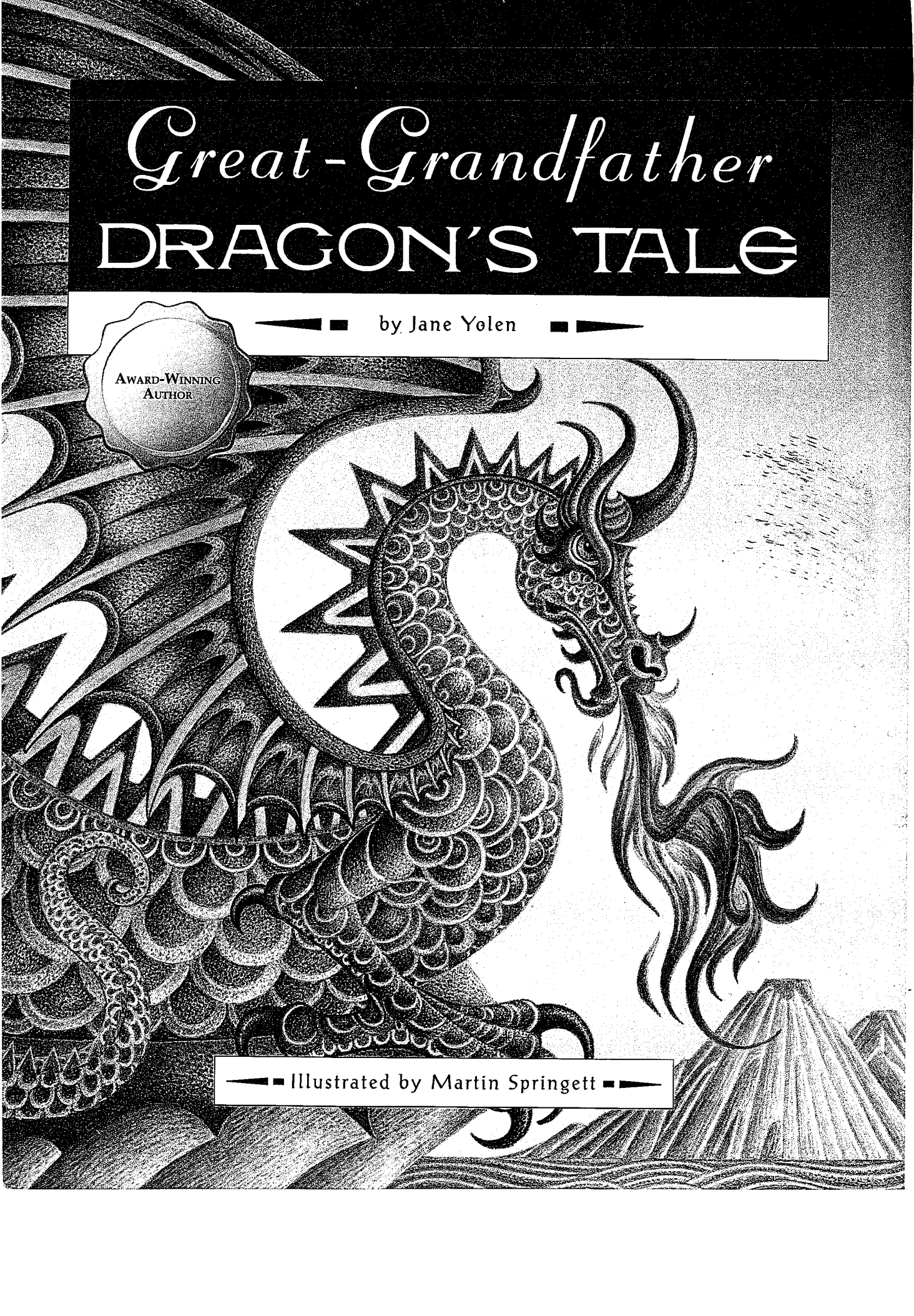


Great-Grandfather DRAGON'S TALE

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"Long, long ago," said the old dragon, and the gray smoke curled around his whiskers in thin, tired wisps, "in the time of the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons, there was no Thanksgiving."

The five little dragons looked at one another in alarm. The boldest of them, Sskar, said, "No Thanksgiving? No feasting? No chestnuts on the fire? Hasn't there always been a Thanksgiving?"

The old dragon wheezed. The smoke came out in huge, alarming puffs. Then he started speaking, and the smoke resumed its wispy rounds. "For other animals, perhaps. For rabbits or lions or deer. Perhaps for them there has always been a Thanksgiving."

