How Tortoise Got His Shell

Tortoise didn’t always look like he does nowadays. His four long skinny legs made him the fastest animal of all, and when he wanted to go really fast, he only used his back two legs with long quick strides. Tortoise was covered with scales, the ones on his back, larger, but soft like leather. He had a black button nose and brown naïve eyes. Once he was quick, once he was agile, once he was unwise, and once he had no shell. However, Tortoise wasn’t happy with himself. Being the fastest animal on Earth was not good enough for Tortoise. He couldn’t stand his ground and fight; he could only run away. When Tortoise was in Pakistan he looked at his reflection in a stream near the Indus River, he saw a weak soft Tortoise who could only wish to be strong and sturdy. So he ran across deserts of the Middle East with to the god Muharreb. It was early morning, and Muharreb was eating breakfast.

“Oh, god Muharreb, make me a warrior like you. I want to be able to face a fight, not just run away. Make me strong so that I am able to defend myself,” Tortoise pleaded with hope.

“Go away, Tortoise, you are no warrior. Let me finish my breakfast in peace,” Muharreb retorted in his grand voice, “Animals these days do not understand the way of life. You should be happy the way you are created Tortoise.”

So Tortoise ran away, unhappy that he could only run from his enemies. Across the desert he went, towards the mountains and into the bamboo forests of India. There he saw the god Dhokha taking his morning bath. Dhokha smiled with his usual quirky smile.

“Good morning, Tortoise. How can I help you today?”

“Oh god Dhokha, make me strong and sturdy. I want to be able to face a fight, not just run away. Make me strong so that I am able to defend myself.” Tortoise pleaded once again hopefully.

“I think I can help you. Find a very large boulder. Then, you must stand on your head on the boulder until you feel strong and sturdy.” instructed Dhokha “Now go and leave me to my bath.”

So Tortoise did as Dhokha said. He ran to the Himalayas, for a normal animal this would take a long time but for Tortoise it was fast. He ran through the forests over the Himalayas. There he found a huge boulder just on the other side. There he stood on his head, for he wanted to be strong and sturdy. Lunch passed and Tortoise was not feeling any different. The afternoon nap passed and Tortoise still was not feeling any different. All of a
sudden, all of the animals in the Himalayas came to the big boulder. When they saw Tortoise they all started to point and laugh.


Tortoise realized he had been tricked. His face grew red from embarrassment and he ran away from the crowd of laughter toward the bamboo forests of China. He was very angry that he had been fooled. He trotted into the forests with his head down and he came upon a pool of water where he sat staring at his reflection. God Zhihui was watching this happen from a distance and approached Tortoise.

“What are you doing tiny Tortoise?” Zhihui asked.

“I wanted to be strong and sturdy so I wouldn’t have to run away from a fight, but god Dhokha tricked me and made me look foolish. Oh god Zhihui, would you make me strong and sturdy? Also, teach me how to be wise like you, so I may not be tricked again.” begged Tortoise.

“Sure, Tortoise. I will help you.” replied god Zhihui. He picked up some rocks and tied one to each one of Tortoise’s feet. Then he called some red pandas over and instructed them to follow Tortoise around throwing whatever they could find at his scales on his back.

Soon after, sticks, pebbles, bamboo, grass, and all sorts of things were hitting Tortoise’s large scales on his back. He immediately tried to run away but couldn’t move fast at all, for he had rocks tied to his feet. So Tortoise trekked away slowly but surely towards the Himalayas. He didn’t like it at all. His back got heavier and heavier. His scales got harder and harder. They got to the bottom of the Himalayas just before sundown. The red pandas took a short nap. Tortoise took a break as well. He was very tired. His back felt stiff and it no longer felt like scales.

After their nap the red pandas started throwing objects at Tortoise again, whatever they could throw they did. He started trekking up and over the mountain. His back got heavier and heavier. His scales got harder and harder. Tortoise was getting very tired. The more tired he got, the slower he went, and the more things hit his back. Tortoise trekked slowly but surely back over the crest of the mountain, and by the time he got to India a whole gruesome day had passed. By now his scales were rock hard but still rough; he could hide from the debris by tucking his head under what used to be his scales. His legs were shorter and he could not walk upright.
Still the red pandas did not stop. Another day passed and he had trekked slowly but surely across India. The sun was beating down on his back so he started to try to find shelter behind it. By sundown he was back to the deserts of the Middle East. After two days and two nights, Tortoise just stopped, worn out from the hike, the sun, and from rubble hitting him constantly. He could trek no more.

Finally Zhihui told the red pandas that they could go home. She removed the rocks from Tortoise’s feet. Immediately Tortoise tried to trot but he couldn’t. What used to be scales on his back was now a strong and sturdy shell that weighed him down. All four legs were short and stubby. You could still tell it was Tortoise with his button nose but his brown eyes were no longer naïve.

“I can’t trot anymore, what have I done to myself?” said Tortoise sadly.

“What have you learned, tiny Tortoise?” asked Zhihui. 

“That it was a bad idea to wish something upon myself that would change me. Now I am going to be like this forever.”

“You are already wiser. You will live a long life now, and be able to observe the things around you. This will make you the wisest animal of all.” said Zhihui, and within a moment he was gone.

Tortoise trekked steadily through the desert, thinking, for years to come. Nowadays he still moves slowly, observing all of the things around him and thinking. Many times someone has tried to fight him, but his shell is strong and sturdy. Tortoise does not have to run away anymore. Many animals look up to him for advice. When they ask to be wise like he is, Tortoise always says, “Be happy the way you are created, for you are special and have your own gifts.”

~Michaela Ruis