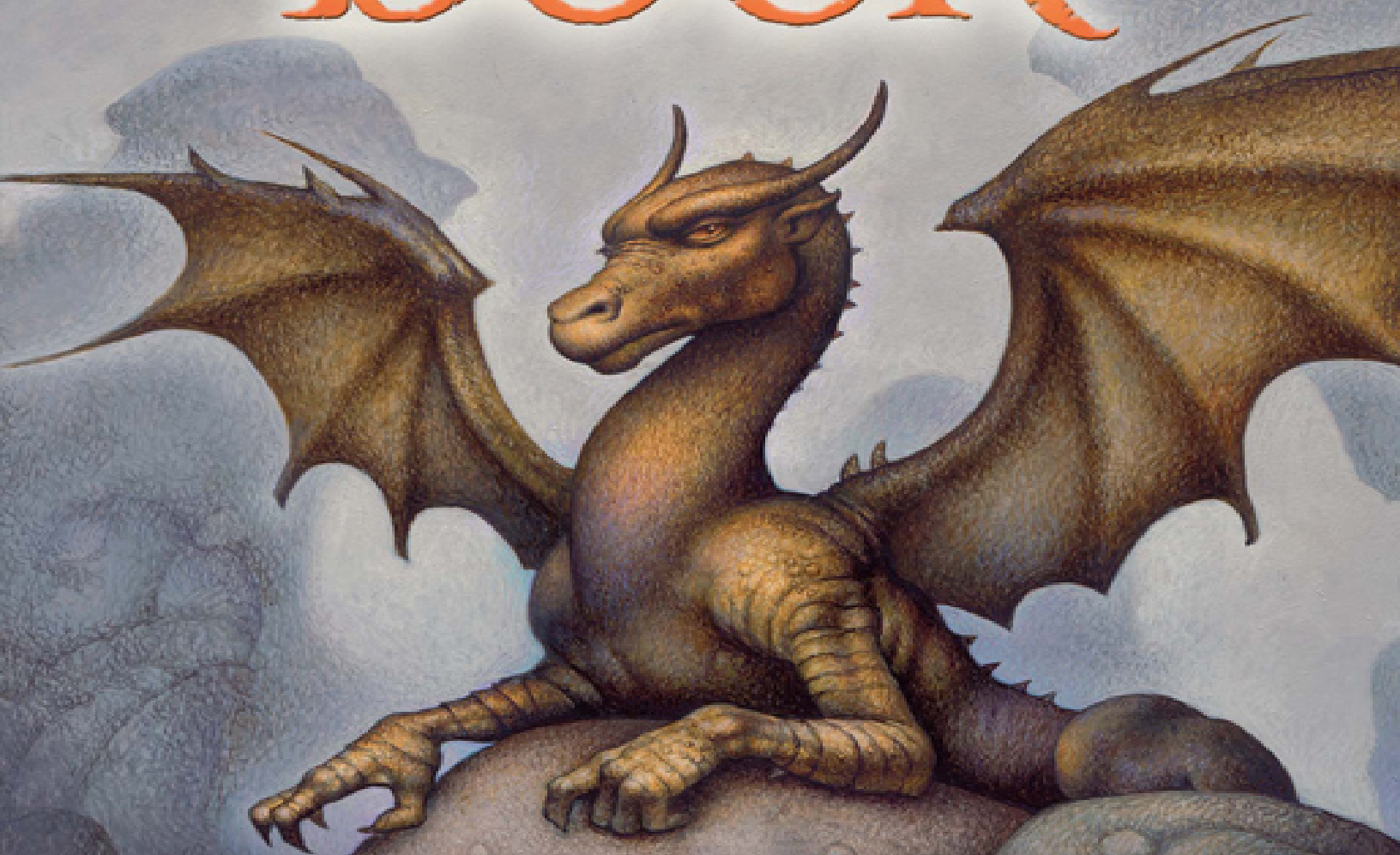


Magical New Stories from the Masters of Modern Fantasy

# THE DRAGON BOOK



GARTH NIX, JONATHAN STROUD,  
GREGORY MAGUIRE, DIANA WYNNE JONES,  
TAD WILLIAMS, TAMORA PIERCE AND OTHERS  
EDITED BY JACK DANN AND GARDNER DOZOIS

