



Natalie Guttormsson

Ash Lad
and the
Sea Dragon

Some stories need to be retold.

Ash Lad and the Sea Dragon

One quiet evening, long ago, off the northern coast of what we now call Scotland, the frigid black ocean began to churn. The water's surface changed from black to white as the depths started to boil, and the surface became pure froth. No one was around to witness the scaly nose break the surface, nor the eyes as orange as fresh lava pierce the night sky. The ancient sea dragon was awake and hungry from centuries of slumber.

The first thing the sea dragon did was devour the entire nearby hamlet, save for one frightened young girl, who ran straight through the night to the nearest village to seek help.

Word soon reached the King that a monster was threatening the kingdom. His response was to immediately send a team of his best guards to the coast to assess the situation.

When the soldiers arrived at the hamlet and saw the destruction, they knew they were dealing with a dangerous creature. They waited, their determination set to take down the beast.

At dusk, the sea dragon rose out of the water thrashing as before.

The soldiers were no match. The dragon opened its mouth and swept them away with a fast swoop of its head.

One solitary soldier managed to escape, running off in fear back to the village to report the failed mission.

The King was angry and disappointed that his best men had failed. Unwilling to give up, he announced to his kingdom that anyone brave enough to fight and defeat the dragon would win the King's prized sword and be rewarded handsomely with land, animals, and riches.

Over the course of the next week, many men tried and failed. Each night, the sea dragon ventured further inland searching for new feasts. Its slippery body left a slimy trail from its attack all the way back to the coast.

Just as the King was at a loss for a new plan, his only daughter spoke up.

"Father, you must let me have my chance."

The King turned to the Princess and smiled sadly. She was his only child and was the light of his life, full of positivity, kindness, and bravery. While he encouraged her to pursue feminine activities, Princess Gem preferred archery, sword fighting, and axe throwing much more than she did needlepoint, drawing, and dancing. She fully intended to fulfill the role of rightful heir after her father passed on.

The King had to admit that his daughter was the most skilled fighter in his kingdom. If anyone could defeat the sea dragon, it would be her. But he could not bear the idea of putting her in harm's way.

"Alright, my dear, if you must." He sighed.

Meanwhile, on a small farm outside the main village, there lived a hard-working family who had three sons. The two eldest sons were just like their parents, tough, determined, and not afraid of toiling on the farm.

The youngest was different. He was industrious yet clumsy and often absent-minded, frequently causing more work for his older brothers.

When he was asked to help with the planting, he'd forget to cover the seeds with soil, allowing the wind to blow them away.

When he was asked to help with the animals, he'd leave the gates open for them to escape into the fields. His brothers had to drop their chores and round up the fleeing cattle, sheep, and chickens.

And when he was asked to cook the stew, he'd leave it to burn as he stared off into space, lost in his imagination.

The only task he was trusted with was cleaning out the ashes between fires, earning him the nickname of Ash Lad. His brothers teased him relentlessly while his parents ignored him as much as they could.

No one expected anything of him.

They could laugh all they wanted, but Ash Lad knew he was destined for something greater than chores on the farm or sweeping ashes. Someday he would prove himself.

He knew that day had come when he noticed a flyer outside the village tavern, promising plenty of rewards for the slayer of the sea dragon. He instantly had an idea and made a plan to sneak out after dark that night and make his way to the north coast. He was determined to prove himself to his family, his brothers, and the kingdom.

That night, Ash Lad packed a travel bag with some basic food supplies, a small hunting knife, and a flask of water. Then he set off unnoticed into the night.

Princess Gem left her castle at first light and hiked her way to the coastline. She brought nothing but a few provisions to keep her energy up and her father's prized sword for protection. Her plan was to reach the beach early, have a rest while the sun was still high in the sky, then prepare to face the dragon as the night approached.

When she arrived at the hamlet that was first attacked, nothing remained but rubble. She could see the slime trail left by the snake's massive body as it slid further inland each evening. She traced the width of the trail with her feet. It was over thirty paces across. She let out a whistle in surprise.

"Um, hello?" Called a male voice from the edge of the cliff. "Is anyone there?"

Princess Gem drew her sword and walked cautiously to the edge of the rocks.

On a ledge not far below her, there was a young man who had obviously slipped, narrowly avoiding falling all the way down to the ocean.

"What are you doing down there?" She asked him.