"Rabbits and lions and deer!" The little dragons said the names with disdain. And Sskar added, "Who cares about rabbits and lions and deer. We want to know about dragons!"

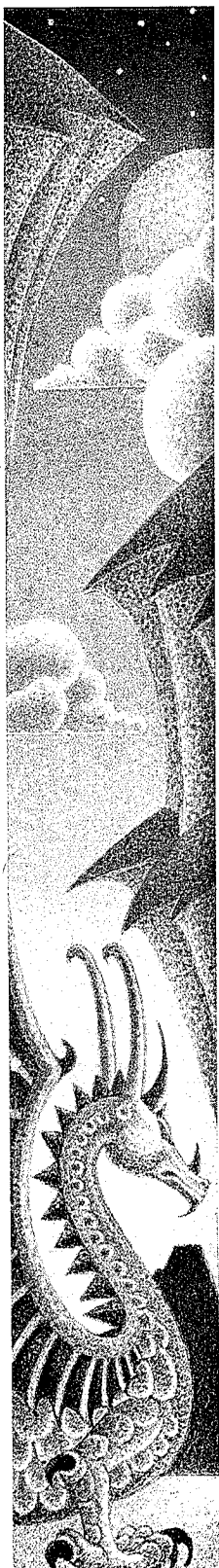
"Then listen well, young saurs. For what was once could come again. What was then could be now. And once there was no Dragons' Thanksgiving."

The little dragons drew closer, testing their claws against the stone floor of the cave, and listened.

Long, long ago began the old dragon the world was ice and fire, fire and ice. In the south, great mountains rained smoke and spat flame. In the north, glaciers like beasts crept down upon the land and devoured it.

It was then that the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons lived.

He was five hundred slithes from tip to tail. His scales shimmered like the moon on waves. His eyes were as black as shrouds. He breathed fire storms, which he could fan to flame with his mighty wings. And his feet were broad enough to carry him over the thundering miles. All who saw him were afraid.



And the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons ate up the shaking fear of the little animals. He lived on it and thrived. He would roar and claw and snatch and hit about with his tail just to watch fear leap into the eyes of the watchers. He was mighty, yet he was just one of many, for in those days dragons ruled the earth.

One day, up from the south, from the grassy lands, from the sweet lands, where the red sun pulls new life from the abundant soil, a new creature came. He was smaller than the least of the dragons, not even a slithe and a half high. He had no claws. His teeth were puny and blunt. He could breathe neither fire nor smoke, and he had neither armor to protect himself nor fur to keep himself warm. His legs could only carry him from here—to there. *And the old dragon drew a small line on the rockface with his littlest toenail.*

But when he opened his mouth, the sounds of all beasts, both large and small, of the air and the sea and the sky came out. It was this gift of sound that would make him the new king.

"Fah!" said little Sskar. "How could something that puny be a king? The only sound worth making more than once or twice is this." And he put his head back and roared. It was a small roar for he was still a small dragon, but little as it was, it echoed for miles and caused three trees to wither on the mountain's face. True, they were stunted trees that had weathered too many storms and were above the main tree line. But they shivered at the sound, dropped all their remaining leaves, and died where they stood.

The other little dragons applauded the roar, their claws clacketting together. And one of them, Sskitter, laughed. Her laugh was delicate and high pitched, but she could roar as loudly as Sskar.

"Do not laugh at what you do not understand," said the old dragon. "Look around. What do you see? We are few, yet this new creature is many. We live only in this hidden mountain wilderness while he and his children roam the rest of the world. We glide on shrunk wings over our shrunk kingdom while he flies in great silver birds all over the earth."

"Was it not always so?" asked the smallest dragon, Sskarma. She was shaken by the old one's words.

"No, it was not always so," said the old dragon.

"Bedtime," came a soft voice from the corner. Out from behind a large rock slithered Mother Dragon. "Settle down, my little fire tongues. And you, Grandfather, no more of that story for this night."

"Tomorrow?" begged Sskarma, looking at the old one.

He nodded his mighty head, and the smoke made familiar patterns around his horns.

As they settled down, the little dragons listened while their mother and the old one sang them a lullaby.

*"Firelight and firebright,
Bank your dragon flames tonight.
Close your eyes and still your roar,
Sleep is here, my little saur.
Hiss, hiss, hush."*

By the time the song was over, all but little Sskar had dropped off. He turned around and around on the cave floor, trying to get settled. "Fah!" he muttered to himself. "What kind of king is that?" But at last he, too, was asleep, dreaming of bones and fire.

