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The Old Man versus The Monster

Long, long ago in China, when dragons still flew high in the sky, there was a village by the sea. The people living in the village worked hard in the fields growing crops or going out to sea in small boats to catch fish but however hard they worked there was never enough to eat, and they could not be truly happy. This is because the village had a BIG problem – every year they were visited by a HIDEOUS monster called Nian.

Nian was a terrifying sight to behold. He was half dragon, half unicorn with scaly skin, large wings and razor-sharp teeth and claws. In the middle of his head was a long horn which he used to spear his prey. His favourite food was little children!

Usually, Nian lived under the sea but on the first day of Spring he would wake from his long winter sleep ravenously hungry. Every New Year's Eve, on the stroke of midnight, Nian would come out onto the land and eat everything he could find, rice, vegetables, animals and worst of all people!

To hide from the monster the villagers would go and spend the night in the mountains. This was a long, cold and difficult journey, especially for the elders in the village and the young children who got tired walking such a long way. For them, the new year was not a happy time because they knew Nian would destroy their home and when they came back there would nothing left to eat.

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One New Year's Eve, the people were getting ready to make their annual journey to the mountains when an old man arrived in the village. He had a long white beard and walked with a stick. The old man came from far away and was tired and hungry. He asked the villagers for something to eat and a place to stay for the night but everyone was too busy to help the old man or even listen to his request for food and shelter.

Eventually an old woman from the east of the village took pity on the man. She gave him a bowl of rice and while he was eating told him all about Nian.

"You are unlucky old man; you have chosen the worst day of the whole year to come to this place. If you stay here tonight you will be eaten by the monster. You must come and hide in the mountains with us."

The old man shook his head slowly.

"Good woman, I am old and tired and I have already walked a long way. Please let me stay here in your house tonight. If you allow me to rest here, I promise that I will get rid of Nian for good."

The old woman looked worried; she did not want to leave the old man to face certain death but she didn't have time to argue – the sun was already setting in the sky – it was time to leave!

She sighed...

"Fine you can stay, but don't expect me to keep you company."

And with that she picked up her bags and fled to the mountains with the others.

The sun set, the sky grew dark except for the light of the new moon and a handful of stars. The whole village was silent. The old man waited...and waited...

Finally, midnight came and Nian arrived to find the village deserted, apart from the old woman's house which was decorated with red papers and had many candles burning brightly in the windows. This made Nian angry and he swooped towards the house –

CRACK! BANG!....CRACK! CRACK! BANG!

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Nian was stopped dead in his tracks by a deafening noise. The door of the house flew open, and the old man stood there wearing a bright red robe laughing loudly at the monster. This strange spectacle terrified Nian and he fled back to his home at the bottom of the sea without eating one single thing!

The next morning, the villagers were astonished to find that their village was exactly as they had left it. Not one house had been damaged, there was nothing out of place. The old woman remembered what the man had said and rushed home as fast as her legs would carry her. How had he managed to stop Nian from destroying the village? What if the old man had been hurt or worse...killed?

When she arrived home, she found the red papers, burnt firecrackers and candles. Folded neatly on the sleeping mat was a bright red robe but the old man was nowhere to be seen. She told the other villagers what she had found and they came to realise that the colour red, bright light and loud noises were magic charms that scared the monster away. The news of how Nian had been defeated spread far and wide.

From that day forward every New Year's Eve, people in China would light candles, set off fireworks and decorate their houses with red paper scrolls. They'd dress up in bright red clothes and stay up all night eating a huge feast with their whole family. And because the people remember to do this every year - Nian has never been seen again.

