

Christmas with Dragons

Part II

The snowstorm eventually went away and with it the dark night. The bright Christmas sun began rising from behind the mountains, casting its rays upon the fresh blanket of snow that covered Dragon Valley. The snow sparkled in the sunlight as if it were welcoming Christmas day once again after a long, weary year. In the cave, James woke up. Mrs. Dragon was already wide awake, picking each candle off the Christmas tree, lighting them with her fire breath, and placing it back on the tree.

“Merry Christmas, James!” she said.

“Merry Christmas, Mom,” replied James. He looked at the tree. “Where did the Christmas tree come from?”

“Oh, I just got it from the woods. It was no trouble at all for me! After reading about it in the book you gave me, I thought decorating a tree was a lovely idea,” said Mrs. Dragon, lighting the last candle. “And there’s a present waiting for you underneath!” James looked and saw the sled. He pulled it out from under the tree. “I know it isn’t much, but I hope you like it at least a little bit! I just thought since the dragon-sized casserole dish is too big for Patrick’s oven, and I have enough already, you could at least ride in it as a sled,” said Mrs. Dragon. James was too busy studying the sled to answer. Mrs. Dragon thought he was disappointed. “I’m sorry, James. I know you were hoping for a nice present like all the other children get. I knew I should have done better,” said Mrs. Dragon regretfully.

“No, no, Mom! This is a great Christmas present! I can’t wait to try it out!” consoled James, and he gave Mrs. Dragon a hug to make her feel better. Mrs. Dragon felt relieved. So far, so good for her son’s first Christmas with her!

“Why don’t we go up to the Queen’s cave after breakfast? The other dragonesses will need me to start preparing the feast. Meanwhile, you can give your present to Keristone, and you two can go play!”

“Okay! That sounds fun!” said James.

After a breakfast of roasted sausage, Mrs. Dragon and James decided to walk to the Queen’s cave. It was the largest and deepest cave in the valley, and it’s where the Dragon Monarchs have lived for well over a million years. It was also the most beautiful. It was naturally adorned in crystals and rubies, which reflected the sun from the entrance, lighting up the palace. In the middle of it all, the ruby-red-scaled Dragon Queen laid majestically on her front, completing the scene. Princess Keristone sat beside her, holding a large diamond. It was her Christmas present and a royal heirloom. She was examining it.

“It’s very beautiful, but I don’t know what to do with it! Maybe I should get it broken up, and make it into a necklace?” Keristone said.

“Darling, you may never do such a thing. This is the King’s Diamond, and it has been in the possession of the Kings and Queens of the Dragons for thousands of years. You must keep it safe at all costs, and never altar it,” said the Dragon Queen. Keristone sighed.

“Yes, Mother.” She put the diamond down and began to think. All she ever got for Christmas were family heirlooms that she couldn’t do anything with. “It’s to preserve our heritage” and “you’re the future queen” were the reasons Keristone was given. Sure, it was cool to be the “keeper of the torch,” but sometimes, being the Dragon Princess was not what it’s cracked up to be. All other young fledglings got simple homemade toys, like kites made out of twigs and paper or sailboats carved out of logs. They

weren't worth nearly as much as the rubies and diamonds, but the other fledglings at least seemed to have fun with them. What's more, Keristone felt alienated from the other fledglings. No one saw her for her personality, but for her status. James, even though he wasn't a dragon, was the only creature her age she had any closeness to, so she was delighted when he and Mrs. Dragon walked through the cave entrance. She immediately got up from her place next to the Dragon Queen, ran up to James, and gave him a big hug.

"Merry Christmas, James!" she said. "It's so good to see you!"

"Merry Christmas, Keristone!" James said in reply. "I got you a present!"

"Ooh, what is it?" Keristone said, beaming with excitement.

"It's a stuffed horse!" said James.

Keristone looked confused. "A stuffed horse? Why did you kill a horse and stuff it? I don't want any horses to die, they're so beautiful!"

James laughed "No, no! A stuffed toy horse!" said James, and he revealed the plush toy.

Keristone's eyes lit up in pure delight.

"You got me a toy? No one has ever gotten me a toy before! And it's a horse, my favorite animal! Oh, James, you are so kind and thoughtful!" she said, and gave James a kiss on his face.

"Golly..." he said as he blushed. "I hope you have lots of fun playing with him! You can pretend he's a real horse, you can talk to him while you're lonely, and you can even cuddle with him when you go to sleep."

"I'll take him to bed every night, and hug him every time I feel lonely. Oh, James, this is the best Christmas ever!" she said as she hugged James again.

