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WILD

PART I
THE FISHING TRIP

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“And then, it came. Tall as the mountains, black as night, glowing eyes red, as blood.”

“The beast of death?”

“The beast of death,” he answered his seven-year-old son, whose eyes were wide open as he paid absolute attention. “So massive was this beast, that its steps shook the very foundations of the earth. So scary was it, that it sent fear, into the souls of men. Warriors threw down their weapons, women screamed, children cried and ran, all of them escaped, all of them, but one. ”

“The boy?”

“The young boy, he stood alone, blunt sword in hand! Courage in heart! Facing the monster *charging*, towards him!” he paused, as the boy’s pupils enlarged a little more as he stared at him across the fire, his face filled with both great expectation and fear.

“What happened?” he very curiously asked, as his serious-faced father slowly looked down at the fire.

“That will wait until the next time?” he replied after some silence, “go to bed now.”

The fire at the center lit the one-roomed, fairly spacious house, whose well finished mud walls were fitted with uneven, rugged, but proper wooden shelves. The shelves were stacked full with food supplies: roasted fish, roasted beef, and reed baskets half filled with both ‘leafy’ and ‘rooty’ vegetables among other foodstuffs.

On the dung-plastered floor under the shelves, were two ‘beds’ on opposite sides of the fire. Low, flat, wooden frames stacked with layers of softened, furry hides. Along the rest of the walls, were different tools and weapons, which included two, very furry, back quivers containing several long arrows, two sharp daggers, two, wooden frame, recurved composite bows, baskets, folded fishing nets, and utensils.

With his strong, hard, callused left hand, the serious-faced man gently pushed a piece of firewood further into the fire, feeding it as his son slowly fell asleep. While holding his arms around his knees, he watched the wood crack up into the warming flames.

Covering his very strong, athletic, hard body, was a sleeveless, brown, pure leather coat, which warmed his torso—across which were several healed scars. Such scars were also present across his face, arms, and legs. While silently contemplating, he observed as orange-glowing ash rose above the fire towards the roof.

Dew was all over the healthy leaves and thick tree trunks, with a slight mist present in the chilly air; through which the orange sunrays lit the waking jungle filled with mixed sounds of all kinds of birds, monkeys and insects. Thick-barked, well-spaced trees constituted most of the forest, with all kinds of thick leaved, coiling plants attached as they crawled and climbed. The crawlers extended all over the “carpet” of orange, red, and purple *shed leaves* that covered the entire forest floor.

On his back, the boy was carrying a big, square shaped basket on thick, furry, leather straps over his shoulders. He walked through the trees with his father. Between the many red and yellow flower bushes, they stepped, walking over dead logs grown by ferns and colorful fungi.

“Over there,” his father said as he pointed at a small bush comprised of small, upright plants. He walked towards them and the boy followed, squatting next to him while facing the bush.

“A-a-a-a, watch it,” he stopped the boy from uprooting a plant.

“But its vegetable?” the boy wondered.

“It looks like-” he paused as he uprooted it himself, “-vegetable, but if you eat this dear boy, you lose your mind, you become like the monkeys. It is a poisonous weed,” he explained while throwing it away.

“They look exactly the same?”

“They sure do, you tell the difference by these,” he said while pointing out the very tiny fruits under the actual vegetable leaves, “see? It is what you look for, these weeds do not have them,” he showed him while uprooting a few. The boy observed and followed as he uprooted more.

After gathering enough, they moved on, walking through some bushes that were enclosing a small depression. Inside the depression, were several huge, decaying logs grown all over with all kinds of mosses, ferns, and very vibrant troops of fungi; healthy plants that thrived alongside bright flowers, dark green thick grass, and armies of colonizing, crawling plants.

“Mushrooms!” the boy remarked as he followed his father through the bushes, “Lots of them!” he added as he excitedly looked around.

“You need to know which ones are for eating, come here?” his father called. The boy rushed over towards him, squatting at a log and checking out the healthy fungi.

“How do we pick them?” he asked as he took off the quarter-filled basket from his back.

“Everything with spots on it is bad-” he started to explain, showing the excited child who quickly learned. To the basket, with hands full of mushrooms, he made several trips, returning and keeping up with his father who moved about the place and pointed out what was edible for him to pick.

Straight into the basket, the boy threw down big ripe guavas from the big guava tree. The basket was a few steps behind his father, who with his hands, was digging into the ground (covered with dense, dark green undergrowth) and unearthing different types of roots. Upon uprooting two handfuls, he turned around and walked towards the tree. He placed the roots inside the basket and looked up the tree.