# THE DRAGON BOOK

EDITED BY  
**Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois**

ANDERSEN PRESS

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# CONTENTS

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**[Preface](#)** ୧୫

BY JACK DANN AND GARDNER DOZOIS

**[Dragon's Deep](#)** ୧୫

BY CECELIA HOLLAND

**[Vici](#)** ୧୫

BY NAOMI NOVIK

**[Bob Choi's Last Job](#)** ୧୫

BY JONATHAN STROUD

**[Are You Afflicted with \*Dragons\*?](#)** ୧୫

BY KAGE BAKER

**[The Tsar's Dragons](#)** ୧୫

BY JANE YOLEN AND ADAM STEMPEL

**[The Dragon of Direfell](#)** ୧୫

BY LIZ WILLIAMS

**[Oakland Dragon Blues](#)** ୧୫

BY PETER S. BEAGLE

**Humane Killer**



BY DIANA GABALDON AND SAMUEL SYKES

**Stop!**



BY GARTH NIX

**Ungentle Fire**



BY SEAN WILLIAMS

**A Stark and Wormy Knight**



BY TAD WILLIAMS

**None So Blind**



BY HARRY TURTLEDOVE

**JoBoy**



BY DIANA WYNNE JONES

**Puzzle**



BY GREGORY MAGUIRE

**After the Third Kiss**



BY BRUCE COVILLE

**The War That Winter Is**



BY TANITH LEE

**The Dragon's Tale**



BY TAMORA PIERCE

**Dragon Storm**



BY MARY ROSENBLUM

**The Dragaman's Bride**



BY ANDY DUNCAN

# Preface

Dragons are by far the most potent and widespread of all mythological beasts, and dragons or dragonlike creatures appear in just about every mythology in the world. So omnipresent is the image of the dragon, and so powerful the emotions that it evokes, that Carl Sagan, among others, has suggested that dragons are actually a racial memory of dinosaurs, left over from the days when our remote ancestors were tiny, tree-dwelling insectivores who cowered in shivering terror whenever one of the immense flesh eaters like *Tyrannosaurus rex* came crashing through the forest.

Whatever the truth of that, it's certainly true that dragons are one of the few mythological creatures that it's almost pointless to bother describing. As Avram Davidson once put it, "Although the wombat is real and the dragon is not, nobody knows what a wombat looks like and everyone knows what a dragon looks like."

There are variations, of course—sometimes the dragon is wingless and rather like a gigantic worm, sometimes like a huge snake, most often like an immense, winged lizard. Sometimes it breathes fire, sometimes not. But, for the most part, the rule holds. With very few exceptions, almost everyone does know what a dragon looks like, which is why it is one of the master-symbols of fantasy. (Or perhaps it's the other way around.)



Although the Eastern Dragon (and particularly the Chinese Dragon) is usually depicted as a wise and benevolent creature, a divine being associated with the bringing of the life-giving rains, what we have been describing here primarily fits the Western Dragon . . . and, not surprisingly, it is the Western Dragon, the terrible fire-breathing dragon of folklore and fairy tales, that has been the dominant image of the dragon in Western literature and art, and which is the kind of dragon we'll encounter most frequently in the stories that follow (although there are a number of benign dragons included as well, just for spice, some in the role of teacher or protector, some who are morally neutral or ambiguous, some who are just friendly).

In addition to its well-known fondness for snacking on princesses, the Western Dragon is a covetous beast and can often be found guarding the immense treasures of gold and jewels that it has pillaged from human realms. Although sometimes portrayed as merely a huge, mindless beast, the dragon is just as often depicted as having the gift of speech: in this guise, it is frequently a sorcerer, an active magic-user itself as well as being a magical creature. In fact, some say that Dragon Magic is the strongest and most ancient magic of all . . .

The strength of that magic, and the sheer power to enchant and fascinate that the dragon still possesses, even in our busy modern world, is amply demonstrated in the pages of the stories that follow.

We asked some of the very best modern fantasists—Cecelia Holland, Naomi Novik, Jonathan Stroud, Kage Baker, Jane Yolen, Adam Stemple, Liz Williams, Peter S. Beagle, Diana Gabaldon, Samuel Sykes, Garth Nix, Sean Williams, Tad Williams, Harry Turtledove, Diana Wynne Jones, Gregory Maguire, Bruce Coville, Tanith Lee, Tamora Pierce, Mary Rosenblum, and Andy Duncan—to write stories about this potent fantasy archetype, the dragon.

The book you hold in your hands is the result. Here you'll find dragons both ancient and newly hatched; dragons evil and rapacious and wise and benign; dragons hunted to the death by humans and dragons who count humans as their closest friends; ensorcelled dragons and dragons with vast magical powers of their own; dragons who coexist with our own modern world, prowling its busy streets and alleys, and dragons who pace the landscapes of ancient Rome, tsarist Russia, medieval Europe, darkest Africa, and a few fantasy worlds that exist only in the imagination. You'll even find a few stories told from the *dragon's* point of view, giving their own unique perspective on things.

We hope you enjoy them.



