



The Legend of the Dragon

Fruit

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Animals, Mythology

5 min read

T Tâm's wagon was stuck in the mud puddle in the middle of the road. Underneath the wheel was a big pothole that was not there the day before. Finally after much effort and soiling her entire áo t thân, she managed to push the wagon out of the snare of the mud hole.

Of course, it was not all her effort: she also had to thank her bulls for pulling the wagon from the front. At last, she was back on her journey to the market with her pushing the wagon from behind. Unlike the other farmers, she did not think of sitting on the wagon and hitting her bulls with a stick to steer them; doing so seemed to be adding on to their burden and it felt too cruel.

It took some time for her to finally reach the market and she was immediately greeted by the snide remark of her neighbor, M nh Chi n. "Here comes the weirdo who pushes the wagon for her cows! And look, what a 'beautiful' outfit she is wearing!" This brought a round of laughter from some of his friends.

M nh Chi n reminded T Tâm of those pesky rats that occasionally invaded her farm, with his small frame, pointy chin and fraying mustache. He owned the farm right beside hers and had always been jealous of T Tâm's father's success with his farm and so had always picked on her whenever possible.

Ignoring him had been T Tâm's learned response, so instead, she focused her attention on finding a good spot

at the market to peddle her corns.

With nearly a hundred stalls selling all kinds of produce, the market was always brimming with energy. This was especially so after a heavy rain like the one last night that brought out the parade of such fine weather that morning. However, it seemed even more so that particular morning with a crowd gathered at the center of it.

“It was huge! And I saw it fly right over my house!”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just an eagle or a bat?”

“Old friend, you think I am so muddleheaded that I can’t tell the difference between a bat and a dragon?”

The word ‘dragon’ caught T Tâm’s attention and she immediately pulled the reins to her bulls over to where the group of people were.

The old man continued, “I swear the wings were so huge that even on a dark rainy night, it still cast a giant shadow over my house.” This bought some gasps from the crowd.

Someone else from the crowd said, “We must tell the king! Get him to send some men over to kill this menace or our lives will be in danger.”

“Ha! Ha! You think the King cares about our lives? I think he’ll be more interested in getting the dragon’s essence! I heard it can grant eternal life!” another man said.

“Shhh! Don’t be impudent! The king has ears everywhere.” At those words, silence fell over the crowd and they started to scatter, as did T Tâm who went on to set up her stall.

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It had been a tiring day selling her corns but many shoppers seemed to take pity on her for the fact that she was soiled with mud so her corn sold particularly well that day. Feeling uncomfortable covered in dirt the whole time, she was glad to be finally back at the barn. Her family barn was one of the biggest in the farmlands with matching large barn doors that felt impossible to push open that day.

When she finally succeeded, she led her bull into the barn and began to detach its harness. Surprisingly, she heard snoring.

Some of the animals did laze around in the afternoon, but they had never snored so loudly before.

Furthermore, the intensity of each snore shook the ground she stood on. It seemed to be coming from behind the huge stack of hay at the far end of the barn.

Curious, she tiptoed towards the earthshaking snores only to be greeted with a monstrous face that in itself, was the size of one of her swine.

*The dragon!*

On any other day, given any other circumstances of seeing such a beast, T Tâm would have bolted out of the barn, screaming her lungs out. However, the fact that the other animals in the barn did not seem threatened by its presence told her that the dragon was likely harmless.

She studied the dragon. It was fully leaf green with a scaly body and spikes running along its spine. Having expected it to be much bigger after hearing what the man at the market had said, T Tâm found its four-legged body rather slender. Nonetheless it still was big and looked to be like the size of those elephants that the loggers in the forest used to carry their logs.

As T Tâm inched closer to study it more intently, the dragon suddenly opened its eyes bringing her eye-to-eye with the beast. Taking a step back, T Tâm's eyes grew wider as they followed its head, risen by its long neck to tower over her.

Without opening its mouth, the dragon began to speak telepathically to T Tâm. *"Thank you for letting me rest just a while more. I'm sorry to have trespassed your barn without your permission but it was raining heavily last night. The animals here said you were kind and suggested that I take shelter here."*

T Tâm had opened her mouth and wanted to speak but instead, opted to do it using the voice in her mind instead. Can you hear me?

*"Yes I can,"* it replied, without opening its mouth again.

*How do you do that?* T Tâm found it very strange to be communicating with another without moving her lips.