“I think it is time to go!” he said to the boy, who was swinging about like a monkey up on the tree.

“Now?” the boy asked with a beaming face and wide-open eyes.

“Now!” stated the man, “We need to catch them before they get fully awake! Unless you do not want to-”

“No father! I’m coming!” he assured as he rushed down the tree.

While breathing quickly in a controlled fashion, the boy’s legs sprinted on the forest floor. He quickly and carefully jumped over rotting logs densely covered with green coiling plants, rapidly dodging the trees left and right, as he maintained his dangerously fast pace. On his arms and body, thick wet leaves slapped as he dashed between the bushes—which constituted the dark green, dead silent side of the forest.

Abruptly, he made a well-calculated stop; rushing his sight around the bushes here and there, as his ears caught the noise of his target rushing through the thick bushes up ahead. He focused his sight on the sound and ‘followed it with his eyes’ as it moved rightwards. From the brown, furry quiver on his back, he quickly drew an arrow from the set of three. He placed it against the long bow and pulled its white feather fletching against the tight string.

Stretching it fast against the bow’s grooves, he perfectly aligned his eyesight along its shaft. Very keenly, he *turned his aim* to follow the noise. His eyes locked-on, and he released the perfectly straight arrow. The arrow flew fast through the air between the leaves and bushes, right towards the neck of the sprinting antelope. The animal suddenly hopped over a log as the arrow fiercely flew under its belly, piercing a tree trunk as it bolted.

Towards the tree trunk, the boy ran. He quickly pulled out the arrow and continued pursuit. Further into the forest, he chased the antelope, ‘snaking’ through trees side to side and dodging thorny bushes and wet stems. Upon stepping into a part of the forest that had better tree spacing, he stopped. He scanned around fast and re-traced the antelope, which was getting away up ahead.

After it, he ran and closed in as it slowed down while trying to force itself through a thick bush crossed with a web of thick-leaved, climbing plants. Taking advantage, he took position; placed the arrow’s fletching against the bow’s string ones again and stretched it back, as the antelope forced itself out of the ‘trap’ and hoping on. He lowered the bow, removing the arrow with some anger and resuming pursuit.

Into a woody section of the green forest, he chased it; running for several meters before stopping again and taking position. He fit the arrow again, and raised the fully stretched bow to strike before the animal made it across the open area. And just as he pulled back the string—SWOOSH!—his eye quickly caught the straight flying arrow speeding from the right. Without

touching a stem, it flew swiftly and *met with the antelope*—piercing right through its heart and *pinning* its entire body against a tree.

In amazement, he lowered his bow and arrow while looking to his right, from where his calm father, carrying his bow, came walking fast through the few bushes and trees.

“You make the animal run into your arrow!” he reminded the boy as he walked towards the kill.

“I was going to kill it!” the boy defended himself while still amazed, walking to meet up with him at the dead antelope.

“It was going to get away, if it went through those bushes, it would have made the task twice as hard,” his father continued to explain, as he got closer.

“Wow!” the boy remarked as he got to the kill his father was now staring at—the arrow ‘pinning’ its upper body against the tree, perfectly through its heart.

“How do you do that?” he asked as he wondered in admiration.

“Just as I have told you, you take position,”

“I did?”

“You shoot the arrow so that your target runs into it?”

“But I—”

“Shot after the animal,” he informed the boy while looking into his eyes, “I saw it,” he added, “your arrow strikes behind your target.”

The boy remained silent. Seeing this, he placed his left hand on his shoulder, making him feel okay before turning back to the antelope.

“Let us get it off the tree, I will tell you more on the way home,” he said as he stood up and moved to pull out the arrow.

On his back, the boy carried the basket- full of the groceries they had gathered earlier that morning, following his father who carried the kill on his back by holding its front legs over his shoulders. Up ahead, on a very small hill covered entirely with short, light green grass, was their home: a well-built mud house at the crest of the hill. The house had four walls, which leaned outwards as they moved upwards, intersecting with the thick layer of damp grass and reeds that thatched the pointed roof on both sides.

Just next to the house, was a soft-wood rack on which a piece of white, furry hide was drying; close to which was another rack, on which pots, calabashes, cooking sticks, and other utensils were also drying.

“Are you going fishing tomorrow?” the boy asked as he kept up his pace.

“Yes? Why do you ask?” His father questioned.

“I want to come with you?”