# Dragon's Deep

CECELIA HOLLAND

*Cecelia Holland is one of the world's most highly acclaimed and respected historical novelists, ranked by many alongside other giants in that field such as Mary Renault and Larry McMurry. Over the span of her forty-year career, she's written almost thirty historical novels, including The Firedrake, Rakóssy, Two Ravens, Ghost on the Steppe, The Death of Attila, Hammer for Princes, The King's Road, Pillar of the Sky, The Lords of Vaumartin, Pacific Street, The Sea Beggars, The Earl, The Kings in Winter, The Belt of Gold, and more than a dozen others. She also wrote the well-known science fiction novel Floating Worlds, which was nominated for a Locus Award in 1975, and of late has been working on a series of fantasy novels, including The Soul Thief, The Witches' Kitchen, and The Serpent Dreamer. Her most recent novel is The High City, and upcoming is The Kings of the North, the last of the Soul Thief books.*

*Here she tells the poignant story of a woman ripped from her proper place who must learn to survive under difficult conditions, yearning all the while for home—only to rediscover the old wisdom that says that you can't go home again. Or that maybe you're better off if you don't.*

ONCE. in the fishing village of Saint Mary Under The Hill, in the duchy of Asturias, there lived a girl named Perla. One summer day, she sat outside with her sister, packing dried fish into casks, to feed them through the winter, and her sister began giving her advice.

"You're a fool not to marry Ercule, Perla. Heed me. We're not rich, you aren't that pretty, and you're too clever. Take Ercule. Who else wants you?"

Perla set her teeth together, her face rough with embarrassment, and watched her hands shoving dried fish into the salt. Her sister had married the biggest lout in the village and already had two babies; Perla thought she wanted company, and some hot words to that effect sizzled in her throat. She glanced up, ready to snap back, and saw her sister looking past her toward the road, her mouth falling open in astonishment.

"Sweet Heaven!" Her sister sprang up and ran through the little circle of huts toward the beach, waving her arms to the men along the shore. Left behind, Perla straightened slowly to her feet, her eyes on the glittering parade of horsemen prancing down the road toward her.

One galloped forward, waving a stick. "Down! Down, you little fool, for the Duke!"

She went to her knees, gaping up at them. There were half a hundred mounted men, but the first few were the ones she stared at. They wore mail, with long coats over them figured in gold and silver thread, spurs on their steel-covered feet, their horses sleek and fine. The one in the middle wore a gold circlet over his helmet. The one with the stick hit her across the shoulders.

"Down!"

"I *am* down," she cried, and doubled up, her arms over her head.

"*All* of you, down," the crier shouted, and she heard voices behind her and knew that the rest of the village had gathered, and she was glad not to be alone. Another of the knights began to shout, talking the way the priest did when he recited something he had by memory.

"You people of the fish and the sea! People of the village you call for the Holy Mother of God! This is to inform you that His Highness the Duke has discovered that you are the best fishermen in his country. This village has taken in more fish in the past years than any other."

There went up an uncertain cheer. The bull-throated voice went on. "Therefore, the Duke has decided that henceforth you will give him double the amount of taxes. And we are here now to take what you owe."

The cheer fell into a stunned silence. Perla, still curled up on the ground, looked backward past her feet toward the rest of her people behind her. Most of them had gone to their knees. Now the rest did also, their faces tilted up, pleading.

All except her brother, Marco. He stepped forward, past Perla, going out there all alone before the Duke, and said, "Sir, we cannot. Already we give most of our catch to you. We have to live."

Cautiously, Perla lifted her head out of her arms and saw the Duke there before her, his horse's feet pattering at the ground. His stirrups were covered with chased silver. Fringe hung from his saddlecloth, his reins. Behind him were too many horsemen for her to count. She began to plan how she would run when they charged.

"Then catch more fish," said the Duke, between his teeth, and waved his arm. His knights jogged forward. For a moment, Perla's brother stood, his feet widespread, his

hat in one hand, and the other hand still out, be-seeching, and then he hurried backward and went to his knees. The knights scattered through the village, and the pillaging began. Perla sprinted toward the nearby woods, staying low to the ground.

When they had gone, when they had taken everything, and the girls and women who had been able to escape had crept back to their trampled huts, the villagers gathered as they were accustomed to in the evening, building a fire in the shelter of the cliff and cooking what little remained to eat.

Perla sat with her arms wrapped tight around her sister, who had not gotten away. The Duke's men had caught her with her babies, and in exchange for their lives, she had let them rape her. She had saved her children, she kept on saying this, while the two little ones sobbed into her skirts, and her husband would not look at her.

Ercule, whom her sister wanted her to marry, sat there with the other men, behind Perla's brother, Marco. Ercule had done nothing, not even a useless plea like Marco's. She lowered her eyes, clutching her sister against her.