"Do not fill their heads with nonsense," said Mother Dragon when the hatchlings were quiet.

"It is not nonsense," said the old dragon. "It is history."

"It is dreams," she retorted. In her anger, fire shot out of her nostrils and singed the old one's nose. "If it cannot feed their bellies, it is worthless. Good night, Grandfather." She circled her body around the five little dragons and, covering them, slept.

The old dragon looked at the six of them long after the cave was silent. Then he lay down with his mouth open facing the cave entrance as he had done ever since he had taken a mate. He hardly slept at all.

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In the morning, the five little dragons were up first, yawning and hissing and stretching. They sharpened their claws on the stone walls, and Sskar practiced breathing smoke. None of the others was even close to smoke yet. Most were barely trickling straggles through their nose slits.

It was midmorning before Grandfather Dragon moved. He had been up most of the night thinking, checking the wind currents for scents, keeping alert for dangerous sounds carried on the air. When morning had come, he had moved away from the cave mouth and fallen asleep. When Grandfather

awoke it was in sections. First his right foreleg moved, in short hesitations as if testing its flexibility. Then his left. Then his massive head moved from side to side. At last he thumped his tail against the far rocks of the cave. It was a signal the little dragons loved.

Sskarma was first to shout it out. "The story! He is going to tell us the story!" She ran quickly to her grandfather and curled around his front leg, sticking her tail into her mouth. The others took up their own special positions and waited for him to begin.

"And what good was this gift of sound?" asked the old dragon at last, picking up the tale as if a night and half a day had not come between tellings.

"What good?" asked the little dragons. Sskar muttered, "What good indeed?" over and over until Sskitter hit him on the tip of the nose with a claw.

This gift of sound said Grandfather Dragon that made the creature king could be used in many ways. He could coax the birds and beasts into his nets by making the sound of a hen calling the cock or a lioness seeking the lion or a bull elk spoiling for a fight. And so cock and lion and bull elk came. They came at this mighty hunter's calling, and they died at his hand.

Then the hunter learned the sounds that a dragon makes when he is hungry. He learned the sounds that a dragon makes when he is sleepy, when he looks for shelter, calls out warning, seeks a mate. All these great sounds of power the hunter learned—and more. And so one by one the lesser dragons came at his calling; one by one they came—and were killed.

The little dragons stirred uneasily at this. Sskarma shivered and put her tail into her mouth once more.

So we dragons named him Ssgefah, which, in the old tongue, means enemy. But he called himself Man.

"Man," they all said to one another. "Ssgefah. Man."

At last one day the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons looked around and saw that there were only two dragons left in the whole world—he and his mate. The two of them had been very cunning and had hidden themselves away in a mountain fastness, never answering any call but a special signal that they had planned between themselves.

"I know that signal," interrupted Sskitter. She gave a shuddering, hissing fall of sound.

The old dragon smiled at her, showing 147 of his secondary teeth. "You have learned it well, child. But do not use it in fun. It is the most powerful sound of all."

The little dragons all practiced the sound under their breaths while the old dragon stretched and rubbed an itchy place under his wing.

"Supper!" hissed Mother Dragon, landing on the stone outcropping by the cave mouth. She carried a mountain goat in her teeth. But the little dragons ignored her.

"Tell the rest," pleaded Sskarma.

"Not the rest," said the old dragon, "but I will tell you the next part."

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"We must find a young Man who is unarmed," said the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons. "One who has neither net nor spear."

"And eat him!" said his mate. "It has been such a long time since we have had any red meat. Only such grasses and small birds as populate tops of mountains. It is dry, ribey fare at best." She yawned prettily and showed her sharp primary teeth.

"No," said the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons. "We shall capture him and learn his tongue. And then we will seal a bargain between us."

