

## THE ICE DRAGON

In a green and forested land of towering cliffs and plummeting cataracts and cool, shimmering lakes there lives a memory. The Ice Dragon. What wisdom it had it gained in a year, for its life was as quick and bright as the flames it breathed and a year was as long as it lived.

That ancient year began, as years do, with spring. Bluebells rose through the last fall of leaves and in the hollows and shadows fugitive patches of crusted snow huddled as the sun rose higher with the lengthening days. Ferns unclenched in the warming air and the forest canopy came to life as old trees unfurled their young leaves and young birds unfurled their wings. At that time, in that season, the year was young and changes were everywhere, but these were expected changes; the yearly round of new life in familiar forms. Some changes are unexpected and not all forms are familiar.

At the foot of a mountain, on the northern edge of the forest where the shadows were longer and and to which winter had retreated, was an egg. No bigger than a good throwing stone and coloured like the silty slush that splattered it, the egg lay abandoned in a small depression on gravel and coarse fragments of shale that contrasted with its smooth, featureless shell. This was no place to begin life, but the egg did not choose and could not wait.

The hatchling peeped over the horizon of its cracked shell, sniffing the cool air and trying to focus its eyes. As the blue shadows on the mountainside bleached out at the peak, the snow-cap caught the dawn colour and shone for the first time in the little creature's life. Gurgling happily, the newborn dragon stretched too far towards the soft pink blur of this mock sun and fell, on his back, into the world.

Now he felt the hard shale and the cold slush. Now he could see his own shell and beyond that the trees flickering and filtering the distant glow of the true sun. With the mountain to his back, he struggled out of the depression and picked his way through the shadows of the forest.

He was too young to have many memories, yet his first smells of damp leaves, rotting wood, and fungus excited him in a way that made them seem half familiar. He gently touched a mushroom, but it was too fragile and snapped at the stem startling him. He sniffed it. It had a cosy deep smell. It also had a cool, damp smell, like slush and wet gravel. It was interesting and he tasted it. Only then did the infant dragon realise how hungry he was and in a short time

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the mushroom was gone. He was very full now, but the mushroom had grown in the shadows and the shadows had made him cold. Wondering where the warm, bright light was, he wandered further into the forest.

He was crouched by a lily of the valley, gazing at it, sniffing it, but too full to actually eat it when a sudden, violent noise made him freeze with fear. Dead leaves, splinters of bark, twigs, and the lily of the valley were all thrashed and scattered as a huge strong-smelling animal bolted into the clearing. The terrified dragon cringed, hissing instinctively. With a head like a dead tree, the creature reared above him. Feet like flat stones pummelled the earth around him and, with a sharp, barking call, the roebuck bounded away as quickly as it had come. The young dragon could not move. The flower was gone. The innocence was gone. Now he was aware of danger.

For a long time the dragon stared down at the flattened earth where the deer had tried to kill him. Gradually his muscles relaxed and his breathing became slower and less shallow. Gradually, out of the corner of his eye, his mind noticed something glowing and small. It was a single white blossom from the lily of the valley lying in a shaft of sunlight that seemed to trickle down the trunk of a nearby tree and pool around the blossom at its base. The little dragon stretched out his claws in the warmth of the light and cast his shadow on the forest floor. Looking up along the tree trunk and beyond its branches, he saw the sun itself and had to close his eyes. With his face feeling the light and his feet feeling the bark of the tree, he climbed, high up, past the larger lower branches with their twigs and broad leaves, up into the thin new growth with its unopened buds and fewer shadows.

The dragon could see the forest spreading below him and feel the greater warmth of the unshaded sunshine surrounding him, but it was strange, because as he climbed the sun did not get any larger. It seemed farther away and smaller, almost lost in a sky that had itself grown into a vast backdrop for the little creature's world. The forest, the valley, cliffs and mountain were all dwarfed by the sky. It was so big, so deep, that the dragon felt as if he could almost fall up into it.

The thin twig he clung to swayed breezily. He was dizzy and, although the sun was warm enough, he felt cold and distant. It was hunger. With his eyes half closed and his grip relaxed, he was falling. Scraping against bark, a brief rush of wind, the flicking of leaves breaking his fall, and then feathers. Feathers and

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small twigs, a crackling noise and something sticky. He had fallen onto a nest. A broken egg. Food, and four eggs waiting to be eaten. A mushroom is not enough for a growing dragon and as he looked around the nest and lapped up the white and yolk of the shattered egg he felt stronger, warmer, less tired, and safe.