The night came, and the light of the fire shone on them all. Usually when they gathered, they drank, they talked and joked, sang the old songs, and retold the old stories; but this time they huddled somberly together and considered what had happened to them.

"We can't stay here," said one, and a few here and there grunted, agreeing.

"Where else should we go? There's always somebody like the Duke." Perla hugged her sister, angry. It was unseemly for a woman to speak up, at least until all the men had spoken, but now they were all calling out stupid ideas, like hiding, or running, or changing who they were. Someone—old Juneo—even said, "We can be pirates."

Now Marco stood. He was short, square-shouldered, strong as an ox from casting nets and rowing; Perla's heart leapt for him, brave and sensible. He would have an answer. Everybody quieted, seeing him. Everybody respected Marco.

He said, "We need to make one more great catch, before the winter. The Duke won't come back this year. He thinks he has it all. If we can pull in one great catch, we can all live through this."

"The fish are going," said an old man. "This is the bad time of the year for fish along this coast."

"Here," her brother said, his voice steady. "And south of here, where everybody fishes. But in the north, where the coast turns eastward, there are always great schools."

A general grumble. A sharp voice called out, "That's too risky."

"It's not for nothing called Dragon's Deep," someone else said—a woman's voice; Perla looked around, started, and saw one of the fishwives standing up, her hands in her skirt.

Now Ercule stood. "Most of the other fleets avoid those waters. But I've always heard they're prime fishing waters, just that there are a lot of reefs."

He gave a look at Perla, to see that she saw him doing this; he puffed out his chest a little.

Perla's sister's husband called out in a hoarse voice. "Bad storms hit that cape. I've heard there's an eddy under the cliff. Bad currents. Nobody goes there."

"There's a reason there isn't a village for miles off that headland."

Marco stood, his hands at his sides, waiting for the clamor to die down. In the first lull, he said, "Or we could get all our scaling knives and gaffs together and attack the

Duke and his men, and take our fish back from him." He was smiling; he gave a little shrug.

Nobody said anything. In the firelight, Perla saw them look from side to side and down, one man after another, and the wives also, one to the next, and there was a long silence.

Marco said, "Then we fish Dragon's Deep."

Perla's sister's husband flung his hands out and stepped back, away from the rest. "Not me. I have a wife and children. I'll take them into the forest first."

Marco wheeled, casting his gaze like a net over the other men. "Who else is a coward? Who else is afraid of rumors and gossip?"

No one spoke for a moment; the men were looking at one another, and a few shook their heads, then Perla jumped to her feet.

"I will go, Marco! I will go with you, if nobody else dares!"

Marco gave her a broad smile and held out his hand. His voice swelled. "Who else is as brave as a girl? All you men. Will you let a girl go first?"

Ercule cried, "I am going."

Then, in a rush, others called out. "Yes, me, I will go, I will go," in a jumble of voices, until all but a few had agreed. But then they stood nervously, looking around, their faces fretted.

Marco stood smiling around him, his hands on his hips. "Good. We'll start tomorrow. It will take us a couple of days to get up there."



"BEAUTIFUL," she murmured, and shivered.



The bay stretched out before them, dark blue to the north, paler as the water shallowed toward the beach, and the beach itself an arc of pale brown sand. The wind was driving from the west, but the headland behind them blocked most of it, and the little combers that ran into the sand were tame and mild. In the shallower, green-blue water, she could see the dark reefs. There was a reef directly below their boat now, the lumpy stone waving green with seaweed and alive with fish.

Yet the broad bay was empty, desolate. No village showed, no smoke, not even a single hut. From the edge of the beach, the sheer headland stood up like a tower, flanked by steep green slopes, and, beyond them, the snowcaps of the mountains.

All along the clean, pale beach, in the high line of driftwood, were the ribs and planks of boats, old wrecks, sun-bleached. Some looked burnt. And down on the bottom in the clear blue depths, she saw a boxy stern and part of a thwart poking out of the sand. Nowhere was there a sign of a living man, except those newly come.

A gull wheeled above them, screeching. She thought, for an instant, that she caught a note of warning in its voice.

Marco was giving crisp orders. "Perla, you go ashore and make us a camp. We should have brought some other women with us to help you, but we'll pitch in when we get ashore this afternoon. Hercule, Juneo, shake out the nets." He put his hands around his mouth, to shout to the other two boats, and Perla grabbed his arm.

"I'm not going ashore! I didn't come this far to *watch* you, Marco."

Around them on the boat, the other men laughed and nudged each other. Juneo said, "Marco, I hope you're handling the lines better than you handle her!"

