into a living ember of pain. I'd never changed so quickly, and it felt as if my bones were splintered, stretched apart and burned back together again longer and thicker. My skin felt as if it tore into shreds from sharp raking claws. I cried out, but it sounded like my mouth was full of marbles, and I was speaking through a tube. It ended in a curling reptilian hiss.

Then the wildness of the dragon overtook me and made the pain seem worth it. I felt more alive, more vital than even just a few minutes before. I turned to where Tony had been and discovered a giant of a white and black Bengal Tiger. He looked at me with stinging blue eyes that seemed to laugh and mock at the same time. His snarl raised to a full spitting roar as if

daring me to top it.

I obliged.

The sound echoed from the mountains. More snow avalanched around us. I raised to my hind legs and opened my wings with a harsh snap.

The tiger sat and panted at me. He seemed pleased. But I wasn't. I hadn't imagined the change in my coloring earlier. My once rich violet scales were definitely paler. I could only assume it was an aftereffect of my earlier fever.

Tony turned his nose westward and raised his chin. He looked at me and chuffed. I had no idea what he wanted, but I thought he was asking something. It would have helped if he'd told me everything before he'd changed. I thought a moment. It would make sense if he was suggesting he ride on my back; it would be the faster way to travel. But again, how could I know? I decided to test my theory and lowered myself, stretching out one wing and wondering why he'd bothered to change into tiger at all if he was just going to ride.

With a great bounding stride, he sprang onto my wing, and then thudded onto my back, hooking his claws into the ridges between my wings. My scales were thickest there and none of his claws were long enough to pierce through to my tender skin beneath. He knew what he was doing, having obviously ridden a dragon before.

Dragons aren't high fliers like the hawk and eagle. Though we have massive wings, we have heavy bodies. We tend to fly through gaps in the mountains instead of over. Therefore, trips take longer for us than most winged creatures.

I rose into the air and headed west, skirting the mountain and following the treeline, the tiger clinging to my back. He hunkered low, using the width of my neck as a buffer from the sheering cold of the wind. It wasn't until I felt the tremors in his limbs that I understood why he'd shifted: cats had a higher body temperature than humans. That, and with the fur, meant he could withstand the frigid temperatures better as a tiger. But it was still too cold for Tony. I swooped lower, hugging the ground, not caring if we were seen. Eventually his shivers stopped.

We traveled for a few more hours, into the night. When I felt his shivers start again, I landed in a small clearing in a forest. Neither of us shifted back to human. In my case, because I didn't want to be naked in front of a man. In Tony's case, probably to help insulate from the cold of the night. He curled into a ball, tucked his nose under the tip of his tail, and seemed to fall asleep right away. On the other hand, I slept fitfully. I was still worried about what that blast was that had come from me. When I thought about my mother, a heavy numbness settled on me like an upside-down bowl.

We resumed our trek at dawn, and had traveled only an hour when Tony abruptly stood and growled. I looked over my wing at him, but he was staring at the field below where a herd of deer was frolicking. I immediately understood. My belly was empty too. I circled and soared lower, shadowing the backs of the creatures below. They bolted in a confused myriad of directions. I focused on an adult with no antlers, a doe, following her every move.

Tony sprang, all four legs spread wide, mouth gaping, and sword-sharp claws at the ready. He landed on her shoulders and neck, and the two of them bowled over. One deer would not be enough for the two of us. One was barely enough for a single dragon. I turned my attention to a young buck with tiny antlers but a big body. Swooping low over him, I snatched him up, tossed him in the air, caught his head with my mouth, and shook him until his neck broke.

I landed beside Tony with my breakfast. He still held his deer's throat in the vise of his jaws, his hind claws kicking and raking her belly. But her struggles had ceased. He ate it, snarling and tearing. Three large bites and mine was gone. I napped while the tiger finished his. When I woke, half the doe was gone, and he was busy licking his fur. Sometimes a cat really is just a cat.

We started off again. Now that the sun was up in the sky a bit, I could see my scales had not only paled more, but had also picked up a sickly yellow tone. What was wrong with me?

About midday, Tony chuffed and patted my back with his left paw. What did that mean? As soon as we were human again, I was going to have to have a serious talk with him about leaving directions with me before shifting. He chuffed again. Patted again. I gambled and angled to the left. Apparently that was what he wanted; there were no more obscure hints from him.

Toward sunset the temperature made a sudden drop. Fog rolled out of our mouths with every breath. I decided to stop for the night earlier than the day before; Tony shivered nonstop on my back, and I was tired from flying all day. There was no argument from the tiger.

We settled into our sleeping positions, both curled up tight with our noses tucked under our tail tips. I must have fallen asleep right away. Something startled me wide awake in the middle of the night. I heard a moan from the other side of our sleeping area. Then another. With every breath Tony took, he moaned. His whole body was in tremors from the cold.