“Son, I have told you before? It is not a journey for children?”

“But I am big now? Do you not see? I can run?”

“It is too dangerous,”

“And I am strong father, I can fight,”

He sighed as the boy insisted.

“Please? Just let me come with you, I *have* to learn to catch fish too? Please father? I-”

“Okay. Alright,”

“*Yes!*” he celebrated.

“You asked for it yourself,”

“Yes!”

“First light tomorrow,”

“*Yes!* I-I will help you carry the nets! And the baskets! I will even-” he continued to promise as he increased his pace in an attempt to walk by his father’s side.

“Stop!” his father suddenly cautioned, holding him back at his side with his strong left hand.

“What?” the boy asked as he tried to look up ahead.

“Over here,” his father pointed as he quickly pulled him aside behind a bush, from where he peeked out behind his shoulder while staying very close.

“Wow,” he remarked in a low tone, as he laid eyes upon the fat, adult, white rhino, which was *patrolling* the back of their house while sniffing everything around the place.

Cautiously, the man and the boy raised their heads further above the leaves, getting a better look at the animal, which stamped around their utensils.

“I’ve never seen one this close before?” the boy said in a low tone, “Is it dangerous?” he whispered as they watched.

“Very, very dangerous,” his father answered. Suddenly, the rhino lifted its head and looked right at them. Behind the bush, they quickly ducked as it maintained its gaze, it’s very fat belly moving in and out as it ‘groaned’ angrily. Lightly, it puffed and waited for any signs of movement, standing ready to attack. The boy and his father remained still.

Getting bored with the silence, the rhino turned back to sniffing as it moved on around the house, groaning as it puffed away.

“Come on,” the man told the boy, who followed him out of cover.

“What did it want?” the boy asked as he hurried through the bushes, keeping up with his father’s pace,

“I do not know for sure.”

“I think it wanted our food! It smelled the pots! Did you see?” he asked as he followed.

“Of course I saw, hurry up now, there is something I’ve been planning to show you.”

“Show me? What is it?”

“I cannot tell you, you need to see for yourself, you said you are a big boy right?”

“I am!” he agreed, “Is it something scary?”

“Not a chance son, I am not saying a word until you’ve seen it,” he intrigued him as they climbed up the green-grass gentle slope towards the house.

The side of the high cliff was extremely steep, with hanging plants and roots almost coloring it green and purple. With one hand after another, the boy climbed along the small rocks all over the dangerously steep side. As he climbed, his heart raced as he grabbed a rock that fell out and

dropped far down below, leaving him hanging by the other hand, which was holding onto another rock that also started to loosen.

“I’m afraid!” he complained to his father, who was climbing just below him.

“It is okay son, I am right below you! Just keep climbing!” he reassured him.

The nervous boy moved his hanging hand and grabbed the next rock, climbing before stepping onto another loose rock that fell off and left his leg hanging. Quickly moving the leg in panic, he stepped on another firmer rock, after which he turned his head and looked.

“Do not look down son!” his father warned him. His heart pounded at the sight of the great distance between himself and the tree top bottom. It did not seem that high from the ground.

“Keep moving up! Keep climbing son! Keep climbing!” his father motivated him. Turning his head back up, he kept climbing. He missed a step here and there, grabbed a loose rock this way and that way. Under his father’s motivation and assurance, he proceeded, slowly approaching the top of the cliff.

A wide, fairly flat, uneven soft rock covered almost the entire top of the cliff, extending over the other end—opposite of which the boy climbed. He pulled himself upon the platform, crawling on all fours as he let out his fear by breathing hard. After him, his father climbed, rushing to check his condition as he also caught a breath.

“Are you okay?” he asked as they took a moment to rest. The boy nodded, and they relaxed for a short while.

“Come on, I would not want you to miss the sight,” his father told him while getting up, walking towards the extended side of the rock.

“Wow!” the boy remarked in amazement, extremely impressed by the view as he followed his father. He stared at the sight, as his father sat on the very edge of the rock.

“Come, sit here,” his father asked him, and he walked closer and sat on the rock at his right side. Their legs hung in midair as they enjoyed the view under the setting sun, whose orange light softly shone over the green, partly wet, endless grassland.

“Look! *Elephants!*” the very impressed boy shouted while pointing very far down below—at a parade of sixty elephants slowly moving through a big pool of clear water, which was partially ‘bathing’ the grass.

“Rhinos! They are so many!” he added, referring to a crash of very fat, white rhinos, grazing next to a herd of hundreds of antelopes.