The Dragon Queen wasn't amused at her daughter's enthusiasm. "Now Keristone, that's enough now."

Mrs. Dragon was more friendly. "Why don't you two go out and play in the valley?"

James agreed. "Yeah, we can play with our presents together! I got a sled! Let's go!" And the two young friends ran out.

"I don't know why Keristone is so enthralled by a simple plaything but doesn't seem to care about priceless family heirlooms. It absolutely puzzles me!" the Dragon Queen remarked.

"I'm sure she appreciates those too, but she also needs time to be a fledgling and play. At her age, a toy brings her much more joy now than a ruby or a diamond,"

"Very well, Mrs. Dragon. Well, why don't you go help the other dragonesses prepare the feast?" said the Dragon Queen, trying to change the subject.

"Yes, your highness," said Mrs. Dragon, and she went into the kitchen section of the royal cave to start on the elk roast.

Meanwhile, James and Keristone were having a wonderful time. James was pulling his sled through the mountain woods. Keristone was walking right beside him.

"Are you having a good Christmas so far, James?" she asked.

"I suppose I am. Mrs. Dragon got a Christmas tree, and I got this sled. I gave her a Christmas Cookbook last night as an early present," James said.

"I can't wait to go sledding! I've never been before!" said Keristone.

"It's a lot of fun! I think you will really like it!" replied James. Soon, the duck and dragon came to a slope that was very steep and a few hundred yards long. "How does this look? It's a little steep, but I'm sure we could find a less intense one if you're too scared," said James.

“No way! This looks exciting!” said Keristone. James smiled. This is what he liked about Keristone, she was very fearless.

“Alright! Why don’t you get in the back of the sled first, since you’re bigger? I’ll sit in front,” instructed James. Keristone did what she was told, and James followed suit.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now we push through the snow until we start moving on our own! We’ll go pretty fast, so I’ll hold onto the rope, while you hold on to the side of the sled,” said James. Keristone and James pushed their sled, moving them a couple of feet through the snow. When they came to the start of the slope, the sled began to move. James grabbed the rope, and Keristone held tightly to the sled. It picked up speed and was soon rushing down the hill. The wind was rushing through Keristone’s hair.

“Whee! This is almost better than flying!” she screamed. When they came to the bottom, the sled hit a rock, catapulting the dragon and duck out of it. Landing in the fresh snow, they were able to laugh it off.

“So, what did you think?” James asked, brushing snow off his legs.

“That was so much fun! Not bad for an old casserole dish,” Keristone said. Then she had an idea. “Why don’t we have a race?”

“But Keristone, you don’t have a sled,” said James.

“That’s alright! Watch this!” Keristone began glowing, which is what happens when all dragons use their magic to shapeshift. Her feet turned orange and became webbed, not unlike James’ feet. Her scales turned into very short green feathers. Her clawed hands disappeared as they became long, thin wings. Her teeth began disappearing and her muzzle turned orange, becoming a beak. Finally, her stomach turned white. Keristone had turned into a penguin! “Last one up is a rotten penguin egg!” she said, and quickly began running back up the hill.

“Oh, you rascal!” said James, and started running after her.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dragon was preparing to cook the Christmas Feast with two other dragonesses, Ermyn and Wanda.

“Alright Daisy, the elk is ready to roast. Since you’re the best cook in Dragon Valley, we thought you should do the honors of lighting the fire,” said Ermyn.

“Aww, that’s very sweet,” Mrs. Dragon said. She bent over and breathed fire onto the logs under the roast, lighting them. Wanda came over and began slowly turning the rotisserie.

“Now, how do you want to cook the Christmas feast? The same way as last year?” said Ermyn.

“Well, actually, my son gave me a cookbook as a present, and I thought it had a few good ideas for new recipes!” she pulled the book out of the apron pocket. “Just look! Chestnut stuffing, candied yams, gravy, mashed potatoes, and all sorts of pies! There’s pumpkin, cherry, apple, coconut creme, you name it! All these would taste great with the turkey,” Mrs. Dragon said, showing them pictures and recipes from her book.

“Yams? Potatoes? Pies? Those sound like anthro foods,” Wanda said.

“Well, yeah, but I’m thinking that maybe we could change things up a little! Anthros aren’t all that bad, and I think we have a lot more in common than we realize,” replied Mrs. Dragon.

“Look, we know how much of an *anthrophile* you are, Daisy, but just because you like cooking anthro food doesn’t mean the rest of us dragons will like eating it,” said Ermyn.

“It’s my first Christmas with my son, and you two know he’s a duck. I just thought it would be nice for him to have a Christmas dinner that he’s more used to,” Mrs. Dragon started.