A general hooting followed that. Perla lowered her eyes, ashamed, thinking she had made a fool of herself, and of Marco. But her brother took her by the chin and turned her face up.

He was smiling. He said, "Yes, you should fish with us." He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the crew. The other two boats had drawn closer. He said, "I remember when you were the only brave one in the village."

That sobered the other men. Ercule and Juneo turned to the barrels that held the fishing nets, and Lucco and the skinny boy, Grep, sat on the two front rowing benches and ran the oars out. Perla lingered there, in the middle, wondering what to do, and Marco put his hand in hers and drew her back beside him at the tiller.

The other boats rowed in a widespread line across the bay from west to east, the headland behind them looming up above the unbroken stretch of beach. Marco called out for the oarsmen to raise their oars. The warm sun glistened on the bay; looking over the side, Perla watched fish as long as her arm, in schools that seemed endless, weaving slowly through the open water. The men had trailed the net out behind them, and Marco let the boat drift slowly along, down the sun from the fish.

The yell from Juneo jerked them all upright. The netsman was hauling on his net, and beside him Ercule bellowed also: "Help! Help!"

With a roar, the two rowers bounded to grip the nets, to try to haul in the catch. Marco gave a whoop. He pushed the tiller into Perla's hands and leapt back there to join them. She gripped the tiller with both hands and looked back, amazed, as they dumped a huge slithering silver avalanche of fish into the back hold of the boat.

Marco came hurrying back, his face ready, his smile abeam. "I knew this would work." He slid onto the bench

beside her and grabbed the tiller away. "Row!" He lifted his voice to shout orders. "Row!"

Perla laid her hand on the gunwale; down the bay, she saw the other two boats also hauling in their catches, and the tiny figures waved their hands over their heads, and she could hear their thin cheering voices. Marco laid the tiller over.

"Down there! Under the headland, where the water's sheltered—Row!"

The boat felt different now, even Perla could sense it, heavier with the load of fish. The men pulled strongly; Lucco squirmed deftly out of his shirt between strokes. The sun blazed on the water, but as they drew nearer, the high stone crag blocked it and cast a shadow out over the deep.

Marco called, and the men shipped their oars and ran to the nets. The other boats were rowing fast after them. Perla stood up; this time she meant to join them bringing the nets in.

She felt the boat under her quiver slightly.

Marco called, "Juneo, cast the net!"

"I—I—" Juneo was balanced on the stern of the boat, the rolled net gripped in his hands; he turned his white face toward Marco, and then the boat began to slide sideways.

Marco yelled. Perla grabbed hold of the gunwale with both hands. The boat was spinning along at the edge of a whirling circle of water; at the center, the water sank down, and down, all spinning and widening, so that their boat now lurched and swayed, tipped halfway into the vortex. Perla shouted, "Marco, what should I do?"

Then up through the center of the eddy came the dragon.

Its great horned head reared up into the air, its long neck arched, its shoulders thrusting through the whirl of

the water. For an instant, the men on Perla's boat stood frozen where they were, their faces lifted, and then Marco bounded toward the mast and the gaff tied to it.

"Get back, Perla!"

She took a step back, but the red, horned head towering over her was turning toward her, toward the boat, and the long jaws parted and a gust of green flame erupted from its throat. The ball of fire hit the boat by the forward thwart, and it exploded into flames. Perla leapt overboard.

She swam away from the boat, but the whirlpool caught her; in spite of her thrashing arms, she went skidding down the side of the eddy. The beast loomed over her, enormous, its red scales streaming water. She saw its head dart past her again and rear up, a man clutched in its jaws. She screamed; that was Lucco, from her boat, his arms waving. The dragon flipped him up into the air, so that he fell headfirst, and swallowed him on the way down. The huge head swung around again. Away from her. She struggled in the furious current, trying to swim across the tow, get out of the whirlpool, but it was carrying her swiftly downward, always closer to the dragon. A scream reached her ears, and she saw the wedge-shaped red head rise again, another man in its teeth.

Then the wave of the whirlpool brought her directly against the dragon's side. Her fingers scraped over the slick red scales, trying to grab hold. Above her, the beast's spines rose like giant barbs, and she lunged up and caught one and held on.

The beast was still rising. Clutching the spine, she was borne higher up into the air. All around her, below her, the water tossed, full of men, some screaming and waving their arms and some trying to swim, and the dragon caught another, and another, its head darting here and there at the end of its long neck. She tied her belt to the spine, to stay

on. She saw Marco down there, on the lip of the eddy, and tried to yell, but he disappeared in a gust of steam. The dragon breathed out again, and the last of the boats burst into flame.