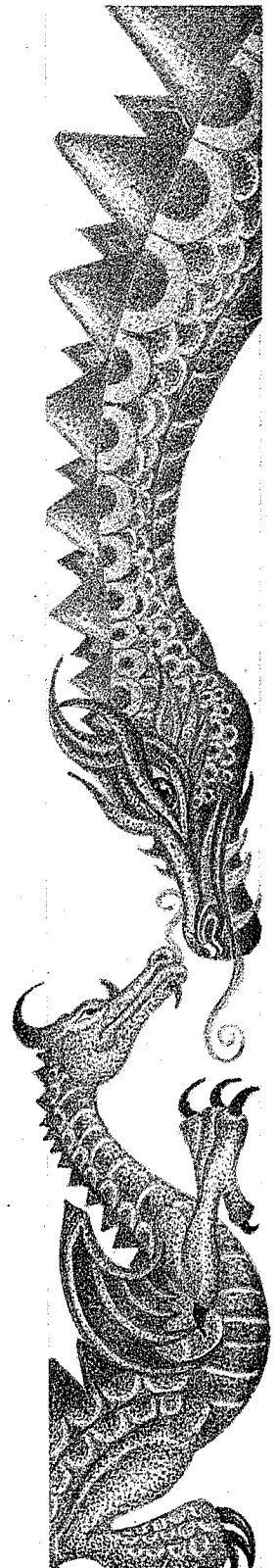
His mate looked shocked. Her wings arched up, great ribbed wings they were, too, with the skin between the ribbings as bright as blood. "A bargain? With such a puny thing as Man?"

The Great-Grandfather of All Dragons laughed sadly then. It was a dry, deep, sorrowful chuckle. "Puny?" he said, as quietly as smoke. "And what are we?"

"Great!" she replied, staring black eye into black eye. "Magnificent. Tremendous. Awe inspiring." She stood and stretched to her fullest, which was 450 slithes in length. The mountaintop trembled underneath her magnificently ponderous legs. "You and I," said the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons, "and who else?"

She looked around, saw no other dragons, and was still.

"Why, that's just what you said last night, Grandfather," said little Sskitter.





Grandfather Dragon patted her on the head. "Good girl. Bright girl. Perceptive girl."

Sskar drew his claws lazily over the floor of the cave, making awful squeaks and leaving scratches in the stone. "I knew that," he said. Then he blew smoke rings to show he did not care that his sister had been praised.

But the other dragons were not afraid to show they cared. "I remember," said Ssgrum.

"Me, too," said Sstok.

They both came in for their share of praises.

Sskar was quiet and stared. Then she said, "But more story, Grandfather."

"First comes supper," said Mother Dragon. "Growing bodies need to eat."

This time they all listened.

But when there was not even a smidgeon of meat left, and only the bones to gnaw and crack, Mother Dragon relented.

"Go ahead now," she said. "Tell them a story. But no nonsense."

"This is True History," said Sskitter.

"It's dumb!" said Sskar. He roared his roar again. "How could there be us if they were the last of the dragons?"

"It's a story," said Sskar. "And a story should be its own reward. I want to hear the rest."

The others agreed. They settled down again around Grandfather Dragon's legs, except for Sskar, who put his back against the old dragon's tail. That way he could listen to the story but pretend not to be interested.

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So the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons began the story once more flew that very night on silent wings, setting them so that he could glide and catch the currents of air. And he was careful not to roar or to breathe fire or to singe a single tree.

He quartered town after town, village after village, farm after farm all fitted together as carefully as puzzles. And at last he came to a young shepherd boy asleep beside his flock out in a lonely field.

The Great-Grandfather of All Dragons dropped silently down at the edge of the field, holding his smoke so that the sheep—silly

creatures—would not catch the scent of him. For dragons, as you know, have no odor other than the brimstone smell of their breath. The black-and-white sheepdog with the long hair twitched once, as if the sound of the Great-Grandfather's alighting had jarred his sleep, but he did not awaken.

Then the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons crept forward slowly, trying to sort out the sight and sound and smell of the youngling. He seemed to be about twelve Man years old and unarmed except for his shepherd's staff. He was fair haired and had a sprinkling of spots over the bridge of his nose that Men call freckles. He wore no shoes and smelled of cheese and bread, slightly moldy. There was also a green smell coming from his clothes, a tree and grass and rain and sun smell, which the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons liked.

The boy slept a very deep sleep. He slept so deeply because he thought that the world was rid of dragons, that all he had to worry about were wolves and bears and the sharp knife of hunger. Yes, he believed that dragons were no more until he dreamed them and screamed—and woke up, still screaming, in a dragon's claw.

Sskar applauded. "I like the part about the dragon's claw," he said, looking down at his own golden nails.

Sskitter poked him with her tail, and he lashed back. They rolled over and over until the old dragon separated them with his own great claws. They settled down to listen.

But when he saw that screaming would not help, the young Man stopped screaming, for he was very brave for all that he was very young.