“Well, if your son is gonna be adopted by dragons, he’s gonna have to live like a dragon! There will be no anthro foods served tonight, period!”

“Very well, I’ll start cutting the beef,” said Mrs. Dragon. As Mrs. Dragon started cutting the beef to make steaks, she could overhear Wanda and Ermyn talking near the roasting elk.

“Daisy likes anthros a little too much. What have they ever done for us?” said Wanda, still turning the rotisserie crank.

“I agree. I don’t know why she is so obsessed with them! She eats anthro food, wears an anthro apron, even has an anthro for a son! If she wants to be an anthro so bad, maybe she should just turn into a duck just like that precious son of hers and live in Port Grindstone? That way they can both be happy and we won’t have to deal with their weird lifestyle.” Ermyn replied.

Hearing this made Mrs. Dragon’s heart sink in sadness. But then, a great flame of rage rose up inside her. Talking about her was one thing, but talking about her son like that? That made her blood literally boil. She marched over behind the two dragonesses and said in a monotone, angry voice: “*What* did you say about James and I?” Ermyn and Wanda turned around to see a seething Mrs. Dragon glaring down at them, with black smoke coming out of her nostrils. Black smoke is a telltale sign that you’ve made a dragon *very* mad.

“Um, n-nothing, Daisy. We were just saying that maybe living with anthros would be a b-better option for your son to g-grow up healthy,” said Ermyn, nervously smiling.

“What she means is that she thinks you should just turn into a duck and move away with James so the rest of us don’t have to mix with anthros,” said Wanda. Ermyn shot her an icy glare as if to say “Thanks, idiot” and Mrs. Dragon lost it.

“I’ll have you know that I am just as much of a dragon as either of you, and I have no desire of going anywhere! As for James, he may be an anthro, but he’s adapting to dragon culture just fine! This is the only place where he’s been truly happy, and he’s not going to lose that! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” yelled Mrs. Dragon.

“Y-yes ma’am,” said Ermyn.

“Now you go make an apple pie for Christmas dinner, or so help me!” Mrs. Dragon yelled again.

“But Daisy, I don’t know how to cook anthro food,” Ermyn started.

“The recipe’s in this book, so get to it!” said Mrs. Dragon, handing the book to Ermyn. Ermyn sighed and began to prepare the pie.

Back on the hill, James and Keristone the penguin were getting ready to have their race. “Ready, set, go!” James’ sled was no match for Keristone’s penguin form. She slid down the slope so fast and slick, by the time James was halfway down, she was at the bottom already. Soon, James made it to the foot.

“Aw, you win!” he said.

“That’s alright! Your sled is still fun to ride on,” said Keristone, “and you are so much fun to be with!”

“You’re such a flatterer, Keristone!” James laughed.

“No, Really!” Keristone said. “I’ve never had as much fun as I have with you before we met,” Keristone said. James listened in, he could tell she was serious. “No one else my age sees me for anything besides being the Dragon Princess. They never invite me to hang out with them, because they think I’m above it. And I love mother, but she’s not always the most understanding, plus she’s also busy a lot. Before I met you, Mrs. Dragon was the only other dragon I could really tell anything,” she explained.

“Yeah, I am pretty lucky to have her as a mom!” James remarked.

Keristone went on. “That’s why when she first took you to the Hot Springs, I knew I’d love to meet any child of hers, so I said hello! What was even better was that you were a duck, not a dragon. I knew you were different too, so we’d make a great team.”

“I remember that day! And I must say, you are one of the best friends I ever had too. And a great teacher for learning how to be a dragon!”

“Thanks. I think you are adapting to dragon life quite well,” Keristone said. She looked at the sun and noticed it was about to go down. “Speaking of being a dragon, we’d better fly back to my cave! The feast will start soon!”

“Right!” James said, as he started to transform into a dragon, while Keristone reverted into one. Then, they took off towards the Royal Cave.

When they landed, the cave was becoming crowded as all the dragons of the mountains began entering for the feast. James shapeshifted back into a duck, while Keristone remained in her default dragon form. They followed the dragons deeper into the cave until they came to a large dining room, lit up with torches, with a very long table. He and Keristone decided to sit next to each other. When all the dragons were seated, The Dragon Queen, who was at the head of the table, gave a speech.

“All Dragons of Wetren, I thank you for attending our annual Christmas Feast. As you know, this is a very longstanding tradition for us dragons. It is my honor and pleasure to host this tradition once again. On my behalf, Merry Christmas, and let the feasting commence!” Soon, Mrs. Dragon came out of the kitchen carrying the large roasted elk, along with Wanda and Ermyn, carrying the various hams, turkeys, steaks, and sausages. The dragons began helping themselves, eating the meat with their hands. Since James wasn’t used to eating this way, it made him a little uncomfortable. Keristone noticed this.