She clung to the spine, thick as a tree bough, polished smooth and sleek as gold; she was sick to her stomach, numb with fear, sure that Marco was dead, that they were all dead. The beast whirled and her head struck the spine hard enough to daze her. The sky whirled by her, then, abruptly, the dragon was plunging down.

She flung her head back, startled alert again, and fought to untie her belt. The wet knot was solid. She fought to pull the belt loose off the spine, while the dragon dove down into the dark green water, but the belt held her, and just as the sea closed over her head, she gasped in a deep lungful of air.

The sea rushed past her. They were going down into the darkness. She looked up, saw a body floating limp in the shrinking patch of pale water. Then the dragon was swimming sideways, into an underwater cave or a tunnel.

The light vanished. In the pitch darkness, surging along on the dragon's back, she could not imagine an end. She had to breathe. Her lungs hurt. The dark water rippled on her skin. Her fists were clenched around the spine, her body flying along above the strong-swimming beast. She had to breathe! She kept still a moment longer, counting. When she got to ten, she counted again. Her lungs ached. She could see nothing. Strange lights burst in her eyes, in the dark, and were gone. Nausea rose in her throat. Then the dragon was swimming upward, toward the pale surface.

She counted again, on the ragged edge of giving up and breathing in water, and at eight, she burst into the light and the air.

She gasped, clinging to the spine, looking around her. Her whole body shuddered. They were inside the headland; some underwater passage connected it to the sea. Sheltered inside the sheer rock walls lay a lagoon with a little brown beach. The dragon was swimming toward the beach. She gripped her belt. With a leap of relief, she saw that it had frayed almost apart in the wild ride, and, with her fingers, she ripped it off just as the dragon reached the shallow water. She plunged down the red-scaled side and ran up onto the sand.

The brown cliff there rose impossibly high and steep. But the face was runneled and cleft with caves and seams. She ducked into the nearest of hollows and went back as far as it went, only a few feet of a narrow twisting gorge that pinched together into nothing.

Far enough, she thought. It can't reach me here. She crept cautiously up nearer the beach, to see out.

The dragon had lain down right in front of her, only about ten feet of sand between her cave and its head. So it knew she was there. But it stretched out, relaxed, well fed, half-asleep. She leaned against the rock wall behind her and looked it over.

The red, horned head lay half-turned toward her, the eyes closed, rimmed in gold, the wide curled nostrils also gold-trimmed, oddly delicate. The long red neck led back into ridged shoulders with scales as big as a house. At ease, the beast sprawled between its forepaws, their curved claws outstretched. The massive bulk of its body curled away, its tail half in the water still, a net wrapped around one spine.

She watched it until the daylight was gone. Once, in its sleep, its jaws parted and gave a soft greenish burp, and a little round stone rolled out. As the beast still slept, its long

red tongue licked over its lips, and it settled deeper on the sand.

The sun went down. In the night, she thought, she could escape, and she edged closer to the beach. Just as she reached the mouth of the crevice, the dragon's near eye opened, shining in the dark, fixed on her. Perla scuttled back into the deep of the crevices, all her hair on end. She thought she heard a low growl behind her.

She wept; she wept for Marco and Lucco and the other men, and for herself, because she knew she was lost. At last, she slept a little. When she woke, it was morning, and she was so hungry and thirsty she went back to the mouth of the crevice.

The dragon was still there. It stood looking away from her, the sun blazing on its magnificence, the red scales, darker at the edges, and the shining spines along its backbone. Then the narrow-jawed head swung toward her, high above her on the long, arched neck. On the broad space between its eyes was a disk of gold. Its eyes were big as washtubs, brilliant red, flecked and edged with gold.

It said, in a voice so deep and huge that she imagined she heard it through the bones of her head, not her ears, "Why don't you come out so I can eat you?"

"Please don't eat me," she said.

"Why shouldn't I? You'll just die in there anyway." It gave a cold chuckle. "And by then you'd be too thin to bother digging for. Tell me what you'll give me if I don't eat you. Will someone ransom you?"

She stood at the mouth of the crevice, her hands clammy and her throat thick with fear. No one from her village had anything to ransom her with, if the village even still survived, with all its men gone. She thought desperately of what she herself could do: weave, sew, cook, haul water.

"Can you dance? Sing?"

“I—”

The dragon said, “Tell me a story.”

A cold tingle went down her spine. “A story,” she said.

“If it’s good enough, I won’t eat you.” The dragon settled himself down, his forepaws curled under him like a cat’s, waiting.

She gulped. The village’s stories were old and worn, which was why the villagers told them, and retold them, like the imperishable favorite about how old Pandan had his eye put out while looking through a knothole in the bathhouse at the women bathing. She knew at once such stories would not satisfy the dragon, much less save her life.

