

The Tale of the Lion and the Boy

A long time ago, when life was harsher and Death would knock at every mother's door in winter, there was a poor village at the edge of a forest. In the village lived farmers, who grew their crops in the surrounding fields, but only ever took firewood from the forest's edge, and they did not venture inside, as it was still a wild and mighty thing, full of twisted turns and hungry beasts, that might as well never let them leave. When the year was good, life was perhaps not always happy in the village, but enough to leave the modest and frugal content; but when the year was bad, hunger fell like a vulture on the simple farmers, and they had to turn their hearts to stone lest its talons rip them to shreds. So it happened that one particularly bad year, many new mothers in the village had so little to eat that they saw their breasts shrink and wither, and their not yet weaned off babies doomed to starve. And so the women made a covenant and followed the Old Ways, and one night, together, they brought their babies to the edge of the forest, and left them there, to be spirited by the fairies and live with them, since they couldn't feed them any more. No one knew when the tradition had been born; but as they felt a secret shameful relief walking back to their homes, they all knew why.

There were no fairies in the forest. However, there were many animals, who lived their own lives within it, as the forest fed and protected them. They came as soon as the humans left, and all they were thinking was that they could get an easy meal. Chief among them however was a Lion, prideful, strong and bold like no one else, who reigned over all others with tooth and claw. He dreamt of greatness beyond what he could hold, and when he saw the human babies, he had an idea. He did eat a few, who seemed more sickly or weak; but when he found a baby boy that looked healthy and strong, he delicately took him within his still bloody jaws and carried him away like a kitten.

Later that evening, he convened a Council. When the Lion called for a Council, it mostly meant that he wanted everyone to hear what he had to say and agree with him; still, very few would dare refuse the call and risk his wrath. And so, most of the Animals gathered in the heart of the forest, around a tree that was so ancient, knotty and crooked one would think its seed must have been planted by the gods themselves when they created the world.

"I have had a wonderful idea!," announced the Lion, once every animal in the forest was gathered, from the measliest Mouse to the mighty Bear. "I have captured a human baby; a Boy. The humans are powerful and are like gods - they can do

many wonderful things we do not understand. We will raise this Boy as one of our own, and make him into our servant. Then he will do our bidding, and work his magic for us, so that we may grow mighty too. We will push the humans themselves off our lands with their own weapons, take back the world, and be as wealthy and powerful as your wildest dreams!"

To this, there was a great clamour, as thousands of animals excitedly shouted or shrieked at the prospect, some excited, others outraged. But above all of them, eventually, won the powerful hooting of an old Owl. He was known as a wise, if cantankerous, type; and like all the birds, he could get away with far more cheek to the Lion than others, since their wings could carry them far off the reach of his paws.

"You prideful fool!," said the Owl. "You will get yourself killed with your stupid scheme - which might be as well, if not for the fact that you will get us killed too. This forest is the last of our land still untainted by the humans. And you would let one of them nest into it, within our very bosom? You know that the humans are clever beyond all of our wits; that cleverness has us confined here, while they hunt us and enslave us everywhere else. You think you can keep that cleverness at your whim, and not be fooled by it? However shall you do that, when you are a dimwit even among us? You should know well that one can't change one's heart in full. A Lion wishes for the hunt; an Owl like me for the night sky. Yet who knows what this Boy will wish for! If the humans' cities and their fields and the way they massacre each other wantonly are any indication, it's nothing good. You say the Boy will be our servant, but be frank - you would like for him to be *your* servant, and yours alone. Have you ever cared for any of us, when you hunt us and devour us to sate your hunger? Yet in a human, even your greed and gluttony might finally meet their match. They see paths that we can not, and walk them without fear. Away with this madness, I say! Feast on that baby like you did on its companions, and let us go about our lives as usual."

The Lion growled and would have pounced and devoured the Owl for his insolence right then and there, if not for the fact that he was perched high on a tree. But since he could not do that, he decided he would rather speak in a manner that would make him look friendly and amenable.

"My dear Owl, your words are harsh beyond what I deserve! You try to scare us with visions of a future you have conjured, and call me a fool. Well, maybe I am one, but even I know that the future can not be known for certain, not even by the wisest. You would bring against me the fact that I hunt to eat - but do you not do

the same? Should we ask the Mice which of us has brought more sorrow to them? I hunt to eat because I have no other way. Well, here, I say, is another way! The humans always have abundant, wonderful food, with strange tastes and smells. Surely the Boy can make this miracle happen, that we might all be fed with no need to turn on each other. When that utopia comes about, no one shall be happier than me! We will all thrive in abundance, so much so that sharing it will be as natural as partaking in it!"

There was more clamour among the animals, as these new ideas set their minds abuzz; but the Owl remained unimpressed.

