

# **The Foal and The Cub**

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# I

It was a beautiful, warm morning marking the start of summer. The sun poked through the dense canopy, enlightening the moisture-laden forest. The soil was marked with deep stamps of young rowdy animals jumping around. It was their first day of holidays. While some families planned grand adventures—songbirds flew northwards, and whales sought southern delicacies—others preferred simpler pleasures closer to home, like chasing butterflies or pranking others.

# II

The two families, the foxes and the horses, came upon the river, one on the other side. The horses didn't notice and began drinking and bathing from it. The fox's family, too, started drinking, but the fox-father was in a jovial mood and decided to initiate the talks. The fox-father, instead of calling out to them and approaching them as any animal would. The fox-father decided to slyly sneak behind them.

The fox-father was just behind the horse-father when he decided to greet him in a rather strange way...by howling. The horse family started jumping around neighing, with horse-father kicking back his hoof blindly, trying to defeat whatever was behind him. The fox-father nearly avoided being trampled by the horse family, yelling, "It's me! It's me!".

The horse family steadied themselves and breathed and sighed relief, all while the fox family watched and laughed (except for the fox-father, who almost passed away).

Both families came together for chit-chat.

"Man, you scared the hell out of me!" said the horse-father.

"And you almost trampled me to death!", shot back the fox-father.

"That's because you scared them first, dear", said the fox-mother.

"whatever..."

"Good morning! How are you all doing today?" asked the horse-mother.

"We are doing very good!" horse-mother continued without letting them reply.

She was always like this; she gets very excited when it comes to chatting and gossiping.

"Good to see you so excited in the early morning", complimented the fox-mother.

"Yes, on this beautiful morning, my little mare and I are going to gallop to the flower fields to the west! Right?", looking at her daughter, who is barely a year old.

"Yes, Mama!", Horse-daughter replied giddily.

"I so envy you. After I take the first bath and the fox-father is gone for work, I have to go and hunt food for the family, because this little son of mine doesn't do anything for his mother." Says the fox-mother in solemn voice, while keeping eyes on the horse-family face to see if they laugh. They all burst into laughter.

"Then I have to bathe again because I get all sweaty from hunting! After that, I have to cook everything by myself without an ounce of help", she continues. She looks at her feet tiredly, "You have to believe me, it's a great deal of hard work", and sighs while peeking at the horse-family face.

Both horse-father and horse-mother exchange a look of compassion.

"I believe you. You are such a hard worker", says the horse-mother with empathy. The horse-mother then receives a reply with a forced snuffle and a low "thank you".

"But what about you two?" asked the fox-father, looking at horse-father and horse-son.

"We are going to the lake to the north-west, where I will teach the young man how to swim", horse-father replied.

Every year, before monsoon, the forest mayor hosted a 2-week boot camp. It was about the safety and preparedness of potential flooding. All children, especially those of mammalian origins, are expected to join them. A professional, along with a few volunteers, is present primarily to teach students how to swim. Sometimes they also give them lectures on disaster management. On the last day of boot camp, a test takes place. All students are ranked according to their ability. Families are invited to witness their children's swimming skills. The mayor, who is also present, takes note of students' results and prepares a report for flood preparedness.

"Ahhh", replied Fox-Father. "Are you planning to send your son for that monsoon bootcamp?"

"Of course, yes. It's just that starting early right now is better than waiting for it." Horse-father said wisely.

"Yeah, that makes—"

"We are going to send our son there too. Even though he says he doesn't need it." Fox-mother interrupts.

"Ohhh, I am sure he is as great at swimming as his mom", remarked the horse-mother.

"Yeah, what can I say? He is as hard working as his mom, too", replied the fox-mother while laughing.

Every time the men of the houses start a conversation among themselves, it gets interrupted by their eagerly chatty wives. The conversation from the horse's side was always

humble and calm, while the foxes were always hungry to brag about themselves.

"My cub wouldn't listen to me at all!" the fox-mother exaggerated. "He is always out there playing with his friends and barely ever does homework! Still...", waits a second, "He is at the top of his class!".

The cub smugs while his mom looks at him.

"Wow, that's so nice.", the horse-father complimented.

"What about your foal? How does he do at studying?" asked fox-father. "Hey!" shouted the fox-father as his son snickered loudly.

"Oh, he's a bit above average in his class.", the horse's father remarked. "Though he is a very hard worker, I can say for sure. He finishes his homework on time and always starts his exam preparation early."

The foal stood there shy and unassuming.

"That's very good", the fox-father returned the compliment. The fox-mother had nothing further to add, remained there quietly, and gave side eyes to the cub.

The conversation switched back and forth for a while. The conversation went as usual, daily woes, gossip, politics, and occasionally, weather. Meanwhile, the cub and the foal kept exchanging looks, the cub smirked with his mouth, and the foal doubted with his eyes.

The sun started to show its might, beaming bright on everyone's foreheads. The adults noticed it, along with the constant whining of their children. They decided it was finally time to part ways.

"Well then, we should go and leave you guys alone". Says the horse-father.