"Nothing, I'd rather be up there. Can you help me out?"

Princess Gem looked around and spotted a clothing line still intact. She untied it, then wrapped it around the closest tree before lowering the other end to the young man.

"Grab hold, and pull yourself out." She directed.

He did so with little grace. But in a few minutes, he was scrambling to his feet at the top of the cliff.

"Thank you, my lady. I am in your debt. If you had not wandered by, I would be a goner."

Princess Gem scoffed.

"I'm not *wandering* by. I'm here for the dragon." She declared, putting her sword away.

The young man's eyes grew wide.

"Me too." He said.

This time, Princess Gem laughed. How could a young man who nearly threw himself over a cliff by accident hope to defeat a sea dragon? She stopped laughing when she realized he was serious.

"What are you doing?" She asked as she watched him retrieve a pot from the remains of a hearth in the rubble.

He lifted the lid to reveal burning embers inside.

"What are they for?" She asked, wary of his strange behaviour.

"It's all part of my plan." He told her. "When the sea dragon surfaces, I'm going to run inside its mouth before it can bite me. Once I'm inside, I'll make my way into its stomach and place the hot embers inside its spleen. That should take him down."

Princess Gem looked at him in bewilderment. The man was clearly mad.

"How will you get out?" She asked him.

"I don't know. Either I'll be ejected from its mouth or die inside. The point is to kill the monster."

He was courageous; she gave him credit for that. She realized that his plan sounded only half crazy next to hers, which was to slice the dragon's head off. But with a thirty-foot diameter, she was beginning to doubt her own plan.

"My name is Ash Lad, by the way, and I could use a skilled fighter." He said. "What if we attacked together?"

Princess Gem thought about it for a moment. Ash Lad was a strange name, but then again, only a peculiar person would go up against a dragon, so she agreed.

She scanned the coastline, looking for the best place to await the beast.

"It will come out of the water there." She declared.

Ash Lad looked to where she pointed and agreed. His eyes began to scan the beach far below them, where he spotted a small rowboat not far up the beach. There was also a steep path winding its way down to the sand.

He pointed it out to her.

"Let's not wait for the beast to come ashore; let's wait for it in the water." He suggested.

Princess Gem liked that idea.

"Let's check it out." They carefully made their way down the steep, twisting path to the beach below.

They still had a few hours before dusk, so together, they pushed the boat into the water and climbed in. They were pleasantly surprised that it felt solid and had no leaks.

"In a few hours, we'll row out onto the water and wait for it to surface."

Ash Lad nodded.

They beached the boat and sat down in the sand to wait.

After a long pause, Ash Lad spoke up.

"Who are you?" He asked with curiosity. Not many people in the kingdom would be brave or stupid enough to volunteer to face the dragon. He could tell she wasn't stupid.

"My name is Gem. Princess Gem." She added.

Ash Lad stared at her, his mouth agape. He'd heard rumours that the Princess was the most skilled fighter in the kingdom. He had no knowledge of weaponry or fighting, even though he could accidentally cause massive destruction with only a rake or fire iron when he was lost in his thoughts. Like the time he burned down the hay shed because he'd been imagining he was fighting a bear, waving the hot poker in the air, igniting all the hay around him.

"Why are you doing this?" He asked her.

"To defend my people." She said. "Who are you?"

"I'm nobody until I kill this monster." He sighed.

Princess Gem frowned. "You must still have a real name, Mr. Nobody, and don't tell me it's Ash Lad."

"My family calls me Ash Lad." He sighed. "You may as well call me that too. Once we finish this task, I'll choose my own name. A name that is bold and strong and memorable."

"Okay, Ash Lad. When this is done, you tell me what you want to be called, but until then, I'm just gonna call you Ash."

Hearing her say *Ash* without the usual derision attached to it made him smile.

When they finished sharing their food, the sun began to touch the horizon.

"It's time." Princess Gem declared.

They climbed into the boat. Princess Gem rowed while Ash Lad carefully cradled his pot of embers, fanning them often to keep them alive.

"How will we know when it will surface?" Ash Lad asked.

"The water will show us."

They rowed further out onto the water and waited. Neither spoke as the minutes ticked by. They only exchanged determined looks for what they were about to do.