“What’s the matter, James?” she said between chews of her turkey leg. James didn’t want to offend anyone. So he reached for some elk.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just used to silverware, that’s all!”

“Haha! You’re in Dragon Country now, James!” said Keristone. James smiled and took a bite.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Dragon spotted James while she was just finishing serving everyone, and noticed his discomfort. She came up to him.

“Oh, I’m sorry! I should have told you we don’t have a traditional Christmas dinner as you anthros have! I’m sorry about this,” she said.

“No, no, it’s fine. It’s not what I was expecting, but it tastes alright. Don’t worry about it,” he replied. Mrs. Dragon thought he was just being polite.

“Well, guess what! I had a surprise from your cookbook specially made! That’s nice, isn’t it? You’re getting something you wanted after all!” said Mrs. Dragon. She eyeballed Ermyn, who was sitting across the table. A panicked look came on her face as if to say “Oh no, I totally forgot!” She ran back into the kitchen and a minute later came out with the apple pie, burned to a crisp. Smoke was coming out of the top, and Mrs. Dragon facepalmed at Ermyn and continued talking.

“It’s just a little burned, but I’m sure it’ll taste delicious! Here, why don’t you and Keristone try some?” She cut two slices out of the pie and gave them to James and Keristone, who both took a bite.

Keristone was the first to speak out. “This pie tastes like charcoal!” She meant well, but Keristone doesn’t always have a filter when she speaks. However, James’ comment hurt Mrs. Dragon even more.

“Yeah, no offense, but it doesn’t taste very good. I bet it would if you took it out sooner,” he said.

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry.” Mrs. Dragon said melancholily. “I have to finish up some things in the kitchen,” she said, and she trudged back to the kitchen, her head hanging in defeat. Mrs. Dragon thought she had ruined Christmas for James. She felt so ashamed of herself that she couldn’t enjoy the festivities anymore, so unbeknownst to James, she was really looking for a place to be alone.

As the feast was winding down and dragons were beginning to feel full, Keristone began to feel excited. “Oh, I forgot to tell you! This year, I’m lighting the Christmas bonfire!”

“Really?” said James.

“Yeah! It’s a high honor, and this year is the first time Mother is letting me do it! Oh, this will be so much fun! I love the Christmas bonfire! We dance and sing around it long into the night, sometimes until dawn!” she said, grinning with excitement.

“Sounds like a blast!” James said. He then looked at one of the turkeys, now practically a skeleton with all the meat off of it. He took the wishbone.

“Hey Keristone, this is a wishbone! We each make a wish and pull it apart. Whoever gets the longest part has their wish granted!”

“Ooh, that sound’s fun! Let’s do it!” Keristone said. The duck and dragon both gripped the bone with their pinkies and made a wish in their heads. James wished for his feathers to grow back so he could fly in his duck form. Keristone wished for a wonderful spring in the coming year, filled with green trees, baby animals, and flowers. They pulled the bone, and Keristone got the longer half.

“Yay! I wished for-” she started.

“Don’t tell me, it won’t come true!” James said.

“Oh, sorry. Let’s go to the bonfire! It should be starting soon!” Keristone said. James agreed, and they both left.

Keristone and James eventually flew to the southernmost mountain on the valley border. It wasn’t the tallest mountain, but it had the best view of the island outside the Draconian Mountains, and a wide, flat summit, perfect for gathering on. In the center was a large pile of wood, about 30 feet tall. The sky seemed to be dotted with trillions of stars, surrounding a full winter moon that cast its light upon the snow. Soon, the mountaintop became crowded as dragons from around the mountains began to land on it. When it seemed as though everyone had gathered, The Dragon Queen got up on a large rock that acted as a pedestal.

“Dragons of Wetren, welcome to our annual Christmas bonfire! This is the most important part of Christmas for us. We are gathered upon this mountain to light a fire to shine through the cold darkness, to signify our draconic presence to every beast in the land. This is a centuries-old tradition, and this year, my daughter, Princess Keristone, has the honor to light our traditional bonfire!” Everyone cheered as Keristone stepped up to the pedestal. She took a deep breath, and breathed her most powerful gust of fire onto the woodpile. It instantly lit up, and all the dragons cheered again, this time even louder. “Now, let the bonfire commence!” the queen declared. The dragons circled the bonfire, and started dancing around it. Keristone flew back down to where James was, and she grabbed his hands.