The other eggs were not broken though, and he had such trouble grappling the smooth surface and trying to get his small, hungry jaws around them that he didn't hear the thrush's return. The sudden shriek, the desperate fury, the frenzied thrusting of the mother's beak threw the terrified dragon into a scrambling panic and he hurled himself from the edge of the nest into the shadows below. As his limbs stretched out for something to cling to, the sagging folds on his sides pulled taut and he almost glided, landing heavily but safely on a spongy patch of leaf mulch between two roots at the foot of the tree. Instinctively, he burrowed under the leaves, bumping into a hidden stone and curling up alongside it. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing. He had nothing to fear, and he slept.

When the dragon awoke, the stone had moved and was now in front of him, just visible where the leaves had been shoved aside by its passing. It took the dragon a moment to recall where the stone had been and to realise that something strange had happened. Although his ribs still hurt from the thrush's attack, he uncurled, slid out from under the leaves, and gently sniffed the stone.

It creaked and a small crack in its surface narrowed slightly. Curious, but confused, the young dragon cautiously backed away and studied the stone. Slowly the crack widened and a solemn, blunt reptilian head eased forward from the middle of the crack with a faint hiss. It wasn't a threatening hiss though; more of a sigh.

The tortoise and the dragon looked at each other for along time; the dragon because he was fascinated and the tortoise because he was naturally slow at everything, but the tortoise was the first to move. Slowly he swung stubby legs out from the sides of his shell, lifted himself more or less clear of the ground, and shuffled off through the leaves.

As different as he was, with his shell, blunt features, and plodding pace, the tortoise still appealed to the dragon. After all, he had scales. He smelled familiar and his beak wasn't the least bit birdlike, so the dragon followed his

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likeable discovery. He remembered the danger of the roebuck's hooves, but wasn't quite so afraid because, for the first time in his life, the dragon didn't feel alone.

The tortoise stopped in front of a young seedling that grew in the shade of more mature trees. Angled on a stem that leaned toward what little light there was were thin, small, dark leaves. They would do and slowly, deliberately, the tortoise cropped them. The dragon was less successful at this and when he did manage to rake and wrench and, finally, roughly tear a piece away he swallowed it whole, for his teeth were very bad at chewing. He remembered the thick, soft, pink mushroom, its taste and its earthy smell, and began to sniff and scratch around in the fallen leaves below the seedling. What he found would have suited the tortoise or the thrush equally well. It was soft and pink, though not so thick, and it was definitely not a mushroom. It was better. The dragon had never eaten a worm before, but he thought he might again. The worm had never met a dragon before and he never would again.

Soon both the dragon and the tortoise were digging in the damp leaves and a second worm was found. The dragon was nearest to it but the heavy shell of the tortoise leaned on him and shoved him sideways. The tortoise's mouth was open and silent and he stretched forward much too slowly as the dragon watched the worm slide away and the clumsy jaws snap shut on nothing. The frustrated dragon tried to push the tortoise's head from the depression in the leaves, but the tortoise only blinked and swung his jaws towards the dragon.

This time the open mouth was not silent. It hissed. Not the softly sighing hiss, but a louder, more forceful, rasping hiss. Then the dragon realised....he really was alone. He wanted to calm the tortoise. He wanted to forget the roebuck and the thrush and the fear, but he didn't know how and yet, after a moment, the tortoise's jaws simply closed, the head drew back, the eyes blinked separately and slowly, and the tortoise half withdrew to the safety of its shell.

Not until the shadow and the hot breath surrounded him did the dragon sense the fox. Teeth grazed the dragon's back, breaking the loose skin but not catching hold, as the dragon bolted behind and scurried under the only thing that seemed familiar and secure; the tortoise's shell. Pawing and rolling the shell to expose the dragon beneath, the fox forgot that the shell was alive and just as frightened as the dragon. The tortoise cringed and powerful muscles quickly closed the box-like shell on two toes of the right forepaw of a now

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equally frightened fox. The more the fox bit and shook the shell, the more the tortoise tightened his grip. With the thudding of the shell on the forest floor, memories of thrashing hooves and thrusting beaks, a vision of teeth bared and a sound that only a fox could make, and the dragon was running as fast as the pain would let him; running away from a forest he once thought beautiful, running back to the stillness of the mountain.

During the long days of long summer months as many changes may take place as happen in the spring. The dragon lived alone on the mountain; avoiding other animals, wistfully watching the sunrise burn the morning mists away and feeling the cool of the evening breeze as night crept over the valley and up to the caves he had made his home.