Finally, the water began to stir around them, and the boat started to rock as the beast rose nearby, its large nose right before them. Princess Gem grabbed the oars and rowed their boat as fast as she could into the path of the sea dragon's mouth, which opened wide with a large yawn, allowing air and seawater to flood inside.

"Now!" Ash Lad shouted.

Princess Gem rowed faster, steering them right into the mouth of the monster. As the jaws clamped shut, everything went dark around them, and the stench was nearly unbearable. Princess Gem pulled out a small torch from under her cloak and lit it from the embers in Ash Lad's pot.

They abandoned their boat and began to run down the throat of the sea dragon. Neither of them had ever been inside a dragon before, but Ash Lad had imagined it many times. He knew that if they ran far enough, they would encounter the stomach and, beyond that, the spleen.

The pair ran until their lungs were heaving, and their legs were burning from having to constantly re-balance as the dragon swam. After making their way through different openings and spongy surfaces, they finally reached a cold, dark red mass that was slightly spherical in shape. Ash Lad knew it must be the spleen. He had dissected many dead snakes as a kid, pretending they were dragons he had slain. The organs of a sea dragon had to be similar to those of snakes. He only prayed Princess Gem wouldn't ask him how he knew this.

He pointed to it, and Princess Gem nodded without comment. She reached for her sword and sank the blade into the tissue, tearing a deep hole. Ash Lad removed the lid from his pot and blew on the embers, watching them glow red before dumping them into the hole. Princess Gem pushed the burning pieces deeper into the tissue with her blade.

They paused, waiting for an indication that the plan would work. The floor beneath them suddenly shifted, causing them to lose their balance and the pot to fly out of Ash Lad's hands.

"RUN!" Princess Gem shouted, grabbing his hand to pull him to his feet.

They sprinted as fast as they could back up the long body of the beast, desperate to get away. They stumbled many times as the sea dragon thrashed about, but they managed to move at a decent pace by working together. Ash Lad was sure he could smell the salt air when a gurgling sound behind them caught him by surprise.

In horror, Princess Gem and Ash Lad glanced over their shoulders just in time to see a tidal wave of green sludge rising behind them.

Ash Lad bumped into something solid. Their boat, he thought. He grabbed Princess Gem's hand and pulled her as hard as he could towards the boat. They both managed to scramble inside it as the dragon's mouth flew wide, followed by a deafening belch. With both of them inside clinging for dear life, the boat was launched out of the dragon's mouth on a wave of green slime. They came crashing down onto the water only metres away from the beach.

When it was clear that both were unscathed, only covered in the sticky, smelly slime, they burst into laughter, relieved to be alive.

Princess Gem suddenly pointed to the sea. "Ash, look at that!"

He spun around to watch the sea dragon shake and twist in agony. It thrashed in the water, moving further and further away from the coast until they could see it no more.

Ash Lad looked back at Princess Gem. They burst into another round of laughter at their success.

Above them, further up the beach, stood a crowd of onlookers. Word had spread fast through the village that the Princess had set out to fight the dragon. Even the King stood amongst his people, a look of stunned disbelief across his face. His expression turned to relief as he spotted his daughter in the boat below.

"Your plan worked." Princess Gem beamed at Ash Lad.

"It wouldn't have worked without you." He told her.

When they returned to the castle, and after a good scrubbing to remove the stench and slime, both Princess Gem and Ash Lad were celebrated as heroes. At the feast that night, the King officially declared Princess Gem would be his rightful heir and was destined to become Queen Gem after him.

The King was true to his promise and offered Ash Lad many great riches, including prime farmland from his own estate, along with animals and resources. Before Ash Lad could speak, Princess Gem intervened.

"I have a better idea, father."

Ash Lad passed his rich reward onto his family and instead took up the position of Royal Librarian, where he was able to spend his days doing what he loved most: getting lost in daydreams and reading books.

And when Princess Gem asked him what name he wanted to be called, he replied: "I think I'll stick with *Ash*. It's grown on me."

As for the sea dragon, it was never seen again in those parts. They say that as the dragon desperately tried to put out the fire in its belly, it bashed its head against the sea so hard that several teeth flew out. Those teeth formed new islands that would come to be known as the Orkneys, Shetlands, and the Faroe Islands.

And what of the body, you ask? The great dragon curled itself up a bit further west and settled into a deep slumber to heal, occasionally spewing smoke and flames from its burning core.

That great mass is a place we know today as Iceland.