“Look at all the animals father!”

“Yes?”

“Look at those birds! *Look!*” he insisted, referring to the million pink flamingoes that jammed around the lake in the distant background.

“I’ve never seen it like this before!”

“And it goes as *far* as your eyes can see,”

“All that far!”

“*All* that far,”

“Wow!” he commented as his body relaxed in admiration.

“There is nothing quite like it,” his father commented.

“It is so beautiful,”

“I know son, I know,”

“Wow,” he appreciated. All around, he looked, not sure which sight to stick with. He switched from the distant crash of tens of lazy looking hippos in a wide puddle, to the zeal of hundreds of zebras, sieges of noisy cranes, troops of stubborn monkeys, clans of cheeky hyenas, among many, many other animals.

“Well, we better get going?” his father suggested after a while.

“But we just got here!” the boy protested.

“I thought you were scared!”

“Not anymore? Can we stay a while please?” he begged, as his father looked at him for a moment.

“Okay, but just a little longer, I would not want us to stay up here until dark,” he advised as they continued to watch.

Early next morning, the two were prepared to leave. Both of them were dressed in brown, sleeveless, very furry, soft leather coats, which extended just below their knees. Equally furry boots covered their feet and half their legs. On a ‘stick back pack’, the boy carried a huge, strapped load of fishing baskets, with a gourd of drinking water and other tools strapped on his waist. He was standing excitedly while holding a straight walking stick his height, facing his father, who had strapped fishing nets and many other supplies on his ‘stick back pack’.

His father was also standing with his walking stick in hand, with two, very sharp spears strapped while pointing upwards on his back behind both of his shoulders. Strapped along the right side of his right leg, was a furry sheath enclosing a long dagger.

“Are you ready?” he asked the boy, who nodded in acceptance, “Let us get moving then,” he said with a light smile as he turned and walked out the door, the excited boy following his lead.

Through the thick, early morning mist, the boy followed the steps of his father, walking along the narrow footpath on which visibility was impossible beyond several strides. As they walked, the mist gradually began to disappear, the air becoming clearer as they moved.

“Wow!” the boy exclaimed in both fear and amazement, as he walked-on while looking down to his right side at the wide lake several miles away. It was very far down below—a thing that made him realize they had been walking on top of an extremely high ridge. He kept looking down to the side, the trees that were barely recognizable.

“Do not stare down too long,” his father cautioned him without looking back, “you might miss a step,”

The boy rushed to catch up with him.

“Where did all that water come from?” he asked, as he got closer,

“I really do not know,”

“Are we fishing there?”

“No?”

“Can we go down and see?”

“Not today,”

“But it’s not far? Look?”

“It appears close because it’s a lot of water, believe me son, it is quite far from here, hurry up a little, we need to get there before midday.”

The boy stepped up as they walked towards a small path that led leftwards and downwards off the ridge.

The sun was now fully risen, with the father and his son making their way across a vast rocky plain; a wide piece of land that was bordered by distant escarpments.

“Are you tired?” he asked the boy.

“No I’m not?”

“Hungry?”

“Just a little,”

“Want to turn back and-”

“No!” the boy immediately protested.

They approached a path that cut through a raised section of the plain, and the boy followed closely as his father walked up and stopped at its crest. It overlooked a lower, flat area down below.

“*Hooow!*” the boy remarked as he got up the crest and stood beside his father.

“Seen anything like this before?”

“No! It is, scary!” he replied, both scared and surprised. His father smiled a little, and walked on down the path, leaving him frozen for a few seconds to process the scenery. He was looking at a vast, flat area covered by tens of ‘wells’ of different sizes; wells that were gushing clean, steaming water up into the air, some as high as the tallest trees. The water splashed and bathed most of the area, scattering and flowing into a clean lake above which hundreds of thousands of white flamingoes flocked.

“Are you coming?” his father asked as he walked on. The boy, *snapping out of his surprise*, followed his tracks down the path. At the springs and geysers, he stared as he approached his father, who was tracing a path through the springs on the flat, red-orange landscape.

“Where is it coming from!” he asked as he kept walking while staring—raising his voice to be heard through the gushing and splashing.

“Under the earth!” his father replied.

“Is it hot?”

“Very hot!” replied his father, after which the boy rushed his little steps and grabbed his belt; staying very close as they walked through, without him keeping his eyes off the water.

“This is amazing! Why does it pour out?”

“I really do not know! You like it!”

“It is, scary!”