From there he saw sunsets that were broader and redder than the forest had ever seen. He was aware of the changes in the forest as it grew thick with leaves and shadows, but he was not as aware of the changes in himself. Drinking by cool waterfalls or timidly descending the warmer lower slopes to feed on worms, lichen, alpines, and moss the dragon grew quickly as dragons must if the few that hatch are going to survive. He thought he had grown a little; the caves felt smaller, but familiar things often seem that way and he couldn't see himself. He never met another dragon. His fear kept the forest animals small and safely distant and, as the memories, the pain, and the scar on his back grew with him, he didn't know that the egg from which he had hatched would now be no bigger than his eye.

Autumn came. Leaves flamed with colour and fell, weaving a broad carpet of red, yellow, and copper below bared branches. The forest was thinner, with fewer shadows, but in the open spaces black shapes of animals moved conspicuously, making the dragon feel exposed and frightened. More than ever he tried to hide himself, feeding less often and then only in the twilight before dawn, but he was seen; dimly, imperfectly seen on a ledge at a distance by an eagle.

The eagle did not know what it had seen in the blue shadows below and couldn't gauge its size, but it mistook the hesitant, nervous movements for those of a young animal, an injured animal, an easy animal to kill. It saw what it expected to see and so did the dragon. As the bird's distant, circling silhouette folded its wings and fell silently, with increasing speed towards him, the dragon saw danger. Fear overtook him before the eagle did. Fear pressed him back

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from the rim of the ledge, wedged him against the face of the cliff, and made the threatening bird seem larger than it was. The eagle was coming, there was nowhere to hide, and he did not want to die.

There is in a dragon a kind of magic, or what passes for magic because it is not understood. It was time for magic. It was time for the cowering reptile on the cliff and the hurtling, relentless eagle to learn in one moment what a dragon was.

The eagle sensed that something was wrong, that the hunched creature below was larger than it seemed, and it tried to stop the rapid descent. Flight feathers fingered out from the tips of spread wings like silhouetted branches on a dead tree and as the eagle gave a high, shrill cry memories of the thrush, the roebuck and the fox fused in one horrible moment. In that moment there was magic. The dragon felt his fear flicker into resentment, flare into rage, and lift him towards his tormentor.

Now he was a dragon. His tail and back uncurled, his head lunged, his neck stretched, legs kicked, and great scaly folds of skin pulled taut as he leapt from the ledge on the cliff, lit up the mountain with his first breath of fire, and consumed the eagle as if it was a thrush.

As the dragon swung back to reach the safety of the mountain he saw a vast shadow on the face of the cliff, but it didn't attack him; it flew with him and met him on the ledge. The dragon trembled. His throat was dry. Hesitantly, he glided down to drink at the pools and cascades below. Then the first exhilarating wingbeats swept him up, past the cataract that fed the cascades and up to the mouth of the caves that had sheltered him all those lonely months.

Now he knew what he was, what he could do, and that nothing could ever drive him away again. As the sun rose higher and the shapes of animals began to stir below, he felt powerful and free and unforgiving. He hated them. He hated himself for having been afraid of them and he leapt down the mountainside, flinging his wings wide and roaring with delight at what he could and would do.

It was a beautiful morning. The low yellow sunlight made the late autumn colours even warmer, more golden, but the air was crisp and silver shimmered in the light frost that touched the quiet landscape. Then a bird moved below a

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bush, fluttering frantically to get out from under its branches. A tree fell in the distance and more birds took to the sky. A rabbit, its hair singed, bounded in blind panic out of the north of the wood as a sudden breeze rose in the south, like the forest drawing breath after a sharp pain. Animals scattered like leaves as the wind increased to a roar, meeting and merging with a rising wall of fire that snaked sideways through the trees; rolling around them, searing them, and abandoning them to the smouldering wasteland behind. The evergreen of the pines, the reds and blues of unfallen fruit, and the warm colours of the dead leaves were black.

Within hours it was over, the fire spent, mercifully trapped between the mountain and a river to the south across which most of the animals had fled. As heat rose from the ashes the dragon drifted on motionless wings over a pall of smoke that filled the valley like a cup and filtered the midday sun. He was pleased. He had shown them. He was strong.

Time passed. Light morning frosts became jagged rime, freezing rains lashed the valley glazing the spines of burnt out trees, and then once more, the snows came; layering white on black ash and softening the stark contours of the injured forest. This was the landscape left to the dragon. Dead or dormant, half alive, with a weak winter sun rising half as high over the horizon. Quiet, but not peaceful; not content.