"I have said my piece," he replied. "I have nothing to add. Do as you wish, and if your foolishness dooms this forest, so be it. I just hope that before making this choice, everyone here thinks well and hard about when is it that the Lion has shared anything with anyone, and why do you believe he should begin once he's more powerful than he's ever been."

There was not much voting in the Council, usually; but there was a certain sense that an idea was to be accepted only if enough of the animals seemed to agree with it. The Lion could deal with dissent well enough, but if all the animals were set against him, he knew that even his power had limits. Unfortunately for him, that night, he could see that the Council seemed divided and hesitant. One after the other, many animals stepped forward to speak their mind; some sided with the Lion, others with the Owl, though none would dare use words as scathing as his. The Council had lasted until midnight, longer than any other, and still there was not a consensus. But then one little young Rabbit came and spoke up, with as thin a voice as a quiet breeze.

"Tonight in this Council, many have spoken; some who know many things, far more than me. I am but a young Rabbit, and I know little. But what I know, I would like to share."

He raised dreaming eyes to the Moon, and when he next spoke, it was like a lullaby to all who listened.

"I know that life is short, and death is long," whispered the Rabbit. "I know our wishes are our own secrets we can never truly share. I know I am one of a billion billions, born neither soon nor late; I know I am but a speck of dust in the eye of eternity. And yet, I very much enjoy to be here in this land; I enjoy the cool twilight air, the fresh morning dew, the warmth of a warren-mate pressed against me. I enjoy those things, and would feel them a little longer, for once, without fear."

And if keeping this human will allow me to do so, I shall be grateful for it, for what my gratefulness is worth; which is not much."

The animals listened enraptured to every word, and for a moment even the Lion seemed struck by the mad ambition of his own dream, laid bare, and the Owl moved from his jadedness. But then the spell ended, and the Lion seized the moment.

"The Rabbit speaks true!," he roared, joyously. "Hear hear, how from the humblest may come the most wisdom!"

To this, the other animals answered with a lot of celebrating and clamouring, and just like that, it was decided that the Boy would stay.

A den was dug for him, and mothers with milk to spare took turns feeding him; and the Boy grew. He grew able to stand on his feet, unlike any other animal on land. The beasts wondered and sometimes even jeered at this sight. It was a funny trick, but no miracle. He then grew able to make many verses with his mouth, more and more refined and sophisticated, but still, they did not make much sense to the animals, nor could their noises make much sense to him. The Boy grew surrounded by the animals, yet alone, as not much could be said between them. He lived for a while in the hollow of a large tree, and then, when it grew too small for him, a Fox lured him and led him to a cave, and he made his house there. The Fox was almost killed for its trouble, as the Boy, hungry for anything that moved, threw stones at her.

"This is no good," complained the Fox to the Lion. "It was bad enough that he's eating Mice and Sparrows when he can put his hands on them, and competing with us for prey; but to try and get me too? This Boy has no manners. You said he would bring us food, not try to eat us!"

"He is still growing, and not in the full of his powers," said the Lion. "But do not worry; I will give him a good scolding."

So the Lion went to the Boy's cave, and stood in front of it, and made a long speech, about how the Boy was being ungrateful, and he should be more mindful of the animals of the forest, to whom he owed his life, and who had been raising him. And that while no one would miss a Mouse or two, there was a limit to everything, and learning his place would only do him good. He recited this speech in the language of lions, of course, which was made of growls, snarls, and roars. The Boy seemed very impressed, as he cowered at the back of the cave for the

whole time, awed and humbled by the Lion's gift for rhetoric. Satisfied, the Lion went away.

One day, the Boy disappeared. The animals thought he must just have gone and got himself killed somewhere, and so ended their dreams of utopia; but instead, after a week, he came back. He carried something with him, a wooden stick of unusual shape. When the Lion heard of it, he was curious, and then decided the human might have finally started working his magic. He went to the cave personally to check on the Boy. Once he saw him, the Boy was overjoyed, and ran towards his guest, stick in hand. He waved it wildly and towards the Lion while shouting excitedly. The Lion kept his distance, admiring the odd dance from afar.

"It's a curious thing," he said, "but far too small for my big paws. I don't know what I would do with it. Still, it's good you are making something! Next time, bring back something more useful."

And after saying so, he left.

Some time later, the Boy disappeared again. A Kestrel that had been currying favour with the Lion followed him from afar, and reported that he was approaching the human village, and spying it from the edge of the forest. That must be how he was learning new tricks. The Lion decided that was good, as long as the Boy remained his. Surely, he would return eventually. And return he did; a month later, the Boy was back in his cave. This time, he had brought rocks. The Lion was not very impressed, and was beginning to wonder if it had been a good idea to keep him around. But then, when the Boy spotted the Lion roaming around the cave, he went to a big pile of straw and dry wood he'd accumulated and started banging the rocks together. They made sparks, and the sparks hit the pile, and eventually, the whole thing caught fire. The Lion had seen fire before, but only from afar, and while running from it. It made him nervous. Still, he tried to keep his dignity.