“Relax! We are getting close to the fishing grounds! Keep up the good pace!” he encouraged as they walked through.

Close to midday, the two were walking down a gentle slope grown with thick vegetation. They followed a green, carpet-grass path, through the thin, straight trees, as they walked towards a very sandy, clear area down below. A pool of water was next to it.

“Look at this place!” the boy marveled as he followed his father out the trees; walking onto the warm, light brown sand. He turned and looked around, marveling at the sight of the very high, medium size waterfall, which poured cool, clear water into the wide pool that flew on slowly and calmly.

All around the area were hundreds of noisy monkeys, which chattered and escaped from the man and his son; madly dispersing and jumping further into the tall trees surrounding the fall. The man walked closer to the pool, and he ‘unburdened’ himself beside a lone tree. Just close to the fall’s plunge pool, was a fairly flat piece of rock—several meters wide and across—toward which the boy walked under his father’s instruction.

“Will they harm us?” he asked about the monkeys while ‘unloading’ at the rock.

“They are afraid of us. Put the baskets over there,” he instructed the boy, as he grabbed one of his two spears.

Kneeling on the rock platform and sitting on his calfs, the boy watched his father (on his front-left side) scan for fish inside the clear water. As he watched, his naked upper-body warmed in the sun. His palms rested on the rock, on which in front of him, were three fat, orange-gray tilapia, and one brown mudfish. Each of the tilapia was as long as his leg, from the knee downwards, and the mudfish was as long as the distance from his waist to his feet.

The area around the pool was cool: a result of the mist from the splashing water neutralizing the heat from the overhead sun. Enjoying the coolness on his skin, the boy relaxed and observed his father, who stood in the middle of the flowing water facing the direction of *the water flow*, which gently curved into the forest where trees bordered its banks all along its course.

With his feet anchored in the water (that reached close to his waist), the man observed the big, healthy fish swimming around his legs. Selecting a fat tilapia, he held his spear in readiness. And just as he raised it for a strike...

“Why do we have to fish here?” the boy innocently interrupted his concentration, causing him to hesitate and scare the fish. Sighing to himself, the man stepped very smoothly through the water to change his position.

“The water here is fresh, so the fish is healthy, it is all I know,” he answered as he took position, the boy watching as he gripped his spear. He selected a slow fish from the oblivious school swimming around, and he stilled himself. Controlling his breath, he raised the spear a strike, as...

“Why is the water here fresh?” the boy interrupted his concentration again,

“You are making me scare the fish!” he complained. The boy looked away slowly. He moved slowly to change his position, and again picked a new spot. The boy looked back at him and kept watching.

As his father was focused on the fish, the boy noticed something different; small water waves were moving outwards and backwards as they approached his father from the quiet side of the river. By straightening his back, he rose to his knees to have a better look.

“I think something is moving in the water,” he said to his father, who got distracted again.

“I cannot catch more fish if you keep talking? What do I have to tell you?”

“But it’s-”

“There is nothing in the water,” he ‘assured’ the boy, who slowly sat back on his calfs. He went back to fishing while slowly shaking his head. To avoid distracting him, the boy tried to look straight down at the water, but the side of his left eye unintentionally caught the ‘movement’ again, forcing him to pay attention. He looked as the small waves kept approaching his father, getting uncomfortably close.

He looked at his father, and back at the moving waves, and he almost said something but stopped himself. He weighed the consequence of distracting him against the possibility of something dangerous harming him inside the water.

“Something is in the water father,” he fearfully said aloud.

“How many times-”

“Look!” he pointed out the fast moving, small wave to him. His father suddenly turned his head and looked. His face turned serious and his eyes widened, as he realized what it was. Quickly, he turned around and started towards the rock, on which the boy stood up in fear and watched as he rushed his steps against the flowing water.

“What is it?” the boy asked loudly with fear.

“Stay back!” his father cautioned.

“It’s getting closer!” the boy observed with both fear and curiosity, as his father rushed against the current, his steps speeding up as he approached the shore. Just as he raised his foot and stepped on a rock inside the water, a massive, scaled tail lashed out behind him. It swept his foot off the rock and caused him to fall backwards into the water, losing grip of his spear as he plunged in with a massive splash.

“*Father!*” the boy cried as he stood confused, watching as the water around the splash whirled and mixed with great intensity. His eyes opened wide as he saw his father suddenly get hurled out into the air by the massive, stone-hard crocodile back.