Alarmed, I stretched my wing across the ground, hooked him with it, and pulled him toward me. He hissed and snarled, clawing to get free, but a dragon's wing is very heavy, and the scales on it are thick enough his claws couldn't penetrate. He didn't seem to realize I was just trying to keep him from freezing. Or maybe it was just his pride that kept him from easily accepting my help. I tucked the tiger, still struggling, into the cocooned heat of my underwing and held him in place until he relaxed and stopped shivering. Then I loosened the tight hold enough so he could lie comfortably.

I woke a couple times during the night to check on him, but he lay quiet, in the deep breaths of sleep. By morning, though, he was up and back on his side of the heavily frosted sleeping area, smoothing his ruffled fur with his tongue just like an insulted housecat. After I had a good backscratch on an icy tree, we were up and hunting breakfast again. Like the day before, we found a herd of animals. Unlike the day before, it was a farmer's cattle. We didn't stick around to eat our kills. Instead, I lifted them both and took us an hour further to eat. I felt a little guilty, but it didn't stop me from finishing off both carcasses.

We traveled three or four hours more, until Tony chuffed and patted my right wing. I turned north into the Polish mountains and began to climb the drafts above the slopes. We passed over a lake bordered on three sides by steep cliffs. A village was nestled on the far side of the lake, butted up against the rock. As we flew over, the tiger jumped up and down with both his front legs in the middle of my back. Assuming that meant to go down, I circled the wide center of the village. Tony roared and villagers came running out of their homes, some waving. We landed with a solid thump.

A tall woman approached with two robes. She wore her dark hair in a long braid down her back. Though she appeared young, there were lines that crowded her eyes, as if in sorrow. She carried herself ramrod straight, like she'd always had a heavy burden on her head. I didn't know her, but I'd seen her twice before, visiting my mother, while us children were sent outside to play. She handed one robe to Tony. Came to me with the other. I took it and backed away while shifting to human. I didn't want anyone to contract whatever illness I had.

She stayed stolid, arms crossed and watching me from where I'd left her. I changed more slowly than when last shifting to dragon, but still much quicker than my normal. I really didn't want to leave my animal form, but it was necessary. I gritted my teeth against the pain and shoved the dragon back into the depths. As soon as I could form words, I told her I was sick. She shrugged, said dragons didn't get sick, and turned away. Called over her shoulder for me to join her when I was finished. I glanced at Tony, but he carefully ignored me. Wounded pride and all, I guess. As soon as he could master his still tigerish arms through the sleeves of the robe, he left.

I didn't know what to do. Dragons didn't get sick. My mother had said that too. Yet, I had. I finished shifting back to human and slid into the robe, looking at all the buildings around me. Dragons adorned everything: doors, windows, signposts, even the robe I wore was embroidered with them.

Everyone who was in this village, who'd carved, painted, sculpted, or sewn these dragons could get sick because I was there. I stared down at my hands, seeing the killer inside me. I shouldn't have joined Tony in his cave; it was likely he would have carried the sickness into the midst of these dragonfolk already, even if he didn't get sick himself.

But, any damage was already done. And, like it or not, these people might have some answers for me. Though no one was around any longer, having followed Tony and the woman inside, I gave a single nod and squared my shoulders. Go in proud, my mother had always said, no matter what happens.

I walked toward the building the woman had gone into, noting it was backed right up against the rock face behind it. Entering, I saw it was a tavern with tables and chairs in the center of the room and a short bar along one wall, but it was empty of people. On the back wall there was a door left ajar. As I approached, I heard voices. Lots of them.

The door opened into a common storeroom with fully stocked shelves. The difference being the entire rear wall had been swung open, shelves and all, to expose a large cavern under the mountain filled with sixty or more people. There were a few dragons present as well. Tony and the woman stood in the center of the noisy group.

My tiger friend noticed me, said something to the woman, who turned and beckoned me to her. The crowd quieted. My feet didn't want to move and tied me heavily to the ground. It took great effort to even move slowly to the center of the room. I knew what she was going to ask, knew I'd have to confess my crime. I felt everyone's eyes following me, judging me before I even opened my mouth.

When I reached her, the woman wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close into a hug. Her breath was warm in my ear as she whispered a welcome. Then she held me at arm's length and looked deep in my eyes. Explained that Tony had already filled them all in on the trip and that my mother had died. She said she had been very fond of my mother and was very sorry to hear the news. Her voice choked. Tears dripped from her eyelashes.

Then she asked the question I'd been dreading. How did my mother die? My face burned, and I dropped my gaze. I couldn't look her in the eyes, this woman who'd loved my mother. It was so quiet in the cavern that my own breath was loud and echoing back at me from the walls. I wanted to die rather than tell all those people what I'd done. The burn of shame built within me.