*"I'm the guardian of all beasts, including humans. I can read your mind and communicate through it. I can sense you're as kind as what the animals made you out to be"*

There was calmness in the way it spoke but T Tâm was still curious as to why she did not fear the fearsome-looking beast. *Why would the animals in the barn help you? Shouldn't they be afraid of you?*

*"They know I would not harm them. A person who does no evil do not have to be afraid of ghost knocking on their doors at night. Similarly, you are of pure heart and hence have nothing to fear of me."*

*Won't you eat them?*

*"It is true I eat meat. But I'm more of a scavenger than anything. I do not actively hunt and instead, feed on dying animals."*

Just then, a ruckus could be heard coming from outside the barn.

"Ông , it's obvious you are hiding the dragon inside! Don't tell me you want to claim the king's reward all for yourself?"

*Stay here!* T Tâm instructed the dragon before heading out of the barn to find M nh Chi n with a few of the other farmers harassing her father. Ông Hai was a medium sized man that had a kind face with an easy smile. However, he was not smiling then.

"...The king heard this morning that there was a sighting of dragon here and immediately issued a reward! 100 gold for credible intel that leads to its capture, 500 gold for a live catch! Please don't pretend you don't know about hundreds of troops he has just stationed just north of here."

"What's happening here?" T Tâm asked as she walked towards her father.

"These people insist that there's a dragon in our farm!" her father responded.

Pointing to the pathway, M nh Chi n immediately proclaimed, "Yes! We found its claw prints along the pathway that led here. In fact, it led right to the barn! It's inside there isn't it?" M nh Chi n's accusing eyes seemed to see right through her.

Not used to lying, T Tâm stammered an unconvincing answer which ended up sounding incoherent.

Coming to her aid, her father quickly stepped in, arguing, "Don't be ridiculous, if we have a gigantic beast

inside the barn like you said, then the barn wouldn't be as quiet as it is now would it?"

Some of the farmers nodded their heads and muttered in agreement.

Refusing to admit defeat, M nh Chi n raised his voice even louder and proclaimed, "For all you know, all your animals have been slaughtered by that beast which is why they are all so quiet! For the safety of your family and everyone else's, we're going to check your barn!"

Without waiting for a response, he shoved T Tm's father aside and stomped towards the barn.

"No!!!" T Tm's resistance did little to stop the group of strong men. Preparing for the worst as they opened the barn, she immediately winced and covered her eyes. Surprisingly, no declaration of discovery came. She slowly uncovered her eyes to see the farm animals minding their own business with no dragon in sight. The men stood at the door and craned their heads into the barn to peer inside the barn but could not find anything out of the ordinary.

Ông Hai sprang in front of the intruders and say, "You've seen for yourself that everything here is fine. May I remind you that you are trespassing on my farm!" He firmly shut the barn door in their face.

Stumped, the men turned to M nh Chi n who looked around flusteredly. "Then... obviously it must have just made a stop here last night before flying into the mountains! That direction my friends! Let's get our 100 gold pieces reward!"

The rowdy bunch cheered and hurriedly left the farm towards the mountains. After everyone left, T Tm's father went back into the barn with her and said, "So, where's the dragon?"

"Dragon!?! Err...! There's no...."

"You know you're bad at lying. If there was no dragon in the barn, you wouldn't have reacted the way you did!"

Realising that there was no way she could lie to her father, she said in admission, "I really don't know. It was here before I left the barn."

*"I'm right here Mr. Tr n.* The dragon appeared right in front of them. It had changed the color of its skin to camouflage itself against the walls.

*"Did he... are you speaking through your mind?"* asked T Tm's father without speaking. T Tm was surprised that

she could hear her father's thoughts too.

"Yes." Then turning to T Tâm, the dragon added, *"And yes, you can hear it too because I can link thoughts of people, though only for a short distance."*

*Wow! That's amazing Mr. Dragon.*

*"Please, call me Yù."*

*"Chào b n Yù. What brings you here?"* greeted Ông Hai.

*"Sorry for taking refuge in your barn. As you can tell, many people are after me for whatever reason."*

*"They are probably after you because of the gruesome things dragons have done."*

*"Just like humans, there are good dragons and also bad dragons. I belong to the tribe that advocates peace. At least, that's what my parents taught me before they were killed by bounty hunters."*

*"Won't you try to seek revenge against those hunters by burning down their village?"* Ông Hai asked.

*"My parents are dead. Killing more innocent villagers won't bring them back. But I can continue to let my parents live through me if I follow their words and value. I was taught to repay even treachery with kindness."*

*"Then you'll find yourself at home with us. We also believe in kindness,"* said Ông Hai with a smile.

And so, that began Yù's stay with the Tr n family.