He was waiting, patient, his jeweled eyes on her. She realized that since he had begun speaking to her, she had thought of him as “he.”

That gave her a wisp of an idea. She sat down in the mouth of the cave, her heart thundering, and began, “Once there was a King. An evil King.” Like the Duke. Her mind sorted through the possibilities. “He stole everything from his people, and he killed many. But he did have one thing he loved, his beautiful daughter.”

She spent some time describing the beautiful daughter, so that she could plan the next part. The dragon was utterly silent, his eyes steadily watching her, his long lips slightly smiling.

“He was so jealous of her that he put her in a tower by the sea.” The story was growing stronger in her mind, and she let her voice stride out confidently, telling of the tower, and the wild storms, the sunlight, and the birds that came to sing to her in her window. “There she lived lonely, singing to the birds, and grew even more beautiful, but no man saw her except her father.



“But one day a Prince came by.” She made the prince like Marco, solid and honest and brave. Dead now, probably, dead in this dragon’s belly. Her voice trembled, but she fought herself back under control. She gave the Prince a red charger and red hair, which she saw amused the dragon. “The Prince heard her singing and climbed up the tower wall to her window. They fell in love at once, because she was beautiful and good, and he was handsome and brave and good. But before he could carry her off, the King burst in on them.”

The dragon twitched, and she leaned toward him a little, intent, knowing now she had him. “The King had his sword, and although the Prince tried to fight back, he had no weapon. So the King got him down quickly.”

The dragon growled. She kept her voice steady, speaking over the rumble. “But he did not kill him. Instead, he told the Prince that, since he was such a lizard that he could scale a castle wall, he would become the greatest lizard. And he turned him into a dragon and cast him into the sea.”

The dragon lifted its head and roared, not at her, but to the sky, then quickly sank down again, his eyes blazing.

“But the Princess. What happened to her?”

Perla was ready to run for the end of the crevice if this did not suit. She fixed the dragon eye to eye. “Her heart was broken. She fled from her father—”

“Good.”

“And now she wanders through the world looking for her Prince. Only her love can change him back from the dragon. But every day she grows older, and every day, the dragon grows more like a dragon, and less like the Prince.”

She was poised to run. But the dragon’s eyes were shining. His long lips drew back from his dagger-teeth, and he nodded once. Turning, he plunged into the lagoon.

She went cautiously out onto the open sand. On the beach, water spilled down the cliff in a long fall, and she went there and quenched her thirst, all the while looking for some other way out of the lagoon. The cliff ran all around it like a wall.

In the lagoon, too soon, the whirling appeared, and the eddy deepened, and the dragon's head rose through it and he swam to the beach and dragged himself out onto the sand. In his jaws, he held a long, flopping sea bass, which he flung down on the sand.

"Wait." The voice was like speaking bronze. He reared his head back and shot forth a bolt of flame, which blasted around the fish for several seconds.

She went warily up to it, knelt, and touched the carcass. It was nicely cooked. She peeled back the skin and ate the hot, flaky white meat. It was delicious, but it tasted a little sharp.

The dragon was crouched there, head and shoulders settled above its sprawled forepaws, his long neck curved, watching her. When she was done, and sitting there licking her fingers, he lay down around her, his head stretched along his paws, half embrace, half prison. The great red eye blinked once in a flash of gold. "Tell me another story."



AFTER that, the dragon let her roam as she pleased around the lagoon, as long as she told him stories whenever he asked. She made up stories about dragons, about princesses, about evil Kings, good and handsome Princes, about the brothers of Princesses, crisscrossing them, sometimes using the same people in one story after another. She tried to make every one different, but to her they seemed to all be the same, about wanting to go home, to be with whom she loved, and where she belonged.

She was sitting in the sun one afternoon, longing for home, and tears began to roll down her cheeks. The dragon said, "What's the matter?"

"You ate my brother," she said bitterly. "You ate all my people. I hate you."

He gave one of his throaty chuckles, unperturbed. "You eat the fish. You don't care about *their* brothers."

She cast off the thought of fish, which she had always eaten. "Do you have no family? No tribe? Where did you come from?"

He looked surprised. His huge eyes blazed red as the heart of a fire. "I was always here." But his stare shifted, and as much of a look of perplexity as she had ever seen came over his long, snakelike face. "There were more of us, once. But not many more." He turned, and flopped away into the lagoon and disappeared.

During the day, he often slept in the sun, or went down into the lagoon and was gone for a long while. She guessed that he went out the tunnel to the open sea. She wandered the beach, drinking from the waterfall that tumbled down from the top of the cliff and spread its shining skirts across the sand, eating berries growing down the stone wall, and seaweed, crabs, and clams, or anything else she could find. She worked out stories as she walked, saving bits and pieces when she could not make them whole, and remembering it all in a big overstory she would never tell him, about a girl taken captive by a dragon, who was rescued in the end by a Prince.

