

# The Dragon's Tear

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*Once there was a boy who lived in the foothills of a great mountain range. His job was to take the sheep each day up into the high valleys to graze. His task wasn't hard because his dog did almost all the work.*

She herded the sheep, guarded them as they grazed, and brought them back to him at the end of the day. The boy usually found a shady spot where he could sit and play his tambouritza. He loved the old songs that his grandparents would sing and play each night. While the sheep fed, he would sit and play each song over and over again until he knew it by heart.

One day, he and his dog took the sheep deeper into the hills than ever before. There they found a hidden valley with long, lush grass. When the sheep saw the grass they ran into the valley with the dog at their heels. The boy explored the gray hills around him and soon found a rocky cliff. Against the face of the cliff there was a cave so dark that he could only see a few feet into it. At the mouth of the cave there was a big rock, and there he sat down to play his songs. He played for an hour. He played for two. And then he got hungry. He put down his instrument and reached for his lunch. That's when he heard a low and rumbling voice coming from behind him.

"Don't stop playing." The boy looked around, reached for his tambouritza, and was going to run when the voice said, "Please." So the boy played.

After the boy had finished, the voice in the cave told him a story. Then the boy played again, and the voice told him another story. And so it went, all day, story for song, song for story. At the end of the day the boy was filled with wonder. The voice in the cave asked, "Will you come again?" And the boy said, "Yes, tomorrow."

Every day the boy returned to the cave. And every day he heard more stories. Stories of knights in battle, stories of adventure, stories of romance, stories of great humor and great sadness, stories of promises kept and promises broken.

One day, the boy stayed later than usual. As the sun dropped low over the valley, the voice in the cave grew sad and began to tell its own story, one of loneliness and fear. As the boy listened, he understood that the storyteller was the last of its kind.

Soon the rays of the evening sun began to reach deeper and deeper into the dark cave. As the boy watched, he saw the light glint off razor-like talons and climb up powerful legs. Then it reached a huge body that was covered with scales and stretched deep into the darkness.

Finally, the light followed a long, serpent-like neck that arched to hold a great head. Wreathed in smoke and framed by curving horns, the head

swayed as the creature spoke. The boy was looking at a dragon.

As he stared at this amazing sight, the boy saw one tear fall from the dragon's eye. Stepping forward, the boy reached out and touched a leathery wing. Suddenly, the great golden eyes of the dragon flew open.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" he roared.

The boy laughed. "No."

"I could rip you apart with my claws."

The boy smiled.

"I could reduce you to a pile of ashes with a single breath."

The boy looked deep into the dragon's eyes. "I can't be afraid of you," he said. "I know your story."

The dragon stared deep into the boy's eyes and nodded. "Will you come tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Every day, for many days, the boy came back to listen to the dragon's tales and share the songs of his village. One day, as the sun began to set, the boy picked up his tambouritza and turned to face the dragon. "Why do you stay here alone? You could live in the village. My people would love your stories."

The dragon laughed. "Your people and my people have been at war for a thousand years. If I came to your village, the men would all reach for their swords and spears and there would be a great battle. Many would die, maybe even I."

As the dragon spoke, the boy realized that the dragon's words were true. He made himself a promise to find a way to help his friend.

That night he listened to his grandparents sing and play. When the music stopped, his grandmother said, "Isn't it sad that no one comes to visit our village anymore? They all go to the village by the river. And we have such good singers, don't you think?"

Hearing his grandmother's words, the boy had an idea. Without waiting for even a minute, he ran to the mayor's house and pounded on the door. The mayor answered the door with a gruff "What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Is it true that people have stopped visiting our village?"

"Yes, everyone has forgotten us. Why do you ask?"

"I know someone who could bring the people back. A storyteller. A truly great storyteller."

The mayor smiled. "A storyteller. Yes, everyone likes a good story! I'll go and meet this teller tomorrow and invite him to our village."

Quickly the boy answered, "No. That will never do. You see, he is very shy. He lives in a cave. You will scare him."

"A shy storyteller? I've never heard of such a thing. How am I going to meet him?"

"Well, maybe if you were blindfolded you wouldn't scare him."

"Blindfolded?!"

"Yes. I'll take you and the village elders to meet him. My dog and I will lead you there."

The next morning the boy and his dog led the mayor and the village elders to the dragon's cave. Before they reached the top of the last hill, the mayor and all the elders pulled their blindfolds up and tied them fast. Holding hands, they followed the boy. When they reached the mouth of the cave, they sat in a circle on the ground. The dragon slowly stepped out into the light and began to tell his stories. He told them stories of adventure that stirred their blood, stories of romance that warmed their hearts, funny stories that had them rolling on the grass. The dragon told them sad stories that made them cry through their blindfolds. Finally, he told them his own story of loneliness. As he spoke, one great tear rolled down his face and landed on the mayor's hand.

Slowly the mayor lifted his blindfold, looked down at the rear, and then looked up. With one hand he reached out and touched the dragon. With the other hand he touched the woman next to him. She took off her blindfold and reached out. Around the circle it went, until each person was touching the dragon.

The dragon opened his golden eyes and looked at the mayor. The mayor looked back. He saw an ancient face, creased with untold years of wisdom. "We have come to ask you an important question," he said. "Will you come to our village and be our storyteller?"

In an instant, the dragon replied. "Yes. Yes, I will."

The mayor turned and looked at all the surrounding hills. Then he turned to face the drag-

on again. "May we ask one favor?" he said with a smile.

"Anything," roared the dragon.

"May we have a ride?"

The mayor, the village elders, the boy, and the dog climbed up onto the dragon's back. He unfolded his huge wings and flew them home. People came from far and near to hear the dragon's stories of promises kept and promises broken.

Years later, when the dragon passed on, he didn't die alone in a cave. He died surrounded by his friends, his great head resting on the lap of a man who had once been a boy and had sung him songs. All the hate and all the fear had disappeared with one tear. ❁