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A few weeks had passed since Yù started staying with them. Through him, T Tâm was able to better understand the needs of the animals. For example, it turned out, the bulls did not mind her sitting on the wagon while they were pulling the cart because she was not very heavy. In fact they did not even feel her weight.

Yù also shared with her stories of land far beyond, like the lands beyond the mountains. Through him, T Tâm heard of lands which were covered entirely with sand, and seas so vast, one would not see land for miles. However, what had always fascinated her the most were the mountains to the south, beyond the forest. They seemed so small and so close but no matter how she walked she could never reach them by foot.

I've always wondered how it looked like to see my own house from the mountains.

"Well one day, given the opportunity, I can take you there!"

That's a promise! But not now, there's still a reward for you. T Tâm gave a worried look before asking *Why does the King want you anyway?*

"He wants my essence. It has the power to heal and give longevity to any other living being."

What's essence?

"It's what some people would call a soul, or your inner energy."

How can anyone take your inner energy?

"They can't... You'll have to give it to them yourself by channeling it onto an object."

Channel?

"Yes. Why don't you try it? Come sit here!" Yù pointed with his claw to a spot underneath him. T Tâm did as she was told.

"Close your eyes and take slow deep breaths," instructed the dragon. T Tâm did as she was told. At first it's all quiet, and darkness. Then she heard Yù's voice and began to follow it. Then in the shroud of darkness, a pinkish flame appeared. T Tâm reached out to touch it and felt warmth coursing through her and a sense of blissfulness she could not explain.

"Now focus it and then try moving the energy to another part of your body." Concentrating, she was able to feel the warm energy in her heart before being moved to her head and other parts of the body

She opened her eyes, dazed in blissfulness. She was able to control her inner energy!

Yù smiled back proudly.

However, this period of bliss proved to be short-lived.

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It all changed one day, after T Tâm came back from the marketplace.

In order to feed Yù, T Tâm had to sell extra corn to buy him food. This was because the family refused to let him go out to hunt on its own, for fear that he would be spotted again. For the camouflage to work, he would have to stand completely still against a still background. This explained why the old man at the market was able to spot Yù flying in the rain the other day.

At first, the Tr n family were still able to support it but having ten children, with T Tâm being the eldest at sixteen, Yù's appetite proved too much to handle. Furthermore, T Tâm's sudden "appetite" for meat at the market began to draw the suspicion of her neighbors.

So, after another tiring day at the market, T Tâm had brought back meat for Yù. After closing the door to the barn, she dragged the meat off the wagon to the deep end of the barn and dropped it in front of him, who was more than happy to gobble it down.

It was then that M nh Chi n jumped out from the haystack near the barn door, shouting, "Ah ha! I knew you were hiding the dragon all along! Everyone must know about this!"

Unbeknown to T Tâm, M nh Chi n had snuck up to the back of her wagon and hid himself on the ledge at the back. After she pulled the bulls and wagon into the barn, he had quietly gotten off and concealed himself behind the haystack before the moment when he saw the dragon.

In panic, T Tâm quickly ran towards him, pleading with him and trying to stop him from getting out of the barn. Unfortunately, he had gotten out of the barn in slithering speed and scampered off to the other farms yelling loudly that he had found the dragon!

The farmers quickly laid down their tools and a big crowd soon gathered.

"I've found the dragon!" they heard M nh Chi n declare.

"Listen to me! The dragon is harmless!" T Tâm addressed the crowd.

"Harmless! Ha! Ha! It gobbled down a large piece of meat in a single bite! I tell you, it's a monster!"

"Please M nh Chi n, he would never hurt anyone!"

“I don’t believe it! It’s too late anyway. I’d already sent for the King’s men before I followed you home just now!” M nh Chi n turned his face and nudged his pointy chin to the road that ran through the farmlands.

From the north of the farm, an army of more than a hundred men were marching in with their weapons. With her attention so focused on the army, she did not realise that M nh Chi n had crept beside her! Even though he was considered short amongst the men, he was still slightly taller than her and definitely much stronger so, with a powerful maneuver, he managed to pin her down on the floor while the other men helped to tie her up.

She fought to free herself with screams and kicks to no avail. On hearing her screams, T Tm’s parents, with some of her siblings, rushed over from the other side of the farm to see their neighbor atop her, “What are you doing to my daughter?”

“Insurance!” he wryly answered knowing that the other men were helping to fence off T Tm’s parents from advancing to free her.

“Against what?”

“Against the dragon!”

Right then, the sound of hooves could be heard approaching the crowd. A horse carrying a valiant looking man wearing a well-decorated uniform strode into a stop before the crowd. “Who’s the one who reported the sighting of the dragon?”

