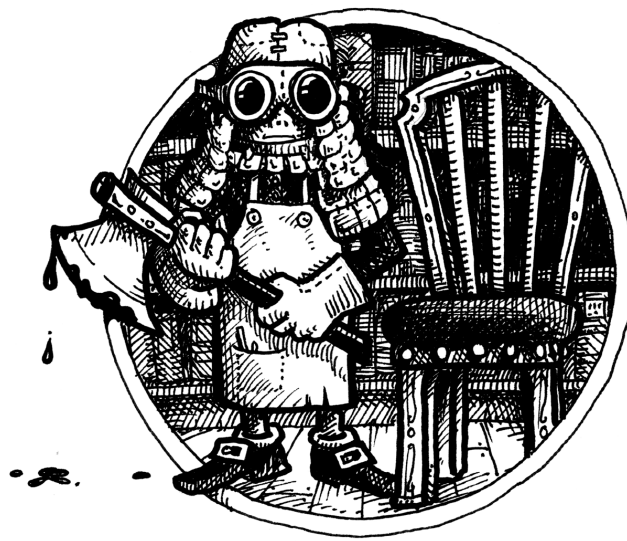


The Firework-Maker and the Dragon

from the Fire story



THERE ONCE WAS A FIREWORK-MAKER* who read so many books about dragons that he became an expert on the subject. And in one of the margins of one of his books he found a tiny fact: *the scales of red dragons are made of solid flame*. The more he thought about it the more he knew that this would be the perfect ingredient for the most splendid—and most expensive—fireworks the world had ever seen. So he set his mind to catching a red dragon and killing it, so he could grind its scales into powder, and become very famous, and very rich.

He arranged a banquet as a trap, with all the kinds of food that he knew would tempt such a creature—curries with the hottest, reddest chillies,

*The firework-maker's story is a retelling of *The Man Who Loved Dragons*, from the old Japanese text *Hagakure*.

sausages made with the spiciest red peppers, and sweet little red biscuits in the shape of salamanders. He dropped invitations written out with crimson ink and tied up with scarlet ribbons into all the hot caves and smoking chimneys he could find, in the hope that one would fall at the feet (or claws) of the right sort of dragon.

He was a man who prepared (you have to think ahead if you are a firework-maker, because all your work is done before the event, so to speak). So he chose an axe made of obsidian, because that gets sharper the hotter it gets, and the sticky poison he dribbled onto it was hardened slowly in a furnace so it wouldn't bubble off. He made an armoured suit of asbestos, because flames bounce right off that, and he blackened his goggles with soot, so his eyes wouldn't smart when the dragon's heart flared up, which his books told him is what happens when the fiery kind of dragons die. And he hid in the shadows right behind his dragon guest's seat of honour, and he waited.

That night a dragon did come to the banquet, a real dragon, red and tall and polite and terrible. He strode into the hall and sat down at the table, and began to eat, dabbing the corner of his mouth from time to time with the red napkin that had been thoughtfully provided.

Although he could not see his host, hidden as he was behind the dragon's seat, the dragon spoke, because to sit and eat such a generous feast without the courtesy of interesting conversation would have been the height of poor manners.

He talked about interesting things only dragons know, about the dragons at the start of the world and about the dragon that will attend its ending.

But the firework-maker heard none of this. The moment the dragon had arrived, red and tall and polite and terrible, the man's heart had gone *pop!* and he had dropped dead of fright. Such is the danger of reading too many books: words are one thing and reality, well, that is quite another.

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THE KNOT-SHOP MAN

four stories concerning Arxnodorum and the knots of fate

This story appears, told in a slightly different form,
in the Fire book of *The Knot-Shop Man*.

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