And when he was set down in the lair and saw he could not run off because the dragon's mate had blocked the door, the young Man made a sign against his body with his hand and said, "Be gone, Worm." For that is how Man speaks.

"Be gone, Worm," Sskitter whispered under her breath.

And Sskarma made the Man sign against her own body, head to heart, shoulder to shoulder. It did not make sense to her, but she tried it anyway.

Sskar managed to look amused, and the two younger dragons shuddered.

"Be gone, Worm," the Manling said again. Then he sat down on his haunches and cried, for he was a very young Man after all. And the sound of his weeping was not unlike the sound of a baby dragon calling for its food.

At that, the Great-Grandmother of All Dragons moved away from the cave mouth and curled herself around the Man and tried to comfort him, for she had no hatchlings of her own yet, though she had wished many years for them. But the Man buffeted her with his fist on the tender part of her nose, and she cried out in surprise—and in pain. Her roar filled the cave. Even the Great-Grandfather closed his earflaps. And the young Man held his hands up over the sides of his face and screamed back. It was not a good beginning.

But at last they both quieted down, and the Manling stretched out his hand toward the tender spot and touched it lightly. And the Great-Grandmother of All Dragons opened her second eyelid—another surprise—and the great fires within her eyes flickered.

It was then that the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons said quietly in dragon words, "Let us begin."

The wonder of it was that the young Man understood.

"My name," he replied in Man talk, in a loud, sensible voice, "is Georgi." He pointed to himself and said "Georgi" again.

The Great-Grandfather of All Dragons tried. He said "Ssgggi," which we have to admit was not even close.

The Great-Grandmother of All Dragons did not even try.

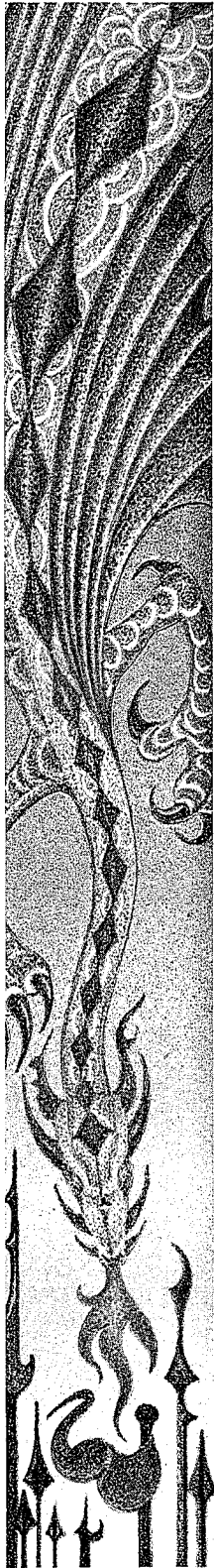
So the youngling stood and walked over, being careful not to make any sudden gestures, and pointed straight at Great-Grandfather's neck.

"Sskraken," roared Great-Grandfather, for as you know a dragon always roars out his own name.

"Sskar!" roared Sskar, shattering a nearby tree. A small, above-the-frost-line tree. The others were silent, caught up in the story's spell.

And when the echo had died away, the youngling said in a voice as soft as the down on the underwing of an owl, "Sskraken." He did not need to shout it to be heard, but every syllable was there. It made the Great-Grandfather shiver. It made the Great-Grandmother put her head on the floor and think.





"Sskraken," the youngling said again, nodding as if telling himself to remember. Then he turned to Sskraken's mate and pointed at her. And the pointing finger never trembled.

"Sskrema," she said, as gently as a lullaby. It was the first time in her life that she had not roared out her name.

The youngling walked over to her, rubbed the spot on her nose that had lately been made sore. "Sskrema," he crooned. And to both their astonishments, she thrummed under his hand.

"She thrummed!" said Sskitter. "But you have told us . . ."

"Never to thrum except to show the greatest happiness with your closest companions," the youngest two recited dutifully.

"So I did," said Grandfather Dragon. With the tip of his tail, he brushed away a fire-red tear that was caught in his eye. But he did it cleverly, so cleverly the little dragons did not notice. "So I did."

"Fah!" said Sskar. "It was a mistake. All a mistake. She never would have thrummed knowingly at a Man."

"That's what makes it so important," answered Sskarma. She reached up with her tail and flicked another tear from the old dragon's eye, but so cleverly the others never noticed. Then she thrummed at him. "Tell us more."