“Dance with me, James!” she said happily. She pulled James into the ring of dragons, and they sang, spun, and kicked around the bonfire. It was a very radiant scene, everyone was enjoying themselves. Everyone, that is, until James noticed someone was missing.

“Where’s mom?” he asked.

“I don’t know, she usually loves the bonfire!” Keristone said. Then James remembered the pie.

“Oh, no! I must have hurt her feelings when I didn’t like the apple pie! Come to think of it, she seemed really concerned about making Christmas happy for me. She felt bad about giving me the sled and not something new, and she even went out and got a Christmas tree when I was sleeping last night! The pie incident must have made her feel awful,” he said. James knew what he had to do. He shapeshifted into a dragon. “Keristone, I’m gonna go find her and patch things up. You stay here, I’ll try not to be gone for long,” James said and flew off into the night.

“Okay,” Keristone said sadly. She understood what James needed to do, but she was sad her friend had to leave her.

James didn’t have to search for long. Mrs. Dragon was laying on the highest cliff, overlooking the valley and the fields and towns beyond it. This was called Sky Garden Cliff, because in the spring and summer, it grew the most beautiful grass and flowers and even had a small pool, which was frozen now. As Mrs. Dragon watched the bonfire flicker, she sobbed. “I ruined the one day James looks forward to. It’s all my fault. How was he supposed to know we celebrate Christmas differently? I should have known,” she sobbed. Mrs. Dragon went on. “Maybe Ermyn and Wanda are right. Maybe a dragon is not fit to raise a duck after all. I can never be an anthro mother to him, no matter how hard I try.”

Just then, James flew up. This time, he landed well instead of a clumsy crash. He turned back into a duck and began stroking his mother. “Why are you crying?” Mrs. Dragon looked up at who was talking, and when she saw who it was, she sobbed even harder.

“James, I am so sorry! I ruined your Christmas! You were expecting a lot of new presents, as well as a Christmas dinner with plenty of good food like in the cookbook! And you deserved it since you’ve never had any of that before, but I couldn’t give it to you!” cried Mrs. Dragon.

“But mom, this was my best Christmas ever!” James soothed.

“Really?” said Mrs. Dragon.

“Yeah! The sled you made is better than anything I got at the orphanage, and it goes really fast! And the Christmas dinner, while not anything I was used to, actually tasted pretty good! But best of all, this was the first Christmas I ever spent with people who loved me. There is no one who I’d rather spend it with than you and Keristone,” explained James.

“Do you really mean it?” Mrs. Dragon said, calming down a bit.

“Of course! Do you know how cool it is to have a dragon for a mom? All the other kids who get adopted have to live in normal houses and go to school. Sure, they may get nicer toys for Christmas, but I bet their mothers can’t breathe fire, or give them rides on their backs, or teach them how to turn into other animals,” James said.

“Aww, how sweet! I guess being a dragon is pretty ‘cool,’ as you say it,” Mrs. Dragon said, smiling.

“Yeah, sorry if the cookbook stressed you out. I thought it would just have some fun recipes, but I kept the exchange slip,” said James.

“No, no. You don’t have to take it back! In fact, I like the idea of bringing a tree inside and decorating it. I think we should keep that tradition going next year!” said Mrs. Dragon, with her sadness gone completely.

“Okay. Well, Patrick Pelican told me not to expect an Old Fashioned Anthro Christmas, so I was prepared. You did a good job, mom,” James reassured.

“Oh, Patrick Pelican! I almost forgot!” Mrs. Dragon said, alarmed. She sat up and reached into her apron pocket, pulling out the blue-and-green wrapped present. “This is his gift for you! He said it would be nice for you to have something you always wanted, after years of getting next to nothing. Go ahead and open it!” She placed the package in front of James, and he tore open the paper. An expression of pure delight came on his face.

“The HO-Scale Denver and Rio Grande F7 special? With a Plastictown station and signal bridge? Oh, this is what I’ve always wanted!” James said, and he hugged Mrs. Dragon.

“Don’t thank me, thank Patrick!” she said, “He says that since we don’t have electricity in our cave, you can set it up there and are free to play with it whenever you’d like to.”

“This truly is the happiest Christmas ever. Now let’s go to the bonfire!” James said, handing the boxed train set back to Mrs. Dragon.

“Alright!” Mrs. Dragon heartily agreed. She put the set back in her apron pocket, and James mounted on her back. They flew back down to the bonfire, where Keristone was happy to reunite with them. They danced and sang until the early hours of the morning, and they all agreed it was a very merry Christmas.