

ALIA TERRA

Stories from the Dragon Realm



The Dragon's New Old Hat

by Ava Kelly

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Once upon a time there lived a very grumpy dragon. Well, grumpy was the word others used for em, but truth was that outside eir cave the disquiet reigned eternal. People could be unsafe without warning, and sometimes all the dragon wanted was to hide forever. It wasn't possible or really what e wanted, though, as the library thrived on being visited, the books deserved to be read, and the dragon loved being a librarian.

The dread e felt at the uncertainties of interacting with others and how they might react, however, really restricted the activities the dragon would partake in. E would watch from the shelves as authors came in for readings, or the children listened to fairy tales, wishing e'd be the one making voices and causing giggles to bounce around the library halls.

It all changed one day when, pulling eir new knitted hat almost over eir eyes, the dragon stepped up to the counter. An impatient, fluttering sparrow rang the bell again.

"Yes, hi, hello, I can't find a book! And I need it! It's not where it's supposed to be."

The dragon tensed. When e spoke, eir voice was barely above a whisper and e dreaded having to repeat emself. "What book is that?"

The sparrow shot up suddenly, coming beak to nose with the dragon.

"I don't know," she cried. "It's big and heavy

and I never looked at the cover. It's always on the table and I always read through it and—"

When the dragon said "I'm sorry," e barely heard emself.

The sparrow landed on the top of the lamp. "Why? Did *you* take it?"

E froze, wide-eyed, eir words gone and thoughts stubbornly muddled.

"Wait," the sparrow continued. "Is that— It is! It's the hat from page sixteen! Wow, you did such an amazing job, I love it. The color is so good, too, and I bet it's super soft. It looks soft. Can I touch it? No, no, what am I saying, it's rude to touch people's hats. But wow, hey, did you add a twist on the hem? It's not in the book, but it works so well!"

The dragon, halfway out of eir hunch, blurted, "It's from page eighty-eight."

"Aaah, that makes sense. I haven't gotten that far. See, I'm trying to learn how to knit, but it's so hard when all the needles are so big. They really don't make small needles, do they? Well, they should!"

With no little amount of excitement, the dragon plucked two of the toothpicks from the cup behind the calendar. The bear did like her gummy candies and always got some stuck in her teeth. E set them on the counter before e could back away, although the worry at how eir gesture would be met gnawed at eir chest.

The sparrow blinked and blinked and, finally, fluttered her wings. “That’s brilliant! You’re brilliant! Thank you so much!”



Day after day, the sparrow kept coming back to chatter at the dragon. They would often knit together, the dragon pensive and the sparrow loud. But over time, it got easier to chat back.

And it was all because of the new hat. As long as the hat was on eir head, the dragon’s voice was stronger, not only with the sparrow, but with everyone seeking help in the library. Curious as to what would happen without it, the dragon tried wearing other hats, but none were the same.

Perhaps the new hat was magic—that must have been the reason. Nothing else would give the dragon enough confidence. Nothing else made the dragon feel like e belonged in the world, like e could take it on and not shrivel under the gaze of the next stranger looking at em.



Weeks passed, then months and years. The dragon was content. Eir friends multiplied,

eir work at the library grew into readings and puppet plays, people laughed at eir jokes, and life was good.

Except . . . the dragon sighed and patted the hat to settle on eir head. Eir knitted companion was beginning to show its age. More and more threads were coming loose every day, holes would extend out of nowhere, and the hat wasn’t holding its shape anymore. Nevermind that the color had faded into a murky gray and it wasn’t as warm as it used to be.

The familiar, rapid flap of wings drew the dragon’s attention to the sparrow’s arrival. She dropped a ball of yarn on the counter where the dragon was sorting returns.

“Look at this, it’s the same color as your ha—”

The sparrow paused and the dragon spared her a wary glance.

“What?”

“I didn’t realize,” the sparrow said, “how faded your hat was. On second thought, it’s quite worn out. You should get rid of it, try something new. Kind of embarrassing, if it were me, to come to work with—”

As the sparrow talked, the dragon’s spirits fell, like a stone through eir stomach and all the way into the ground. How could eir *friend*, the one that first helped em believe in emself, dismiss the dragon’s cherished hat?

But then again, the dragon wasn't the same. E could speak for emself, loudly even.

"I'll wear what I want," e said, turning away from the sparrow.



Back in eir cave, however, the dragon spent a long time holding the unwearable hat in eir claws. After all those years, e had realized the hat wasn't magical. It had, however, given em courage when e hadn't had any. The hat was akin to an old friend coming along on the adventure of life, and the dragon didn't want to let it go.

The sparrow was right, though. It was time to say goodbye to it, so the dragon put it out in the thread bin, tears blurring eir vision. There were plenty of birds around looking for nest padding materials that made good use of the scraps from eir knitting.

In the morning, as expected, the beloved hat was gone. The dragon pulled and pulled at the other hat e'd grabbed from eir worn-once-and-discarded stash, but e still felt uncovered. It irked and itched under eir skin.

What was worse, the week passed without the sparrow, too, so nothing was right in the library. Eir reading was stuttering, eir voice losing tone, and e kept misplacing book cards.



It was almost two weeks later when the dragon arrived at the library to find the sparrow waiting for em.

"I'm sorry," the sparrow said, pushing a small package over the counter. "I was very rude to you. Sometimes I don't even know what I'm saying but that's no excuse. I should pay more attention."

The dragon sighed. "You were right."

"No," she countered, wings spread wide. "No, I was *not*. You have a right to like your hat without judgment. Open it. I mean, if you want to."

Crinkling filled the space with the unwrapping. Inside the paper, a hat sat. New and soft, knitted in the color of eir old one, with the special hem e liked, and a new pattern interwoven . . .

"Oh," the dragon breathed.

"It took me a while to find the book," the sparrow said. "And the big needles are still hard to manage for me. And I couldn't measure your head. But I hope it fits."

The hat was carefully knitted around the old one, supporting and completing it. Making it new and keeping it the same. The dragon grinned and quickly swapped it on.

"It's perfect," e declared. The sparrow nodded

and shuffled closer, flying to the dragon's extended claw.

"We're still friends, right?" she asked. "Even when my mouth runs in a bad way."

"It did bring us together, so I'm willing to forgive it. But it wasn't nice— It felt like you were saying something was wrong with me."

"I didn't mean it like that," the sparrow said firmly. And then, quieter, "You are awesome *because you're you*. But if it takes this hat for you to believe it, then I'll fix it however many times it's needed."

The dragon smiled and the world felt right again.