The reptile’s back was close to his father’s back, as he turned with it in midair. Its massive jaws moved in a biting stance towards his right arm, which he removed to his right leg, and drew his sharp dagger. They plunged back into the water.

“Father!” he cried, watching helplessly as blood started to color the ‘turning water’.

“*Father!*” he cried again, rushing to the edge of the rock, from where he saw the massive crocodile charge out again—now with his father’s left arm tightly restraining the underside of its neck, his legs locking across its belly, holding on at its back as he repeatedly continued to stab its

throat. Vigorously, the monstrous reptile turned and splashed back in an attempt to get him off its back, the water turning redder as it continued to mix up.

The boy felt a slight skip in his heartbeat as his father's head suddenly surfaced. "Father!" he called as his father caught a breath, after which he immediately started rushing towards the tree on which he had set his tools. The boy ran off the rock in the same direction.

"Get me that spear!" his father said as he rushed his legs through the coloring water, whirling around him.

"Hurry!" he insisted as the boy ran towards the tree, "hurry!" The boy got to the tree and grabbed the spear, which he threw so that it spun and turned as it flew toward him. Raising his hand as he stepped on the rock once again, the man grabbed the spear right at the middle of its shaft, as the crocodile charged out the water behind him.

Against the rock, he sprung himself as he turned, his hand charging with strength as he thrust the razor sharp tip right into the crocodile's throat through its huge, open mouth. With the other end of the spear, he pushed it backwards into the water, and he quickly turned and splashed towards the shore, where his son was anxiously waiting for him.

"Father!" he called as he rushed out the water. He moved to help him as he collapsed on all fours, coughed as he caught a breath.

"Are you hurt father?" he very caringly asked.

"No I'm (coughing) I'm fine, are you okay!"

"Yes father." "Are you okay!" he insisted while holding his right shoulder and checking his condition.

"I'm fine father," the boy assured, "your hand!" he noticed a profusely bleeding fresh wound on his father's left arm—a deep 'hole' made by one of the crocodile's dirty canines.

"Get me my pouch, hurry," he sent the boy rushing to the tree, as he capped the wound tightly with his right hand, blood flowing out between his fingers. The boy rushed back with the soft skin pouch, and he turned slowly and sat on the ground, getting ready to nurse the wound.

"...it was *twisting* and *turning*! And you grabbed it with your arm and killed it!" the very excited boy demonstrated with a lot of energy as he followed his father through the clear, leaf carpeted paths of the forest, carrying the same loads he had when he left that morning, "that was great father! You *killed* a crocodile! I *cannot* believe it!"

"Not the fishing exercise you hopped for, was it?"

"No father! It was more than I imagined! It was *amazing*! I want to come with you next time!" he suggested as the house came into view against the orange, setting sun.

"But you saw how dangerous it was?"

"No! I want to come again! I want to walk on the *very high* ridge! I want to see water *exploding* out of the ground! And learn how to kill crocodiles!" he said with his father laughing lightly as they approached the raised part of the forest.

"I'm serious father! I want to learn that too! I want to be strong too?"

"But you said you were strong already? Remember?"

"I am? But I want to be stronger?" he said as he hurried his steps to catch up with his father's left arm, which was entirely bandaged with a soft piece of skin that held the herbs which prevented infection and restrained bleeding.

"Stronger?" his father asked.

"Way stronger!"

He insisted, his father laughed while walking on towards the house.

"And then what happened father? What happened?" the boy, who sat on his bed, asked while staring at his father, seated on a stool on the opposite side of the fire as he paused and looked down at the flames.

"Death happened. Death," he replied. The boy sighed with some sorrow while still staring at him.

"Time for bed now, get in before *the monster* comes to get you too," he said to him.

"Monster?" the boy returned, "I would take a sword and *strike it*, like that boy?" he illustrated while getting into bed, covering himself to the neck with the warming, fur blanket.

"Does it hurt?" he asked his father with some sympathy.

"Not that much," he replied, covering up the fact that it was excruciatingly painful.

"Father?"

"Yes boy?"

"The forest is dangerous, is it not?"

"It is?"

"Yet we live here every day? Why?" he asked as his father paused for a while before responding.

"Is it not beautiful? And rich?"

"It is?"

"And fun?"

"Of course it is, but it's dangerous? You could have died today?" he said. His father sighed ones again.

"It is our home now son," he told him, "and we accept it for what it is, you see, that way, we can prepare for whatever it brings, we cannot go back, can we?" he asked while looking into his eyes. The boy slightly moved his head side to side in refusal.

"Sleep son, I will see you tomorrow."