"That is certainly a wonderful trick!," he said. "But very dangerous, and I don't see a good use for it. It can only burn down the forest, which you have to agree would be bad. So please, turn it down, and next time, make something more useful, like food."

Having said his piece, the Lion left again.

More time passed, and when the Boy left one last time, it looked like he was gone for good. A month passed, then two, and he still was not back. The Lion truly

believed he was perhaps finally dead; but after a whole season, the Boy returned again, and a while later, the Lion went to visit his cave.

This time, the Boy was sitting in front of the cave; he still had one of his pet fires, which he seemed to like to keep around for reasons the Lion didn't really get. The only new tool he could see was another stick, this time with some kind of grey, flat triangle of a sort of smooth stone growing out of it on one end. It was left leaning against a side of the cave. The Boy really didn't seem very productive, and as more and more animals were complaining about how many of them he would hunt and eat these days, the Lion was beginning to wonder whether he shouldn't call his whole idea a bust and devour him for good. Maybe he had just been unlucky, and he had picked a particularly stupid baby. He could not very much say this to the Boy, though, and he did not wish to come close to his fire.

"Come out," said the Lion. "You've been away for a very long time, and as the king of this forest, I wish to welcome you properly!"

The Boy stood, holding the stick from his first sally in one hand. It looked like he'd been careless with it, and he had left it to burn on the fire, because the tip was blackened. In the other hand, he grabbed a big tree branch thick with sap and plunged it into the fire; then he held the burning torch before him, as a shield, as he marched towards the Lion. The big cat felt uneasy and nonchalantly tried to step back, but he could not look afraid in front of this runt.

"Look now, put that branch down," he said. "It's dangerous."

The Boy shouted and waved the branch, as he circled around the Lion, and shook his pointy stick as well. The Lion backed out one more step, then two, and suddenly - he was in the void. He grasped desperately upwards while he felt the ground disappearing below him, as if by magic. It was in a flurry of broken branches and leaves that he finally crashed at the bottom of the freshly dug pitfall, and at the bottom, he found only other pointy sticks poking out of the ground. When he finally regained his bearings, one of them was stuck through his chest, and the Lion could feel his blood dripping from the hole, his heart beating so close to its tip it almost touched it.

"What are you doing?," asked the Lion, pained. "I saved you! I raised you!"

The Boy stood above him, out of reach. He dropped the torch inside the pit, making the Lion cry and whine as it singed his mane. Then he raised the other pointy stick he still held, and with one swift movement he plunged it straight into

the Lion's back. The beast roared, moaned, thrashed, and eventually stood still, all the time desperately asking itself what could have possibly gone wrong. He died without an answer.

The day afterwards, the Boy left the forest again, and at its edge he met with a Girl. When he saw her, he smiled widely, ran towards her and hugged her.

"I have taken care of the Lion!," he said. "Now he'll never threaten me or any of your village ever again. I couldn't have done it without you giving me courage!"

The Girl hugged him back. "I was so afraid for you! But you don't have to fear any more. After I taught you our language, I discussed it with the elder. You can join the village if you marry me. You can leave that horrible forest forever."

The Boy laughed. "Leave it? We can master it! I know it like the palm of my hand, and now that the Lion is gone, I need fear nothing in it. I will show you. We will build our house in it, and make use of all its bounty. Our children will never have to starve again."

And so, the humans came to that last forest; and they were not a speck of dust, but a storm, a whirlwind. They ripped and cut and hunted and burned until only half of the forest remained, and then a quarter, and then only a memory, and then not even that. The Rabbits and Owls who still lived on the land forgot there ever was a time in which they owned it, and they were the lucky ones.

Eventually, the little village grew into a town, a city, a kingdom; the Boy was now a Man, and became its first King, and his and the Girl's children its princes. Centuries went by, and the kingdom grew and advanced; humans discovered new wonderful tricks, tricks that would not have had just the Lion, but the Boy himself gaze in awe as if witnessing magic. But still, something eluded them. Still, the fullness of the happiness that they desired was out of reach, and they could imagine something more, but not grasp it. They would feel that life is short, and death is long. That each of them was just one of a billion billions, born neither soon nor late; that they were but specks of dust in the eye of eternity. And subtle, the dream crept on them that perhaps they could get one like a god to help them out; and if there was no such person to be found, perhaps, with all their craft and ingenuity, they could make it.

But that is another story.