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opening extract from

Deep Fear

written by

Debi Gliori

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In the Land of the Snoke Ween



'I don't know about this,' the dragon complained. 'Are you absolutely positive that we're in the Snow Queen's neighbourhood? It's just that it's sooo *cold*. I mean, why would anyone want to live here? Can't we just turn back? It must be nearly time for tea . . . someone'll notice we've gone . . .'

The little girl sighed and folded her arms in a fashion that indicated that her mind was made up, even if her companion was having second, third or even fourth thoughts. The dragon continued, undeterred.

'You know, I think you've magicked us into the middle of a *National Geographic* special Antarctic

issue rather than between the pages of one of your fairy tales . . .' The dragon slumped and added, 'Don't get me wrong, Small. I mean, you're a brilliant sorceress, but next time could you choose a warmer fairy tale? Like *The Princess and the Pea* with extra quilts or . . . um . . . er . . .'

Tapping one foot impatiently, Damp sighed even louder, forcing air down her nostrils like a disgruntled duchess who'd just been mistaken for a commoner.

'OK . . . OK . . .' Ffup threw up her forelegs in surrender. 'Don't *snort* like that, girl. You might . . . uh, accidentally . . . *you* know?'

'Make hot hot burny by nax dident?'

'Yeah. And since right now we're tiptoeing across a snow-bridge slung between two crevasses, more flames would be a very bad idea. Heck, *any* flames would be catastrophic.'

The little girl's eyes widened as the meaning of the dragon's words sank in, and she slipped her hand into Ffup's paw for safety. Underfoot, a glassy blade of pale blue ice stretched ahead, its glazed surface pitted in places by rock falls and avalanches from the surrounding mountains. This was a hostile place, scoured by vicious winds that made eyes water and plucked at clothes and skin with determined tugs; a bleak place with no trees, no grass and little colour, a land of ice and stone and sky that stretched all around.

This land was nothing like Damp had imagined it, back then. However, back then, Damp had been

pink and warm, fresh from her bath, wrapped in flannel pyjamas and curled up in bed in the nursery, her father's voice as warm as the flames that flickered and danced in the hearth. Back then, the land of ice and snow was just a story. Back then.

'My feet hurt,' the dragon moaned, the rhythmic *scrunch crunch* of her footsteps coming to an abrupt halt as she turned round to peer behind her, trying to gauge how far they'd travelled. 'It's this horrible snow,' she explained. 'It sort of gathers in freezing clumps in between my paw-pads, until eventually I'm walking on massive snowballs. It's making it hard to keep my balance. Harder, in fact.'

Wordlessly, Damp tugged Ffup behind her like a gigantic pull-along toy, ignoring the dragon's litany of complaint and forging ahead, seemingly unaware of the weight of wet snow caking her own body from the waist down or of the dizzying drop on either side of the snow-bridge.

'*And* it's soooooo cold,' Ffup whined. 'My nostrils are icing up, you know. Pretty soon I'll have to stop and try to clear them, though without using my nasal flame-throwers, I have no idea how I'm supposed to de-ice . . .'

Overhead, the highest mountain suddenly turned gold, reflecting the setting sun, which gilded its lethally steep western face. This brief exposure was enough to thaw a glistening finger of water-ice, which started trickling down the mountain, trailing small chips and flakes of loose rock behind it. As

these fragments fell, they began to snowball, gathering layers of soft snow about themselves, rolling silently towards the two figures, one large, one small, carefully picking their way across the snow-bridge to the relative safety of the glacier beyond.

'Can you hear a rumbling sound?' Ffup stopped, her golden eyes widening with the first prickle of fear.

'Nearly time for supper.' Damp smiled up at the dragon and reached out a mittened hand to pat the scales of the giant beast's belly. 'Shush, tummy. Not home yet.'

Now there was a faint vibration in the air, as if the blue of the sky fairly hummed and trembled above them. The insignificant rock fall had become an altogether more serious affair; the patter of tumbling pebbles triggering a vast slab of snow into shearing off a rock-face, and it was this that vibrated and rumbled as it plummeted towards the tiny figures on the edge of the glacier.

'That was *not* me or my tummy,' Ffup snapped, stung by this implied criticism of her digestive excesses. 'Why *is* it that you humans immediately assume that any bad smells, loud parps or distant rumblings are always the product of the nearest beast-gut? You lot are perfectly capable of producing some window-rattling, eye-watering little numbers yourselves. And don't go all huffy on me either . . .' Ffup dug Damp in the ribs with a playful talon, oblivious to the vast wave of snow towering above her back. '*You*, if I recall, were

still wearing night-time nappies until only recen—'

Spinning round, Ffup registered the oncoming death-wall of blurred white, and in the same instant, scooped Damp up between her forepaws, her wings snapping open to bear them both into the air, straining and heaving against the heavy suck of snow churning beneath her belly.

A cloud of spindrift boiled up, hiding both mountain and glacier from their sight as they flew up for what felt like for ever, gaining height, heading out of the deadly white snow chopping beneath them; devouring the bridge, obliterating their footprints and turning Damp's vision of the kingdom of the Snow Queen into something far more lethal than Hans Christian Andersen had conjured from words alone. Then the sun vanished behind a ridge and all at once the snow turned to blue. Beneath them lay a field of darkness, its features completely transformed by the avalanche. The tumbling slabs of snow slowed and juddered to a halt, a vast puff of powdered ice settling on the ground like a shawl. Now silence blanketed the glacier, and overhead the first cold stars began to appear in the sky. In the distance, a far-off cowbell chimed, and from a long way below came the sound of laughter echoing across the ice.