I again looked at my hands as if they were the offending members who'd slain all those people. They were bright red. With a start, I realized it was happening again. I jerked my gaze up to the woman, saw her frown as she looked me head to toe. I glanced at the gathered people. Many had their mouths open in astonishment. All were staring. Tony watched me through squinted eyes, his arms crossed over his chest.

All these people. I couldn't let them die too. I turned and bolted back past the open shelving wall, through the storeroom and the tavern, and then to the outside. I ripped into the dragon, falling to my knees and nearly passing out from the wrenching pain that divided me. I gave a quick glance at the woman who'd followed – along with Tony and most of the assembly. Then I launched into the air, beating my pale, yellowed wings hard to get as far away as I could. There was no way I could climb high enough to pass over the mountains in time, so instead I headed over the lake, back the way I'd come. That's when the shockwave took me. I don't know if it was stronger because the emotions were stronger or because I was fighting it, but I lost

consciousness.

I woke hours later in the dark. I was stretched out on the rocky beach, my neck threaded between boulders. My hind end was in the lake. A large group of people were around me, many in robes. By this, I assumed I had fallen into the lake and several dragons had shifted to pull me out of the water. Tony was there, hunched on a rock, as man and fully dressed. Not much a tiger could do when rescuing a dragon, I guess. The woman with the braid, who'd been my mother's friend, was there, also in a robe. It pleased me she'd been part of the rescue party.

Then I remembered what I'd done to my own mother and wished they'd let me drown.

The woman spoke directly in my mind, as my mother had, and I snatched hungrily at her words. She told of a legend among the dragonkin. That this legend was a normal dragon who burned hotter than the rest. Who carried a fire naturally within, so needed no phosphorus. Legend was that these snow dragons were pure white and lived high in the mountains where the cold kept them comfortable. But no one currently alive had actually seen one. They hadn't believed snow dragons ever really existed.

Until now.

So, I wasn't sick; I was a snow dragon. It made me feel a bit better. Then, before I could stop myself, I telepathically confessed to the woman that I'd killed my mother. And a whole hospital full of people.

The woman placed a hand on either side of my wide snout, and laid her forehead against mine. There were no words, no thoughts. She just held me. My heart clutched within me, the first thing I'd felt since the accident in Minsk. Dragons can cry, and fat tears flooded my dragon's eyes and rolled down onto her hands.

We stayed like that a long time. Eventually, Tony changed boulders to sit beside me. He laid his hand on my neck. Didn't say anything. When every last tear had been spent, I shifted back to human at my normal Tony-infuriating pace. He left part way through, returned with a robe for me to slip into, and then disappeared again. The woman stayed though. She told me her name was Cecily. She said that with my addition, all the dragons were finally together.

We entered a home, and she led me to the bedroom where she reached into a wardrobe, removed a yellow chiffon dress, and handed it to me. She pulled out a green floral dress for herself, dropped her robe, and began to dress. I spotted a crown on the top shelf of the wardrobe before she shut the doors, and asked if she was the queen. She smiled. Gave a single nod and went right into the story of how, after warring with the griffins and their following for several hundred years, the old king dragon was killed in battle. Cecily became ruler and she immediately called an end to the war. But it would not end. Blood lust had fallen upon the shapeshifter world. In an effort to end hostilities, the dragons withdrew.

I interrupted to say that Tony told me a few individuals didn't go, like my mother, but remained hidden among the humans. The queen nodded and said the plan backfired; dragon supporters, not understanding what had happened, became crazed, believing the griffins had slain nearly every last dragon. They sought retribution and hunted out every griffin they could find.

And what happened to the griffins, I wanted to know. She sadly replied that they were all gone. None remained.

But, they might be in hiding as you are, I said. Cecily studied me a moment. Then turned away. Led me to the kitchen where I found a platter with five different kinds of nicely charred meats and sausages. There were potatoes cooked three different ways, and pickled red cabbage. The smell sent my stomach into a loud rolling growl. I'd never been fond of cabbage and avoided that bowl, but I loaded up a plate with the rest. While I ate, Cecily told me how they didn't allow anyone to eat as a dragon because of the drain on resources, though they did have an

extensive herd of cattle scattered around the mountains, as well as a large passel of hogs that lived on the lichens and various mushrooms found inside the caverns.

During the second plateful of schnitzel, bloodwurst, and kielbasa, the oldest man I'd ever seen shambled into the kitchen and sat at my table. He was escorted by a young couple, holding hands. The old man asked if I was the snow dragon he'd heard about. I nodded that I was, my mouth full of thick smoky sausage. Cecily told me that Pirien, the old man, lived mostly as dragon and only shifted to human to eat. She then introduced me to the couple. Turns out they were phoenixes, a queen and her mate. I nearly choked. Talk about legends!