When he came back, he always had a fish for her and cooked it with the fire of his breath; no matter what the fish, bass, bonito, or shark, the meat always had a faintly sharp, spicy taste. If he had fed well, he burped up lots of stones, some as big as her fist, most toe-sized, clear lumps of colored crystal, red and blue and green. If he had eaten

nothing or little, he complained and glowered at her and licked his lips at her, and talked of eating her instead, his red eyes wicked and his tongue flickering.

"I don't have to listen to you," she said, holding herself very straight. She turned back to the crevice, where she could get away from him.

Behind her, the deep rumbling voice said, "If you try to escape, I will definitely eat you."

She spun toward him. "But I want to go home. You should let me go home."

At that, he gave off a burst of furious heat and exhaled a stream of green fire. She dodged him and ran toward the crevice.

One huge forepaw came down directly in front of her. When she wheeled, his other paw came down, fencing her in.

"You can't leave!"

She put her hands over her ears, the roar shaking her whole body. The ground trembled under her. He was lying down, curled around her. She lowered her hands. He was calm again, but his great scaled bulk surrounded her. Only a few feet away, the enormous eye shut and opened again. "Tell me a story."

So she had to escape. During the day, she followed the seams and gullies worn into the cliff, hoping to find another way out, but they all pinched out or ended in falls of broken rock. Once, in the shadows at the back of a defile, she found a skeleton, still wearing tattered clothes—a cloak with fur trim, and pretty, rotten shoes, even rings on the fingerbones.

The bones were undisturbed. Whoever this was, however he had gotten here, he had never even left the cave.

She had left the cave. She found herself a little proud of that.

One evening, after she told him a story about some adventures of the Prince as dragon, she turned to go back into the crevice, where she usually slept. Before she could reach the cliff, he caught her lightly with his forepaw—the long curved claws like tusks inches from her face—and tossed her backward. She stumbled off across the beach, wondering what she had done wrong. The other paw met her and sent her reeling back. She whirled, frightened, her hands out, and he batted her around again. His head suspended over her watched her with a cold amusement. He was *playing*, she realized, in a haze of terror, not really hurting her. She caught hold of his scaly paw and held tight, and he stopped.

But he did not let her go. He reached down and took her between his long jaws, gently as a mother with an egg. She lay, rigid, her breath stopped, between two sets of gigantic teeth, the long tongue curled around her. He lay down, stretched out, and carefully set her on the sand between his forepaws. He put his head down on his paws, so that she lay in the hollow under his throat, and went to sleep.

She lay stiff as a sword under him. Something new had happened, and she had no notion what he might mean by this. What he might do next. Yet the cavern under his throat was warm, and she fell asleep after a while.

The next day, he dove into the lagoon and was gone, and she began to search from one end of the cliff to the other for a way out. She went back through every crevice, tried to chimney up the sides, and crawled along the top of huge mounds of rubble. Always, the space came to an end, the cliff pressed down on her, dark and cold.

She crept back out to the sunlit lagoon again. The beauty of it struck her, as it always did, the water clear and

blue and dark at the center, and paler in toward the shore, the tiny ripples of the waves, the cream-colored sand. The sky was cloudless. The cliff vaulted up hundreds of feet high, sheer as glass.

As she stood there, wondering what to do, the blue water began to whirl, eddying around, and the dragon's great head thrust up through the center of it, a white fish between his long jaws.

He saw her, and came to her, cast down the fish, and breathed on it with the harsh fire of his breath, and then, as usual, stood there watching her eat it. She was hungry and ate all the pale, flaky meat. Being close to him made her edgy. She had thought of a good story to tell him, with a long chase through a forest, and the dragon's escape at the end. She could not look at him, afraid of what she might see brimming in the great red eyes.

He sat quietly throughout the story, as he always did. She had learned to feel the quality of his attention, and she knew he was deep into this story. She brought it to an end and stood.

His head moved, fast as a serpent, and he caught her between his jaws. He laid her down on her back between his forepaws. She lay so stiff her fists were clenched, looking up at the wedge-shaped head above her, and then he began to lick her all over.

His tongue was long and supple, silky smooth, longer than she was tall, so that sometimes he was licking her whole body all at once. She was afraid to move. He licked at her dress until it was bunched up under her armpits. His touch was soft, gentle, even tender; stroking over her breasts, he paused an instant, his warm tongue over her, and against her will, she gasped.

He said, in his deep, harsh voice, "It's only me, the Prince," and chuckled. He slid his tongue down her side