

KOTOSHI THE DRAGON DOCTOR

by Phillis Gershator

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IT WAS THE TIME OF YEAR, in a small Japanese village by the sea, to chose a maiden as a sacrifice to the local dragon.

The dragon lived in a cave in the sea cliffs. If the villagers did not offer it a maiden every year, it got angry and churned around violently in the sea. It thrashed its long, scaly tail this way and that until the waves rose so high that the shore flooded and the boats at sea capsized. So many people drowned in the floods and storms that sacrificing a single maiden seemed a small price to pay for the lives of all the other villagers and sailors.

The names of the maidens were written on separate slips of paper and placed in a barrel, and one slip was selected by a village elder. Kotoshi's name was chosen this year. Her parents wept, but what could they do?

"I will not go meekly," Kotoshi told them. "I will fight to defend myself. I will try to kill the dragon. Even if I fail, it will be better than doing nothing."

"If you attack the dragon and fail, it will go on a rampage. Then not only will we have lost you, but many others will also die in the dragon's storms and floods," her parents replied, fearing the worst.

"We have endured storms and floods even when other maidens went quietly to their deaths. The dragon is hateful and cruel. I must attempt to rid our village of this cursed creature. Don't forget," Kotoshi reminded her parents, "I am skilled with a knife."

Kotoshi was, in truth skilled with a knife. She assisted her father when he doctored the villagers. From him she had learned how to lance an infected wound and remove warts, tumors, and moles from the body. She had also learned how to set broken bones and how to ease pain with herbal potions and massage. She knew good herbs from bad and she helped her father prepare medicines for fever and sickness of all kinds.

When the time for the sacrifice came, Kotoshi was brought in a carriage to the rocky seaside cliffs. Her family and friends followed the carriage, weeping and wailing. She waved a last farewell from the rocks and watched the people grow smaller and smaller as they slowly made their way back to the village.

Kotoshi settled down to wait for the dragon. In her sash she had hidden her knife. In her basket of food she carried medicines, in case she was wounded in battle and survived to doctor herself.

Hours later, there was still no sign of the dragon. Kotoshi crept down among the rocks, looking for shelter from the sun and wind. From a nearby cave echoed the sound of great, gulping sobs. Kotoshi crept closer to the cave's opening. In the dim light she saw a larger dragon with a small one lying at its feet.

"I am Kotoshi," announced the maiden. "I was sent to save my village from your wrath."

"Not now, not now," cried the dragon. "My baby is dying!"

"What's the matter?" asked Kotoshi.

"I don't know. If it were surface wound, I could heal it with my own blood, but something is eating away at my baby from inside."

"I have some knowledge of illness," Kotoshi said. "Maybe I can help, if you will allow me to examine the baby."

"If you can help me," the dragon said, sniffing, "I will let you return to your village. I never liked human flesh anyway. I only exacted sacrifices because they made everyone fear and respect me."

Kotoshi's examination revealed that the baby dragon had broken its wing. The break had not healed properly, and the wing was swollen and infected.

"I will have to pierce the infected area to release the poisons trapped inside," she told the mother dragon. "Then the wound must be cleaned and the wing reset. We will need a bit of wood to use as a splint. I already have a knife and medicine and I can tie the splint with my sash."

Kotoshi put the baby dragon to sleep with some herbs so it wouldn't feel any pain; then she went to work while the mother dragon watched. When the baby awoke, Kotoshi gave it more medicine to bring down its fever. She cared for it all night and day, until finally, the fever broke.

“Your baby will be fine now,” Kotoshi said. “I will come back in a few days to remove the splint.”

“No, you cannot go,” said the mother dragon. “How do I know you will return?”

“But I will starve here,” protested Kotoshi.

“I will bring your food, the same food we eat: seaweed and fish.”

Since the dragon wouldn’t let her leave the cave, Kotoshi made the best of it. She talked to the dragon about life in the village and explained that the people were poor and dependent on the sea for their meager livelihood. She told the dragon that when huge waves rocked the ocean and storms blew up unexpectedly, everyone suffered and many villagers drowned.

The dragon told her that it was dragon nature to frolic in the water. Even a hundred sacrificial maidens couldn’t keep dragons from swimming in the sea. Dragons did not intend to cause havoc, but of course, if they were angry or upset, they tended to thrash about.

“That is why the villagers offer you a maiden each year—to appease your anger,” Kotoshi said.

“But I told you, I don’t care for meat,” complained the dragon. “I prefer fish. The villagers might as well leave me a basket of fresh fish.”

“When I go home, I will tell that to the elders,” Kotoshi promised.

“Make sure the fish are alive,” said the dragon.

Once the baby’s wing had healed, the dragon kept her word and allowed Kotoshi to return to the village. She also gave Kotoshi a precious gift.

“Since you saved my baby,” the dragon said, “you may prick my tail and collect nine drops of blood. Everyone knows that dragon blood heals an open wound.”

Kotoshi preserved the precious blood in one of her medicine jars. She thanked the dragon and promised that the villagers would reward her with offering of live fish, now and in the future.

People could hardly believe the good news: Kotoshi had come back alive! Her parents saw her and wept, this time for joy. The elders listened carefully to her tale.

Henceforth, they announced, the villagers would offer live fish to the dragon. No maidens had to be sacrificed ever again. An offering took place that very week. Everyone trooped to the seaside cliffs, singing and dancing and carrying baskets of live fish for the dragon. How different from the mournful parade that had accompanied Kotoshi's sacrificial journey!

In time, life returned to normal. Kotoshi continued to help her father doctor the villagers. If a patient's wound would not heal, she used a drop of the precious dragon blood, and the wound healed instantly, as if by magic.

When she saved a life that would have been lost without the dragon blood, Kotoshi led a special procession to the cliffside cave. The villagers left mountains of fish there for the dragon and her baby. And to show their appreciation, the dragons played far, far out at sea so they wouldn't churn up the monster waves that so often ravaged the coast of Japan.