A cook appeared from somewhere with another heavy platter, this time filled with raw cutlets of some kind, maybe pork. The old man smacked his lips and stabbed slice after slice onto his plate until it was as full as mine. The two phoenixes plucked chunks of roast pork from a plate dripping with gravy and thick with steam, not waiting for the cook to set it on the table. The female phoenix, Destante, a stunning redhead, saw me staring and said that she and Aniause only ate when Pirien ate. That had been several days ago.

For a little bit, the only sounds were those of utensils scraping across china. Eventually though, conversation began. It seemed the phoenixes were the guardians of the old dragon shifter, the oldest one alive, which was why he lived mostly as dragon. He had been in the court of the old dragon king before the war. I asked how the war began, and Pirien told the story of how Cecily's brother, Bartheleme, found a woman, a human, who could hear the dragons speak telepathically. That was nothing unusual; it sometimes happened. As with all the others, the woman was given a choice of whether to live among the dragons forever, thereby guarding the dragon's secret, or she would be put to death. She chose death; she was the first one who ever had. A griffin who was in love with her fought to rescue her. Somehow Bartheleme was killed and the two escaped.

The king, in a magnificent error, spread the rumor it had been a love triangle rather than admit that he was going to murder the woman over a secret. To kill a prince over a love affair? The fury of the dragons was consuming. They declared war. Now I thought I finally had the whole story. No wonder Tony hadn't wanted to talk about it. I felt a little bit guilty, even just *being* a dragon.

My appetite left me as quickly as it came and I struggled through the last of my schnitzel. Cecily must have noticed. She stood, said that since I was finished, I should follow her. I rose to my feet, took one step, and stopped. The cook had a tray piled high with honey cakes, and she was headed toward the table. I pivoted as she walked around me, my gaze always on the gooey nibblings. She set the plate smack in front of Pirien, whose eyes twinkled when he saw them. He claimed the biggest benefit of getting old was being fed what he wanted. He reached a papery hand toward the plate, snatched up a cake, and popped the whole thing in his mouth, honey oozing down his chin. He grinned, cheeks puffed and wrinkles smoothed into a plump roundness. I laughed right out loud at that. It was the first time since my nightmare began, and it made me feel I was going to be all right eventually.

I reached for a cake, but a wrinkled old hand slapped mine before I could grab one. I blinked and withdrew my attempt. Then it was Pirien's turn to laugh. He pointed at, what I'm sure, was my very astonished expression. Laughed harder. It infected me and I giggled. Soon everyone was laughing. Somewhere in the middle of all that merriment, the old man stood and crammed a cake in my mouth. Told me I need to laugh more; happiness healed everything.

I nodded. My mother had told me the same thing. I thought it must be a dragonism. When Cecily saw me turn toward her again, she pulled aside a tapestry and led me into a mountain entrance hidden behind. We traveled in a tunnel until we reached the giant cavern I'd run out of

earlier. This time, though, the place was nearly empty and silent, except for one sole person: Tony. He was sitting on a boulder, frowning, as was his penchant since I'd known him. He rose as we approached. Cecily motioned him back to his place and joined him. Since there were no other nearby boulders, nor any more room on the one they used, I stood.

Tony was needed in New York, it seemed. His face turned sour and he shook his head. He wouldn't go. Cecily took his hands in hers and told him no one else could help like he could. That a broken heart was no reason to stop being who he was. He sighed. Shook his head again, but it was in submission to the request. Slowly it changed into a nod.

Then it was my turn. Cecily asked me to travel to Colorado, leaving Tony in New York. I said I didn't know how to handle the heat strikes... waves... flashes... whatever they were. She shrugged. Said they didn't either; I'd have to learn on my own. What's in Colorado, I wanted to know.

She gave a secretive smile and told me it was a new beginning. I wanted to ask what was beginning, but then she nodded to the two of us, stood, and led the way outside. Tony changed into tiger at a fairly quick clip, but I refused to be bullied into such a thing and shifted at a somewhat lesser speed. Cecily and Tony both sat and waited, the dragon queen stroking the smooth fur on top of Tony's head.

When I finally finished shifting and was all dragon, with all the tumultuous excitement of it, Cecily stood and walked slowly around me. She said nothing, but nodded again. Tony chuffed. I craned my neck and looked at myself. I was pure white with tiny gold points on my scales. My tail looked like it had been dipped in gold and when I stretched my wings, nearly decapitating a statue, they were pure white with gold lacings throughout, like filigree. I thought I'd never seen anything so beautiful. I ducked my head, suddenly shy.

Cecily patted my long dragon neck. Told me that even though Tony could be singularly annoying, I was not allowed to dump him in the ocean. Tony softly growled, launched onto my back, and gripped my scales with his claws. I rose into the sky and set course for New York and whatever the future would bring.

THE END