

The Smallest Fire

A FABLE

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1

Nim was the smallest dragon in the Hollow, and the only one who had never breathed fire.

Every dusk the others gathered on the warm stones by the river and lit the dark with their breath. Great goutts of orange rolled up into the pines, and the moths came to dance in the light of it. Nim would open her mouth with the rest of them, and out would come a thin grey ribbon of smoke, and nothing more.

“It will come,” said her mother, who was patient and very large. “Fire finds its own season.”

But the seasons turned, and turned again, and still Nim’s fire did not come.

2

One morning, before the others woke, Nim climbed out of the Hollow and went to find her fire.

She walked north because the wind came from the north, and she thought her fire might be hiding somewhere upwind. She crossed the wide river on the backs of the sleeping stones. She passed under trees so old they had forgotten their own names.

By the reeds at the edge of the marsh she met a heron, standing on one leg and thinking.

“I am looking for my fire,” Nim told him. “Have you seen it?”

The heron considered her for a long while. “I have never seen a fire that was lost,” he said at last. “Only fires that were not yet lit. Go up. Cold things remember warmth best.” And he tucked his head beneath his wing and would say no more.

Up was the mountain, so Nim climbed it.

The pines gave way to bare rock, and the bare rock gave way to snow. The wind here had teeth. It bit through her wings and rattled the thin bones of her tail, and the higher she went the smaller and greyer she felt, until she was certain there was no fire in her at all — only smoke, and the memory of smoke.

Near the summit she could climb no farther. She curled into a hollow in the rock with the storm howling over her, and she thought: so this is where the smallest dragon stops.

4

In the hollow beside her, something moved.

It was a nestling — a small brown bird, blown from somewhere warmer and half frozen, its heart going like fast rain. Without thinking, Nim drew it close and folded her wings around it, the way her mother had once folded wings around her.

She did not think about fire. She thought only of keeping the small cold thing from growing colder. She breathed on it, slow and steady, hour upon hour, and somewhere in that long night the breath went warm, and then warmer, and then a light woke under her ribs that she had never felt before — not smoke, but a low and living gold.

When the storm broke at dawn, the nestling stirred and cheeped and shook itself dry against her side. And Nim, looking down, saw that she was glowing.

5

Nim came down the mountain with fire in her at last.

She did not roar it or fling it at the pines. She carried it the way you carry something you have only just been trusted with. The heron dipped his head as she passed the marsh. The old trees seemed to lean a little toward her warmth.

That dusk, when the dragons of the Hollow gathered on the warm stones and lit the dark, Nim opened her mouth with the rest of them — and out came a small, steady flame, no bigger than a cupped hand, but bright, and hers, and enough.

The moths came and danced in the light of it. And her mother, who was patient and very large, said nothing at all, but curled a little closer, and was warm.