

The Chef & The Dragon

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DEDICATION

To my children. Be diligent.

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Once upon a time, there lived a young man named Zhu. He lived on a small farm with his mother and father. Down the road lived his aunt and uncle, who were potters. They all lived in a small village, a long way from the capital. They were poor, but they enjoyed their lives.

Zhu wanted to be a chef when he grew up. He loved food, all food. He loved dumplings, noodles, rice, beef, pork, and chicken. He loved green vegetables, fragrant mushrooms, and aromatic spices. He spent his free time in the kitchen, helping his mother cook.

His family did not believe in him, though.

“You’ll be a farmer like me,” said his father.

“You’ll be a merchant in town,” said his mother.

“You’ll be potters like us,” said his aunt and uncle.

The years went on and Zhu spent his time helping his father in the field and his mother in the kitchen.

As he tilled the field one day, his uncle came with bad news. The capital had been invaded and the country was getting ready for war.

“You’ll be a soldier now,” said his uncle.

“You’ll be a general one day,” said his father.

“You’ll be dead!”, his poor mother wailed. “You must leave and go far, far away!”



So, Zhu packed a few things - a big, sharp knife, some rice, and some spices, and traveled to the coast. He tried to get passage on a ship. He had no money to buy a berth, so the captains laughed at him and chased him off the docks.

Finally, one captain agreed to let him work during the voyage to earn his keep. Zhu eagerly agreed and off he sailed.

On the voyage, he offered to help cook in the galley, but the ship's cook did not want the help. So, Zhu spent the voyage swabbing the decks and trying not to get seasick.

At long last, the ship made its way across the ocean. When the lookout cried, "Land Ho!", Zhu ran to the bow of the ship to look. As they neared the port, Zhu could see the land was foggy and steep. In the distance, he could see mountains.

He left the ship at port with the sailors. Almost instantly, they were surrounded by soldiers. The soldiers forced Zhu and the sailors to march high into the mountains. As they went, a soldier explained to Zhu that they served a great, black dragon who lived in den high in the mountains. He had terrorized the town for a long time. Now, even new arrivals at the port were to be brought to the dragon, to see if they would make fitting servants.



When they arrived at the den, Zhu could hardly believe his eyes. It was not just a dingy hole in the Earth, but a cave that had been carved into a palace. Before him stretched a great hall, lit red by ornate pillars filled with fire. The ceiling glittered with the Dragon's many golden treasures, carefully laid out in swirling patterns. All around, servants and artisans dashed to and fro.

The soldiers took the captives to a much duller hall made of grey, square blocks. There, they placed a talking hat on each person's head. The hat called out the type of work the person would be best at: "Guard! Housekeeper! Sculptor!"

Zhu's turn came and soldiers put the hat on his head. "Cook!" it announced.

"Well," Zhu thought to himself, "if I have to be stuck here working for this horrible dragon, at least I can do something I enjoy."

After Zhu, two more of the group were assigned cooking duties. The three of them were led to the kitchen. Zhu had never seen so much fine, strange food before. There were whole cellars full of fruits and vegetables, barrels of flour, casks of wine and beer, a butchery full of dried, savory meats, and every type of pot, pan, and knife a chef could wish for.



Then, the head guard told the cooks what would happen, “Each night, one of you will cook a meal for His Terror. The best cook will be granted his freedom. The others will stay here and work for the rest of their lives. You will start tomorrow.”

The next night, the three cooks drew straws to see in what order they would cook. Zhu drew the longest straw and would cook last.

So, the first cook began to decide what to cook. He did not last very long until he began crying and retreated to a cellar. When dinner time came, the guards hauled him from the cellar and took him before the dragon.

“Where is my dinner?” bellowed the beast.

“This is very unfair, my lord,” whimpered the poor man, “I have never been trained in cooking. What chance do I have against the others? Surely, I cannot compete with them. You must give me time and education to be worthy of preparing your dinner.”

The dragon paused for a moment, glowering, and then said, “You may be right. Let me see what you have prepared anyway.”

“I have n... nothing”, stammered the cook.

The dragon then became very angry. He was quite hungry, so, in a fit of famished rage, he ate the cook.