Damp shuddered, blinked and laid her head against Ffup's neck. Beneath them, hundreds of metres below, the glacier shivered and cracked open. The distant laughter stopped as if a switch had been thrown.

'Gerda?' came a thin cry from far below. Then the

bell. Insistent now, closer and louder, a vibrant summons at odds with the frozen world under Damp and the dragon.

'Gerda?' again, but this time tinged with something close to despair.

'Make it stop,' Ffup whispered. 'I hate this bit. Snow, ice, Gerda, Kay, the Snow Queen, all that eternity stuff ... eughhh. I just don't understand why humans feel they're obliged to wallow in such sad stories.'

'Not sad,' said Damp firmly. 'This story's got a nappy ending—'

'Damp?'

Damp's shoulders slumped. Uh-oh, she thought. Big sister alert. Not *now*. Not when I'm just getting the hang of this. Go *way*, Pandora.

'Damp! For God's sake. I've been going purple in the face from calling and calling and *calling* you. Eughhh, *children*. I'm *never* going to have any when I'm older.'

The sound of approaching footsteps galvanized Ffup into action. 'OK, OK. Let's go, let's get outta here. C'mon.' The dragon plucked Damp off her neck and flapped towards a huge white door which had appeared in the sky ahead of them. The door resembled a detached sail etched against the deep blue of the sky, luffing and flapping as if a strong wind were hitting it side-on. Ffup clung to one edge with her talons and began to poke Damp through the undulating whiteness into whatever lay beyond.

'Go,' she insisted. 'Out. Back. *Home*. You may be

the sorceress, but I'm your rear guard. You have to go first.'

'Damp. You *know* you're not supposed to play up here on your own. The attic's out of bounds to tots.'

At this, Damp's bottom lip popped out mutinously, but a stiff shove from Ffup reminded her that if she ever hoped to use her abilities as a baby magus to return to this kingdom of ice and snow, she had to cover her tracks. Scrabbling through the white door-sail, she fell heavily onto the floor of StregaSchloss's biggest room – a massive attic running the entire length of Damp's ancestral home. Ffup tumbled down behind her in a cloud of dust, her wings sending a rusty birdcage rolling across the attic floor until it came to rest against a slumped and silent set of bagpipes.

The attic trap door began to open, just as the white door to their ice kingdom began to shrink. When Damp's big sister Pandora climbed into the attic, the much-diminished white door fluttered down to the floor before squeezing itself between the well-read pages of the picture book from which it had come.

'*Look* at you,' Pandora groaned, catching sight of her little sister and clasping a hand to her forehead. 'What a *mess*. You're *soaking wet*. What on earth have you two been up to?'

Ffup peered intently at her talons, turning her paws this way and that, as if wondering whether a manicure might be in order.

'Ffup?' Pandora marched across the attic and halted in front of the dragon. Although she only

came up to the giant beast's nipples, she radiated such fierce determination that Ffup quailed before her, blinking rapidly and breathing through her mouth in frantic puffs.

'Stop avoiding eye-contact,' Pandora snapped. '*Look* at me.'

'Gosh,' the dragon squeaked, 'and don't you look *nice*. What's changed? Hair? Nope, don't tell me. You've taken your glasses off?'

'I don't *wear* glasses, as you well know.'

'Well, *some*thing's different,' Ffup insisted, edging towards the trap door, her golden eyes swivelling wildly as she tried to avoid being skewered by Pandora's steely glare. 'Oh, please, stop it. I *hate* it when you look at me like that. It makes me feel all hot ... and squirmy and ... and ... like I might need to go to the bathroom. Soon. You know, I'll wet the floor if you keep on looking at me like that. Really, I will.'

'Oh, for heaven's *sake*,' Pandora snorted. 'I came up here to tell you it's teatime, not to torture you. However, that doesn't change the fact that neither of you is supposed to *be* up here in the attic. Damp, you're too young, and Ffup, you' – the dragon flinched and attempted a winning smile – 'are too heavy.'

'HEAVY? Are you saying that I'm *fat*?' Ffup's voice rose an octave, leavened by outrage. 'I'm *so* not fat,' she continued, her voice wobbling with indignation. '*I* am "with dragon" actually. There are two of me standing in front of you, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'I could hardly fail to notice,' Pandora retorted. 'Even Mum isn't as baby-obsessed as you are, and *that's* saying something.'

'Your mother is expecting her fourth child, which is, you must admit, a bit of a non-event seeing as how she's done it all before, and before and before, whereas *I'm* only on my sec—'

'Whatever,' Pandora muttered. 'Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that the attic was, is and always will be out of bounds to smalls and beasts. Besides' – Pandora smiled as she pointed towards the open trap door – 'it's teatime and Dad's making pizzas . . .'

Ffup's expression softened and her eyes developed a faraway look. Pandora turned to leave, adding over her shoulder, 'And if you get a move on, you'll be able to select your own toppings.'

A loud rumbling rolling twang echoed round the attic, causing Damp to frown and stare at her own midriff. Ffup cleared her throat and scooped the little girl up in her forepaws.

'That, my small mountaineer, was no avalanche,' the dragon whispered, poking Damp's tummy and grinning. *'That* was a rumble a dragon might be proud of.'

From far off came the distant ringing of the dinner gong.

'Hungry,' muttered Damp, stating the blindingly obvious.