M nh Chi n quickly stepped forward. “Xin chào anh General Đ ng. I was the one who reported it. Do you have the gold pieces?”

“Only after we have a confirmed sighting of the dragon. Where is it?” General Đ ng answered without much of a glance at M nh Chi n or even if he did, his small slits for eyes did not show.

“I can assure you, it’s inside the barn.”

“Then get it out or you won’t get your money.”

M nh Chi n wanted to utter a protest but decided otherwise. Instead, he grabbed the string that tied T Tm and shouted, “Dragon! Come out or your friend here dies!”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Ông Hai threatened.

“He wouldn’t, but I would,” General Đ ng said, brandishing his sword to make a small cut that drew blood on T Tâm’s arm. This drew a shriek from T Tâm’s mother.

“Please! Let her go!” her mother begged.

“She has been reported to be harboring a wanted and dangerous monster. We have every right to capture her for execution.”

“Please! Let her go! Let me go in her place!” her father implored, even kneeling down to make his case.

“Father, no! Don’t worry! I’ll be fine.”

“Enough of this nonsense! Men! Take her away!” Chaos ensued as two men that were standing behind the general walked forward to grab her but her parents tried to hold on to her, screaming and resisting in every way possible.

The door burst open and out came Yù. He gave a ferocious roar that shook the fields of crops and sent the birds fleeing.

“Ah... the fabled dragon!” uttered the general. Without taking his eyes off the magnificent beast, he reached into the saddlebag of his horse to grab a bag of gold and threw it at M nh Chi n. The bag dropped onto the floor and its contents spilled onto the ground. M nh Chi n immediately got on his knees trying to gather the precious metals.

“Formation!” yelled the general. This brought all his soldiers into action, readying their arms and steadying their crossbows.

“Do not harm Yù! I’ll go with you!” shouted T Tâm.

“Oh, you are coming alright.” the General Đ ng said as he brought his blade deeper into her wound. Screams of agony did not stop his abuse but instead, only stopped Yù in his tracks. “Get into the cage or she dies.” At the general’s words, a large cage was wheeled forward by several of his men.

Yù stood there for a long while. He tried to intimidate the general with his roars but each roar only brought

more screams from T Tâm as the general plunged the sword deeper. Eventually, the roars turned to whimpers before he stopped roaring altogether. Yù's ferocity morphed into anxiety. Without any resistance, he crawled into the cage on his own. The men quickly secured the cage and wheeled it towards the end of the path where they came from.

A smaller cage was wheeled forward and T Tâm was thrown inside with her blood still oozing from her wound. The farmers watched on in silence and everyone, including M nh Chi n, bore a look that was an exact mix of fear and sorrow.

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Yù and T Tâm were kept in separate cages and away from each other during the journey. It took them nearly two days, taking them north beyond the farmlands and into the city. By then, T Tâm was cradled in a fetal position on the floor of her cage that was smeared with dried blood, too weak to stand. The stab on her arm had not been attended to and it appeared to have been infected. Days without proper food and water compounded the situation and she was shivering from fever.

As they were moved further into the city, T Tâm heard a fanfare. She lifted her head unsteadily to see a majestic gates with tall walls. Sporting a full head of white hair and matching long white beard was a regally dressed man, who was waiting for them at the gate. He was seated on an uncovered sedan chair carried by four strong men so T Tâm assumed that he must have been the king.

General Đ ng rode forward on his horse alongside Yù's cage at the front of the procession. Pulling it were four horses which were brought to a halt right before the king.

"Well done General Đ ng. You'll be handsomely rewarded," the king proudly proclaimed. Grinning with a broad smile, he leaned forward with his hands steepled.

"Thank you, your Majesty," acknowledged General Đ ng with a bow.

Then as T Tâm's cage was brought closer, the king asked, "Who's this?"

General Đ ng promptly replied, "She is the criminal hiding the dragon from us. The dragon would not have come so willingly if it wasn't for her."

This was the first time since the start of the journey that T Tâm had the opportunity to see Yù up close and even

though he was given food and water, he had not been consuming them. However, when he heard the General talking about T Tâm, he quickly lifted his head to look over at her.

“Are you alright?”

I’m not doing too good.

This revelation made Yù’s face frown with concern.

“A friend of the dragon is she...” The king eyed her from the corner of his eyes for a brief moment before looking over proudly to the cage with the dragon.

“My wonderful beast. Welcome!” Turning to the guards, he commanded, “Bring them to my garden.”

The cages soon followed the king’s sedan chair into the garden. Passing through an intricately crafted archway that was flanked by high walls, they were brought to an area as big as a field. In it were flowers the colors of rainbow and plants of a wide variety of shapes and sizes.