The dragon was restless. He had wanted the forest for himself, but now there was nothing. Nothing moved. The trees, the river, everything was frozen as if waiting for time to move first.

The dragon wanted leaves. He wanted flowers, warmth and life, but they wouldn't return. By now even the fluttering, darting flight of a bird would have captivated him. He didn't fear them anymore. He had, by now, outgrown that and regretted having destroyed so much. But if his heat and fury had driven life away, it was the quiet cold that kept it from returning.

The dragon wandered through this ghost of a forest, digging in the ashes for any life left and breathing on the snow to melt it. The warmed snow ran down over soft ridges of soil and into pools that rippled under the watery sun until thin crystals crossed their surfaces, weaving a lattice of ice. Beneath the snow by one of these frozen pools the dragon found a snowdrop, the edges of its petals frost-burnt and brown. Beside it, below the ashes and under the leaves,

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lay a small, peculiarly shaped stone. He remembered a stone like that, but he remembered it being larger. He remembered digging into soft leaves and curling up against it. He remembered the tortoise, he remembered the fire, and he felt cold.

More than ever the dragon wanted to give life, but he couldn't and the cold was keeping life at bay. The dragon raced above the landscape, billowing flames across the sky and driving the cold air before him; feeling powerful, certain, determined in his anger, determined to breathe living warmth back into the forest...and yet the sky seemed so vast, the low sun so faint, the cold so limitless it was futile. He felt himself tiring, but this only angered him more and he would not stop. He would not land to rest. Instead he flew higher, towards the frozen flanks of the mountain where there were no injured trees, no blighted flowers, no promises of life; only rock, ice, and snow on which to vent his frustration and his fury.

As the dragon circled the mountain, ice erupted into steam from every hissing crack and fissure. Rocks splintered in the heat and soft sheets of melting snow slipped away into clear, splashing freshets. Again flames bathed the mountain and again warmed water washed the foothills and fringes of the forest on its way down to a frozen river. Only the cataract did not move. Gnarled, white buttresses and glinting spikes of ice hung motionless, as if waiting for the dragon....and he came.

The silent fall of cold air was ripped by rising fire and a skim of water shimmered on the frozen mass. In and around the arching ice the dragon flew, as the sound of water on rock reverberated from below. Wings banked and turned and in the orange glare of the dragon's breath a single, glassy stalactite groaned, cracked at its base and broke free. In a moment the tapered shaft fell, tumbled, tore through a wing, and shattered on the shale scree beneath a helpless dragon. Spiralling, thudding, rolling, scraping scales, rock chippings skittering to a stop, and then silence. Silence while the dragon's senses slowly ebbed and returning waves of pain flowed over him...and told him...he was still alive.

The day dwindled into twilight and a cloud flecked sun flickered like a guttering candle that blew out in the evening wind. Above him and the deeper shadows of the valley a sky like black crystal flashed and fired brightly as warmth rising from the flame thawed earth rippled the stars. He wanted to fly.

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He wanted to be in that sky, but he never would again. Shards of ice and shale grated as the dragon moved and melt-water trickled around his feet. He was cold and felt slow and heavy as he began his painful climb along a half remembered route back to the shelter of the caves.

After an hour or so he had reached a spot where the rocks seemed almost familiar and then he saw the caves along a far too narrow ledge. Remembering the last time he had passed that way, he realised how small he must have been and that the caves were now beyond his reach. Even if his wing had not been torn; he was so tired. Perhaps there was shelter higher up. Just a little further. He climbed. The rhythm of his heart, his breathing, each footfall seemed to measure time and time slowed down.

The slope steepened and he rested awhile. On a dry rising wind powdery granules of snow swirled and hissed against the ice encrusted escarpment, sounding like leaves rustling and small cascades. A full moon had risen above the mountain and as the dragon looked up he thought he saw the sun shining down through the mouth of a pit with no walls to climb. He remembered the warmth of that sun and the heat of his fire and breathed once more on the frozen stone. As the water ran down he closed his eyes, lowered his head and smelled the deep, earthy smell of warm, wet rock. The innocence returned. He remembered the forest and, as the ice finally encased him and he became part of the mountain, he heard nothing, saw nothing, had nothing to fear, and he died.

The floods were lower and less violent that spring because of the midwinter thaw. Seeds and soil that might have been washed away remained. Young plants bound the earth with new roots, scarred but living older trees began to bud, and over a new forest with new animals spread a haze of green as delicate as a memory.