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The youngling Georgi lived with the two saurs for a year and a day. He learned many words in the old tongue: "sstek" for red meat and "sstik" for the dry, white meat of birds; "ssova," which means egg, and "ssouva," which means soul. Learning the old tongue was his pleasure, his task, and his gift.

In return, the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons and his mate learned but one word. It was the name of the Man—Georgi. Or as they said it, "Ssgggi."

At the end of the year and a day, the Great-Grandfather called the boy to him, and they walked away from the sweet-smelling nest of grasses and pine needles and attar of wild rose that Georgi had built for them. They walked to the edge of the jagged mountainside where they could look down on the rough waste below.

"Ssgggi," said the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons speaking the one word of Man's tongue he had learned, though he had never learned it right. "It is time for you to go home. For though you have learned much about us and much from us you are not a dragon but a Man. Now you must take your learning to them, the Men, and talk to them in your own Man's tongue. Give them a message from us. A message of peace. For if you fail, we who are but two will be none." And he gave a message to the Man.

Georgi nodded and then quietly walked back to the cave. At his footsteps, the Great-Grandmother of All Dragons appeared. She looked out and stared at the boy. They regarded one another solemnly, without speaking. In her dark eyes the candle flame flickered.

"I swear that I will not let that light go out," said Georgi, and he rubbed her nose. And then they all three thrummed at one another, though the Man did it badly.

Then he turned from the saurs without a further good-bye. And this was something else he had learned from the Great-Grandfather, for Men tend to prolong their good-byes, saying meaningless things instead of leaping swiftly into the air.

"It is their lack of wings," said Sskarma thoughtfully.

Georgi started down the mountain, the wind in his face and a great roar at his back. The mountains shook at his leaving, and great boulders shrugged down the cliff sides. And high above him, the two saurs circled endlessly in the sky, guarding him though he knew it not.

And so the Manling went home and the dragons waited.

"Dragons have a long patience," the two youngest saurs recited dutifully. "That is their genius." And when no one applauded their memories, they clattered their own claws together and smiled at one another, toothy smiles, and slapped their tails on the stone floor.

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In Dragon years continued Grandfather Dragon it was but an eyelid's flicker, though in Man years it was a good long while.

And then one day, when the bright eye of the sun was for a moment shuttered by the moon's dark lid, a great army of Men appeared at the mouth of the canyon and rode their horses almost to the foot of the mountain.

The Great-Grandmother of All Dragons let her rough tongue lick around her jaws at the sight of so much red meat.

"Sstek," she said thoughtfully.

But the Great-Grandfather cautioned her, remembering how many dragons had died in fights with Men, remembering the message he had sent with the Manling. "We wait," he said.

"I would not have waited," hissed Sskar, lashing his tail.

His sister Sskitter buffeted him on the nose. He cried out once, and was still.

At the head of the Men was one man in white armor with a red figure emblazoned on his white shield.

It was when he saw this that Great-Grandfather sighed. "Ssgggi," he said.

"How can you tell?" asked the Great-Grandmother. "He is too big and too wide and too old for our Ssgggi. Our Ssgggi was this tall," and she drew a line into the pine tree that stood by the cave door.

"Men do not grow as dragons grow," reminded the Great-Grandfather gently. "They have no egg to protect their early days. Their skin is soft. They die young."

The Great-Grandmother put her paw on a certain spot on her nose and sighed. "It is not *our* Ssgggi," she said again. "He would not lead so many Men to our cave. He would not have to wear false scales on his body. He would come to the mountain by himself. I am going to scorch that counterfeit Ssgggi. I will roast him before his friends and crack his bones and suck out the marrow."

Then Great-Grandfather of All Dragons knew that she spoke out of sorrow and anger and fear. He flicked a red tear from his own eye with his tail and held it to her. "See, my eyes cry for our grown-up and grown-away Manling," he said. "But though he is bigger and older, he is our Ssgggi nonetheless. I told him to identify himself

when he returned so that we might know him. He has done so. What do you see on his shield?"

The Great-Grandmother rose to her feet and peered closely at the Man so many slithes below them. And those dragon eyes which can see even the movement of a rabbit cowering in its burrow, saw the red dragon crouched on the white shield.

"I can see a mole in its den," said Sskar. "I can see a shrew in its tunnel. I can see . . ."

"You will see very little when I get finished with you if you do not shut up," said Sskitter and hit him once again.

"I see a red dragon," said the Great-Grandmother, her tail switching back and forth with anger.