"I will see you tomorrow as well father," the boy said and he laid back on the bed, the man smiling and watching as he turned and faced the other side, closing his eyes.

Back to the fire, the man turned his attention. He gently pushed-in a piece of firewood, and then carefully crossed his hands over his knees. Soundlessly, he watched the flames as he contemplated.

THE END

WILD
PART II
THE GRASS LEOPARDS

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“Have you caught it!” the man asked as he stepped through the light green, wide and circular leaves, which were suspended on straight stalks to form an almost level bed that was as high as his knees. As he stepped through, tens of wild, fat chicken, big pigeons, enormous geese, and many other hundreds of wild birds dispersed. They took off, others flying up towards the branches of the well spaced, straight-stem trees.

“I’ve caught it!” the boy shouted while still out of sight, as the man, his father, with his spear in hand, walked on towards a section of the round leaves from under which the panting boy arose. Close to his chest, the boy was clutching a huge, grey-brown duck with both of his hands. Squeezing it tightly as it quacked loudly and jerked its muscles in an attempt to get free.

“I’ve caught it!” the boy repeated excitedly, as sweat continued to wet his face. He looked at his excited father who stepped faster towards him.

“It’s a fat one!” the boy said aloud.

“Very impressive!” said his father as he approached,

“It’s a big one! Look!”

“Great job son,” he said genuinely said as he got to the boy, who looked down at the face of the duck that quacked more slowly.

“Are we going to eat it?” he asked while looking at the duck, which was giving up its struggle.

“Of course we are?” replied his father.

“I feel sorry for it,” the boy said.

“Believe me son, you will not feel sorry when you’ll be chewing down its roasted meat,” he assured him, “come on.”

The boy followed his lead as he cuddled the slowly quacking, enormous duck—a duck that was much bigger than the size of his entire chest. The circular leaves, through which he followed

his father, 'buried' his legs to his waist. They walked down towards a wide, shallow depression that was covered entirely by the circular leaves and surrounded by trees.

"Can you carry it all the way?" his father asked as he led the way down the very gentle slope.

"I think I can, but my hands are starting to hurt," the boy replied. The weight of the fat duck was stressing his young muscles, causing his elbow to ache. He did his best to hold the bird from sliding down and getting away.

Down the gentle slope, he followed his father as they approached the centre of the very shallow depression.

"Stop," the father said, the boy who was very close behind him, stopped.

"What is it?" he asked nervously, as his father looked down at the bed of leaves before him. He had noticed 'a curving disruption' that extended from up on the very gentle slope ahead, and stopped a few steps in front of them. Towards that place where the disruption stopped, he walked, with the boy following close behind.

"What are you looking at father?" the boy asked, as the man used the sharp tip of his spear to cautiously move the concealing leaves to the side—revealing a puppy that was lying on its side while panting with its eyes closed. He slowly went down on one knee to have a closer look, as the wild puppy started to whine in fear. Dark brown in color, with white spots, and pointy ears, the wild puppy was about three months old.

To his father's side, the boy moved to have a look as well. Down on the rotting leaf carpet, it remained coiled while hissing motionlessly.

"A small dog!" remarked the surprised boy, who had never seen a puppy that close before. "You said they never come out this far?" he asked while raising the heavy duck under his tired right arm.

"They never do," his surprised father, answered. He gently placed the spear down beside it. While staying immobile, the puppy increased its whine as he reached for it. Its belly went up and down rapidly as it breathed. Gently, he held its legs and slowly turned it over as it whined. Laying it over on its right side, he saw that its left, hind leg was bloody. He also noticed the marks of three, big claws from which the drying blood had been oozing.

"What happened to it?" the boy asked sympathetically, as he gently laid it back to its initial position. He looked around keenly, his face turning more serious, as he noticed something else: all along the disruption were several, big paw prints that were hardly visible.

"Something bad was here," he said as he stood up with his spear while still observing the disruption.

"What is it?" the boy asked.

"I cannot tell for sure," he said, looking around at the surrounding trees, "something chased it down here, something very, very dangerous," he added and then sighed, "we need to keep moving," he said while stepping aside.

As he walked on, the boy remained standing, looking down at the whining puppy. Sensing that the boy was not following, he stopped and looked back. He was still sympathizing with the puppy.

“Can we take it with us?” he asked.

“We need to get home, come on?” he called him. The boy remained silent and hesitant, not sure whether to follow his father or remain with the puppy.

“We cannot just leave it like this?” he said.

