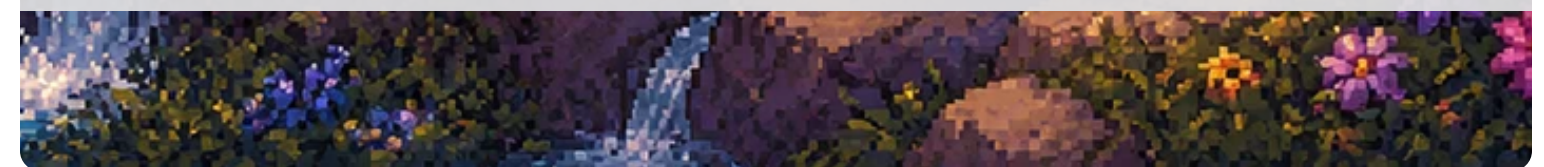




The Princess and the Star-Sneeze Dragon

reshmi narayanan





Princess Lyra stood on her high stone balcony, watching the strange purple smoke curl from the top of the Great Peak. While the villagers whispered of a terrifying monster living in the clouds, Lyra felt a mysterious pull toward the mountain, sensing a story that had never been told.



With her trusty golden lantern and a small bag filled with sweet star-berries, Lyra slipped past the castle gates under the silver moonlight. She wasn't looking for a fight or glory; she was looking for the truth behind the dragon's thunderous roars that echoed every night.



The path led through the Whispering Woods, where bioluminescent mushrooms pulsed with soft blue light and ancient trees seemed to bow as she passed. Lyra stepped carefully over glowing roots, her heart dancing with a mix of nervous excitement and curious wonder.



At the mouth of a massive obsidian cave, a giant shadow flickered against the jagged stone walls. Suddenly, a thunderous sneeze shook the ground, sending a shower of harmless, glowing sparks flying into the night sky like tiny falling stars.



Lyra stepped into the warm cave and found not a fierce monster, but a huge, emerald-scaled dragon named Ember. He was shivering and holding his snout with his claws, his big amber eyes brimming with watery tears and his wings drooping sadly.



I am not here to hurt you, Lyra whispered softly, stepping into the light and holding out a glowing star-berry. Ember tilted his head, his long tail twitching shyly as he realized the little princess brought a peace offering instead of a heavy sword.



Ember let out a soft, melodic rumble and pointed toward a jagged Moon-Crystal wedged painfully between his teeth. Every time he tried to breathe, the crystal tickled his nose, causing the wild, fiery sneezes that had frightened the kingdom below.



Using her silk scarf and a very steady hand, Lyra climbed up and carefully helped Ember pull the glowing crystal free. As the pressure vanished, the dragon let out a happy, vibrating purr that sounded like a thousand humming bees, bathing the cave in a warm glow.



To thank his new friend, Ember knelt down and invited Lyra to climb onto his soft, warm back. Together, they soared through the moonlit clouds, diving through stardust and heading back to the kingdom to show everyone that the monster was actually a gentle guardian.



The kingdom cheered as Lyra and Ember landed softly in the castle courtyard, bringing warmth and light to the startled citizens. From that day on, the princess and her dragon were inseparable, teaching everyone that bravery means looking past fear to find a friend.