There, the king dismissed most of the guards insisting on leaving himself with the four men who carried his sedan and the two prisoners. For fear of his safety, General Đ ng tried to warn him against. The king raised a hand to wave him off. General Đ ng had no choice but to bow and step away.

Then, the king did something that took T Tâm by surprise: he asked for his sedan chair to be lowered to the ground and then limped over to the cages with the support of his walking stick and unlocked the cage doors for the two captives.

“If you wanted, you could have broken out of your cage anytime you wanted, couldn’t you?” the king said to Yù who remained quiet.

“I need your help. As you can see, I’m too frail to walk properly and I know that death will come knocking very soon. I’m not afraid to die but, I fear for the country. Under my reign, I’ve ruled and brought the country to new heights of prosperity. My dimwitted sons were all born with a silver spoon and are too spoiled by their mothers to learn about ruling a country. They are all just waiting for the day I die and hope that I would name one of them king. I have no plans to do that. I shall outlive them and rule the country ages beyond. But...” The king leaned in towards the dragon. “I need your help. I need your essence dragon. Give me the fruit of your essence so that I may continue to rule this country.”

Yù remained motionless and did not look at the king. An uncontrollable cough from T Tâm unintentionally brought Yù as well as the king’s attention onto her.

A smile quickly grew on the right side of the king’s face. “How about this. If you give me the fruit of your essence, I’ll share a little with your friend here. Without your help she’s going to die. Don’t tell me you’re going to let your friend die?”

It was then T Tâm heard the king’s thoughts; *“Once the dragon gives me his essence, I’ll have no use for this peasant girl!”*

This seemed to enrage Yù who burst out of his cage, causing the king to stumble back. Several guards armed with crossbows came running into the garden. With one swipe of his tail, he knocked out several men. Then, with a thunderous roar, he breathed a small ball of fire towards the archway causing it to collapse, sealing the entrance for any further reinforcement. Yù reached into T Tâm’s cage to grab her and quickly leapt off from the ground into flight.

“Stop! Guards! Stop them! Guards!” the king demanded. The few guards who managed to ready their crossbow and fire at the dragon missed terribly. By the time help came, the dragon was long gone.

Yù blindly flew south. He was at a loss as to where to go as he was too ashamed to bring T Tâm back to her family after getting her into this state. Then he remembered something and continued flying past the farmlands. Eventually he stopped at the mountains somewhere not too high up but with a good view. The sun was setting, painting a coat of orange onto the jungle of trees and the farmlands beyond.

"T Tẫm, T Tẫm, wake up!" For a moment she did not stir and Yù was visibly distressed. Then when she finally responded, he heaved anxiety out his snout to make way for relief.

"T Tẫm, I am sorry to have caused you so much harm. I did not know that you had fallen so ill."

It's not your fault Yù. Then T Tẫm realised where they were and her eyes began to fill with tears *It's even more beautiful than I had imagined.*

They sat there for a good while until the sun hid itself away, taking with it all the colors of the world. It was a full-moon night and as the moon slowly inched higher up in the sky, it gave the world a shade of gloom. Unfortunately as the night wore on, the wind began to grow colder and T Tẫm began to shiver uncontrollably.

Yù frantically blew a small fireball to set a bush on fire but her shivering did not go away.

"T Tẫm! Don't die! It's all my fault! Please, take my essence!"

No your essence is your life and not mine to take!

Before T Tẫm could refuse, Yù had begun breathing a small ball of fire from his mouth. He continued blowing at it as it shone brilliantly. Eventually, a fruit that looked almost like the ball of fire, took form when the fire was no more. And when the fire was no more, so too was Yù whose body began to disintegrate into ashes and scattered by the wind.

"Thank you T Tẫm!" Yù's words echoed in her heart.

The fruit landed on her lap. Her tears glistened under the moonlight as it flowed from her eyes. In her weakened state, she brought the fruit up to her mouth but instead of eating it, she began to channel her essence too and breathed her remaining gasp of life into the fruit. In the end, she was no more but a pile of dust covering the fruit.

Many years later, from that spot in the mountain grew a plant which bore fruits that resembled a ball of fire. This is how dragon fruits came to be and why it is so nutritious. The fruits are usually pinkish on the outside to reflect T Tẫm's essence of love and warmth. You may also notice that the dragon fruit plant is green and spiky just like Yù. Because the plant also contain T Tẫm's essence, it produces beautiful flowers that only bloom at night and are sometimes called Ladies of the Night or Moonflowers.