“Son, we have no time, you need to come with me now, night is approaching,” his father insisted. The boy continued to hesitate.

“But father-”

“But what son? We need to get home. It is probably almost dead—you have seen its wounds? Come on,”

The boy still did not move. After a sigh, the man turned around and walked back to him.

“Look, this puppy might not make it all the way home,” he said.

“It can father?”

“Even if it did, it might end up causing trouble,”

“Trouble?” the boy questioned, “But you said they could be kept? Didn’t you?”

“Look, this dog, is going *to die*,” he stressed, “look at it, it is *dying*, and we need to get home,”

“But we cannot just leave it here like this,” the boy continued.

“What is wrong with you? We have to go!” There was a moment.

“But I want it,” the boy said finally. The man sighed, after which the boy looked up at him with a miserable face. They gazed eye to eye for a moment, and he noticed that the boy was not going to give up.

“Okay,” he said, “but something is not right with this, give me the duck,” the boy handed him the duck, which quacked louder and jerked its muscles vigorously to escape. He grabbed the duck and locked it under his strong right arm, his spear held in his left hand.

“Pick it up,” he told the boy while looking around at the surrounding trees, walking on away. The boy gently carried the whining puppy and carefully supported it on his arms across his chest. He followed his father while cuddling it with sympathy. Eastwards, opposite the direction of the orange, setting sun, they walked through the bed of circular leaves, heading down another very gentle slope that led the way out of the well-spaced trees.

Lighting the entire hut, was the fire on top of which was placed the simple grilling apparatus. Well above the warming flames, was the headless, leg-less, golden brown duck, dripping fat through the grill into the fire, which expanded at intervals because of burning it. All around the hut spread the aroma of roasting duck, as the man and his son—seated on the warm and dry, dung plastered floor on opposite sides of the fire—feasted on its soft meat. Just next to the fire, was the puppy, coiled in a small depression of ash. It had a skin strap pressing a bunch of ground, mixed herbs against its wounds.

With his knife in his right hand, the boy reached again for the roasting duck. He pinched a big piece and cut it off. He sat back down on the floor and chewed it down. Just before he could bite the last piece, he looked down at the puppy at the side of the fire. He extended the piece towards its mouth. The puppy hurriedly snatched it with its young but sharp teeth.

“Finnish eating before feeding it,” the man, his father, told him while clearing meat from a bone.

The boy cut off another piece, and he looked at his father as he enjoyed it. His father thought for a while as he looked at the cleared bone, which he eased to the puppy that grabbed it with a groan and started grinding it. Into his eyes, the boy looked as they feasted late into the night.

The orange sunlight shone through the spaces between the pieces of wood that made up the door, causing the puppy to wake up and start barking. It played about and barked until the boy woke up.

“You’re okay!” he exclaimed excitedly as he sat up, watching the puppy as it limped around and barked at the tens of chirping birds just outside the door.

“Take it outside,” his father said while still in bed.

“Why?” the boy asked in defense of the puppy.

“It wants to chase the birds,” replied his father.

Off the bed, the boy jumped towards the door, opening it as the puppy rushed out and caused the hundreds of birds that were around the house to disperse. Beside the house, was an incomplete store, made of mud and reeds. It was halfway in terms of height, and on its sides, were piles of fresh reeds and an almost depleted heap of clay that needed refilling.

As the puppy chased the birds round and round the incomplete store, the man stepped out the door and told the boy to prepare for a trip to the river. There was no need for breakfast since the duck had been big enough to keep them full until lunchtime.

They put on their brown, furry, sleeveless coats that reached close to their knees, and went on to prepare for the trip. With a big, soft leather bag over his shoulder, a furry skin sheath strapping a dagger at the side of his right leg, and a spear in his hand, the man led the way out the door. The boy followed with the puppy close behind him. He ran around with it as they proceeded down the gentle slope leading away from their house.

They trekked westwards into the ‘tall forest’, which had sparsely spaced, perfectly straight trees whose high branches formed a continuous canopy a long distance above. Through the red flower bushes growing close together between those trees, the man led the way. The excited boy followed with most of his attention focused on the trailing puppy. Surrounding the vast spread of red flower bushes, were taller, green bushes, which proceeded ahead.

“Carry it,” said the man as they approached a clear, shallow stream that cut through the flower-colonized grounds. As he stepped in and started to cross, the boy excitedly picked up the barking puppy and followed his lead.

“It barks all the time?” he noted.

“It’s excited,” his father replied.

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