The second night, it was the next cook's turn. Like the man before him, he did not get very far before he became upset.

He became very angry and stormed off to the butchery, where he took a big knife from the butcher. When dinner time came, he tried to fight the guards, but they hauled him from the butchery just the same and took him before the dragon.

“Where is my dinner?” the dragon roared.

“There is no dinner!” the angry cook yelled, “You cannot expect me to work in this environment. There is far too much hostility and fear! I only work when I am comfortable.”

The dragon's lips slid back into a grin; wisps of smoke escaped between his teeth. “Ah, you are not comfortable? Perhaps I can arrange something cosier for you?”

“Yes, you had better!” demanded the cook.

And with that the dragon roasted him with fire and ate him.



Finally, it was Zhu's turn. He had heard from the guards what happened to the other cooks, he would not make the same mistakes.

Now, the kitchen contained many fine ingredients which Zhu had never seen. He wasn't sure what to do first or what the dragon would expect, but he remembered that flour and water made dumplings, pork was a good choice to fill them, and onions went well with anything. He could heat up a batch of oil and fry the dumplings to make potstickers.

Soon, Zhu was happily at work. As he started cooking the first batch, curious guards got a whiff of the smell.

"What is that amazing smell?" they asked greedily.

Zhu showed them the dumplings and said, "If you help me stuff them, there will be more than even His Terror can eat and you can have some too."



The soldiers agreed and began helping stuff dumplings as Zhu cooked them in oil. As the scent wafted through the palace, more and more soldiers came to the kitchen. Soon, Zhu had them making dumplings of all kinds: pork, chicken, shrimp, mushroom, spinach, leeks, and more.

Finally, Zhu was called before the dragon.

“Where is my dinner?” the dragon boomed, his voice echoing through the hall.

Zhu produced a large tray of dumplings.

“Ah, finally,” the dragon growled, “a little effort.” With that, he devoured the entire tray of dumplings.

“Those were very good little man, I hope for your sake there are more.”

“More and different,” replied Zhu proudly. He waved to a guard who brought in another tray of dumplings.

And so it went, the guards running back and forth and the dragon hungrily gulping down tray after tray, until finally the dragon was stuffed. He lay down, fat and satisfied, and held up a scaly hand, “no more.”

Barely awake, he looked at Zhu... and burped. “I think you will have to stay”. The beast had barely said the words when he fell asleep.

Dejected, Zhu went back to the kitchen. He found the soldiers merrily enjoying the many leftover dumplings and even a keg of beer.



When they saw that Zhu was sad, they tried to cheer him up. But it was no use. Zhu only wanted to leave.

At last, the soldiers, feeling brave after their hearty dinner, decided to take up with their boss on Zhu's account. They grabbed their swords and spears and marched noisily into the hall, clamoring for Zhu to be released as promised.

The dragon awoke angrily. In no mood to have his ruling questioned, he snatched at the nearest soldier. He was feeling sluggish after his big dinner, however, so he missed. The soldiers, seeing their chance to defeat the tyrant, charged.

A noisy battle ensued, but the fat, full dragon was no match for the angry soldiers. The soldiers cut off his head and carried it back to the kitchen.



“You’re free! We’re free! Everyone is free!” they cheered.
And so it was.

That very night, Zhu and the soldiers and all of the dragon’s servants marched down from the mountain. They carried with them all the golden treasures the dragon had stolen from the townspeople over the years. The people in town greeted them with cheers.

Zhu and the soldiers spent the next few days working to return the treasures to their rightful owners, but they could not find everyone. Despite their best efforts, they still had a big pile of gold left over.

So, they split it amongst themselves. Some soldiers left to see the world, others bought houses and settled down.



Zhu used his share to finally open his own restaurant. He sent for his family, who joined him.

“You’ll be a great chef,” said his mother.

“You’ll be famous,” said his father.

“You’ll bring another plate of dumplings here, please” laughed his uncle.

And all three of those came to pass. Zhu became a famous chef and lived happily ever with his family in the foggy town by the sea.

THE END



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nelson lives in New York with his wife and growing family. He works in advertising during the day and writes little fairy tales for his children at night.

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