"And what is the dragon doing?" asked the Great-Grandfather even more gently.

She looked again. Then she smiled, showing every one of her primary teeth. "It is covering a certain spot on its nose," she said.

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Just then the army stopped at a signal from the white knight. They dismounted from their horses and waited. The white knight raised his shield toward the mountain and shouted. It took a little while for his voice to reach the dragons, but when it did, they both smiled, for the white knight greeted them in the old tongue.

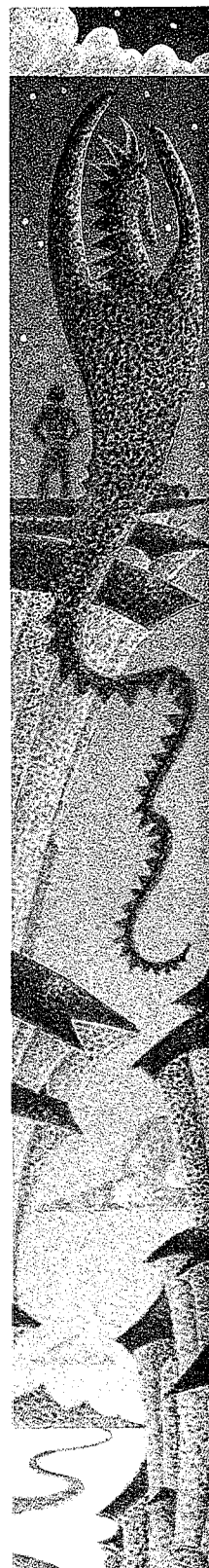
He said: "I send greetings. I am Ssgggi, the dragon who looks like a Man. I am taller now, but nowhere near as tall as a dragon. I am wiser now, but nowhere near as wise as a dragon. And I have brought a message from Men."

"Of course they did not trust him. Not a Man," hissed Sskar.

"They trusted this Man," said Sskitter. "Oh I know they did. I know I do."

Sskarma closed her eyes in thought. The other two little dragons were half asleep.

Grandfather Dragon did not answer their questions, but let the story answer the questions for him.





The Great-Grandfather of All Dragons stretched and rose. He unfurled his wings to their farthest point and opened his mouth and roared out gout after gout of flames. All the knights save the white knight knelt in fear then. And then Great-Grandfather pumped his wings twice and leaped into the air. Boulders buffeted by the winds rolled down the mountainside toward the Men.

The Great-Grandmother followed him, roaring as she flew. And they circled around and around in a great, widening gyre that was much too high for the puny Man arrows to reach.

Then the white knight called on all his archers to put down their bows, and the others to put aside their weapons. Reluctantly they obeyed, though a few grumbled angrily and they were all secretly very much afraid.

When the white knight saw that all his knights had disarmed themselves, the white knight held his shield up once more and called out "Come, Worm" in his own tongue. He made the Man sign again, head to heart, shoulder to shoulder. At that signal, the Great-Grandfather of All Dragons and his mate came down. They crested a current of air and rode it down to the knight's feet.

When they landed, they jarred nearly fifty slithes of earth, causing several of the Men to fall over in amazement or fear or from the small quaking of the ground. Then they lowered their heads to Ssgggi.

And the Man walked over to them, and first to the Great-Grandmother and then to the Great-Grandfather he lifted his fist and placed it ever so gently on a certain spot on the nose.

The Great-Grandmother thrummed at this. And then the Great-Grandfather thrummed as well. And the white knight joined them. The two dragons' bodies shook loud and long with their thrumming. And the army of Men stared and then laughed and finally cheered, for they thought that the Great-Grandparents were afraid.

"Afraid? Afraid of puny Men? They were shaking because they were thrumming. Only lower animals like rabbits and lions and deer—and Men—shake when they are afraid. I'll show them afraid!" cried Sskar. He leaped into the air and roared so hard that this time real flames came out of

his nose slits, which so surprised him that he turned a flip in the air and came back to earth on his tailbone, which hurt enormously.

Grandfather Dragon ignored him, and so did the other little dragons. Only Mother Dragon, from her corner in the cave, chuckled. It was a sound that broke boulders.

Sskar limped back proudly to his grandfather's side, eager to hear the rest of the story. "I showed them, didn't I?" he said.

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"Hear this," said the white knight Georgi, first in Man talk and then in the old tongue so that the dragons could understand as well. "From now on dragons shall raid no Man lands, and Men shall leave dragons alone. We will not even recognize you should we see you. You are no longer real to us.

"In turn, dragons will remain here, in this vast mountain wilderness untouched by Men. You will not see us or prey on us. You will not even recognize us. We are no longer real to dragons."

Great-Grandfather roared out his agreement, as did Great-Grandmother. Their roaring shattered a small mountain, which, to this day, Men call Dragon Fall. Then they sprang up and were gone out of the sight of the army of Men, out of the lives of Men.

"Good," said Sskar. "I am glad they are out of our sight and out of our lives. Men are ugly and unappetizing. We are much better off without them." He stretched and curled and tried to fall asleep. Stories made him feel uncomfortable and sleepy at the same time.

But Sskitter was not happy with the ending. "What of Ssgggi?" she said. "Did they ever see him again? Of all Men, he was my favorite."

"And what of the Dragons' Thanksgiving?" said the littlest two, wide awake now.

Sskar was silent, looking far out across the plains, across to Dragon's Fall, where the boulders lay all in a jumble.

Grandfather touched Sskar's shoulder gently. "There is more," he said.

She turned her head to look at him, her black eyes glistening. "I know," she said. "Ssgggi came back. He would have to. He loved them so. And they loved him."

Grandfather shook his head. "No," he said. "He never came back. He could not. Dragons no longer existed for him, except in his heart. Did not exist for him—or for any Men. Of course," Grandfather added, "Men still exist for us. We do not have Man's gift of tongue or of the imagination. What is—for dragons—is. We cannot wish it away. We cannot make the real unreal, or the unreal real. I envy Man this other gift."

Sskarma closed her eyes and tried not to cry. "Never?" she said softly. "He never came back? Then how could there have been a Thanksgiving?"

Dragons keep promises Grandfather continued, for they do not have the imagination to lie. And so Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother and all their children, for they finally had many, and their children's children never bothered Men again. And, since Men did not believe Dragons existed, Men did not bother Dragons. That is what dragons give thanks for. In fact, Men believed that Saint George—as they called him in later years—had rid them forever of Dragons.

And so things have stood to this very day.

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Mother Dragon rose at the story's end. "You have a Man's imagination, old one, though you deny it. You have a gift for making up stories, which is another way of saying you lie. Sometimes I think you are more Man than dragon."

"I tell the truth," growled the old dragon. "This is dragon history." Huffily, he cleaned his front claws.

"It is true that the word history contains the word story," said Mother Dragon. "But that is the only thing I will admit."

Grandfather Dragon houghed, and the smoke straggled out of his nose slits.

"And now if we are to have a real old-fashioned Dragon Thanksgiving, to celebrate the end of stories and the beginning of food, I will have to go hunting again," said Mother Dragon. "A deer I think. I saw a fat herd by Dragon's Fall, grazing on the sweet spring grass."

"May I come?" asked Sskar.

Mother Dragon smiled and groomed his tail for him. "Now that you have real flames you may."



"The others and I will gather chestnuts," said Grandfather. "For the celebration. For Thanksgiving."

Sskarma shook her head. "I would like to stay behind and clean the cave."

The others left without an argument. No one liked to clean the cave, sweeping the bones over the side of the cliff. Mother Dragon and Sskar rose into the air, banked to the left, and winged out of sight so that they could approach the Fall from downwind. Grandfather Dragon and the three young dragons moved slowly along the deeply rutted mountain path.

Sskarma waited until they had all left; then she went out and looked at the great old pine tree that grew near the cave mouth. About five slithes up was a slash of white, the mark left by a dragon nail, a slash they all called Ssgggi's mark. She looked at it for a long time and calculated how quickly trees grow. Then she stood up alongside the tree. The mark came up to her shoulder.

"Ssgggi," she said. Then she said it three more times. The fourth time she said it, it came out "Georgi."

"Georgi," she said a fifth time. This time it sounded right. Smiling quietly to herself, Sskarma glanced around the wilderness and then once into the sky. Far away she could see one of the great silver birds Grandfather always warned them about. "Georgi," she said, and went back in to clean the cave.



Did you feel sympathy for the dragons in the story? Why or why not?

Do you think the dragons have a good reason to celebrate Thanksgiving? Explain your answer.

Why do you think Grandfather Dragon insists on finishing the story for the little dragons?

Why do men exist for dragons while dragons no longer exist for men?

WRITE Grandfather Dragon says that he envies man's gift of imagination. Do you think imagination is a valuable gift? Explain your answer in a paragraph.