"Yes, I need to get this foal-mare to the fields, she can't stay put for a second", added the horse-mother, laughing.

"Yeah, we've got to go our ways, too. I've got a lot of work to finish before noon." Replied the fox-mom.

The males exchanged looks, the females exchanged pleasantries, and the boys exchanged pride and doubt.

### III

Some weeks passed, and the day of boot camp arrived. The foal has his hair brushed, hoves trimmed and backpacked. He left his house on time and galloped steadily on his path to the camp. Meanwhile, the cub who looks as if he had just woken up, leaves his home hastily with his bag half-opened. He rushes on his path to camp, occasionally licking his fur clean.

On their way, they meet each other. The fox-son, with his subtle smirk, pretends not to notice his counterpart approaching him. The horse-son initiates the conversation.

"Aren't you nervous about swimming lectures?" asked the horse-son.

"No, not at all, why would I?"

"I am nervous about it, I don't like water, they are too cold sometimes, and you can't breathe underwater, it's too suffocating."

"I already know how to swim, so I don't mind. Also, of course you can't breathe underwater!", fox-son replied, laughing.

"Yeah...then what do you do?"

"Magic!" fox-son laughed again.

Horse-son disappointed, trailed behind. He looked at the canopy above him. The rays of the sun, scattered by the moisture, revealed its vibrance, as he wondered about the magic behind swimming. The warmth of the air surrounding him eases his anxiety.

They both arrive at the camp, which is a lake at the foot of a hill and is as deep as two brown bears.

The lake was starting to get surrounded by students of various races and classes, from mammals to amphibians, from vertebrates to invertebrates and from winged to non-winged. The teacher, who was a snake, was at one end of the lake, and the volunteers, who were brown bears, were behind him. The volunteers were strong enough to rescue any animal out of the water.

Both of them were among the crowd and waited for the teacher to start. The fox-son was with his group of friends, which included snake-daughter, beaver-son, pig-daughter and jackal-son. Meanwhile, horse-son stood next to a beautiful horse-daughter.

The fox-son's conversation started with his friends glazing him, boasting about how good he was at many things, how he excelled at swimming, etc. While the horse-son's conversation started with a nervous "Hi", which sets off the mare into excitedly talking about how she likes swimming, how excited she was to swim again, etc. Just then, the teacher began speaking.

"Good morning, everyone! Welcome to the 77th pre-monsoon annual boot camp. I will try to keep this short to not drown anyone with boredom, hahahaha.", and so he



went, announcing the bootcamp, introducing volunteers and highlighting the programmes.

They started their swimming practice immediately after it. The students went one after another, based on roll call. The fox-son and horse-son were together, the fox-son before the horse-son.

Beaver showcased its floating skill, jackal surprised people with his diving skills, pig-daughter made everyone concerned with her sinking like a cannonball, and the mare drew admiration from everyone for swimming beautifully.

Then, finally, came fox-son turn, and everyone was watching him. He stepped into the water and kept walking as if there was no distinction between land and water. He kept walking until he was fully submerged. A few seconds in and still no bubble to be seen, this made everyone concerned, and the bears were ready to dive in. Just then, he arose from the water, acting as if he didn't put any effort into surfacing. Then he went on to swim with near-perfect stillness; his strokes were so elegant, it would put some fish to shame. He left everyone astonished. The snake teacher, with a round of applause, said, "Bravo! That was amazing! You have passed!".

Now it was horse-son's turn. He went to the lake's boundary and then slowly began to submerge himself. Just as he had his first hoof in, he began to shiver; the water was a little cold for him. Despite it, he kept going in slowly, deeper and deeper.

"Flood isn't going to wait for you to touch it!" someone yelled.

Everyone burst out laughing. The horse-son looked around and found even the mare to be laughing; this

embarrassed him a lot. So, he closed his eyes, called all the strength he had and dived into it. He wasn't a great swimmer; he struggled to breathe, and his movements were frantic and unoptimal. Nonetheless, he could at least stay afloat until any help arrived in case of emergency.

After everyone was done, the volunteers announced the list of students and their marks for that day. Obviously, the fox-son ranked one, and understandably, the horse-son ranked 10 from last. The snake-teacher announced that the top 10 wouldn't need to attend practice anymore, as they are good enough to handle water by themselves.

The fox-son was as smug as ever, while the horse-son was embarrassed and disappointed. Both exchanged one final look before everyone left for home, one of pride and the other of shame.

## IV

The next day, both of the sons were back at camp. Horse-son to practice and fox-son to "teach his friends". The horse-son kept on practising hard. Every time he looked up, there was almost always a fox and his friends to snicker at him.

One day, while the horse-son was practising, the fox-son suddenly shot up beside him and startled him. The panic made it hard for the horse-son to stay afloat and keep his head above water, which further made him start drowning. He screamed for help, but heard no one reach out to him, not even the fox-son who was next to him. He wrestled with water harder, trying to stay alive, but his leg began to give in.

Before his eyes began to shut, he saw something strange: the fox-son's tail looked black, thin and wide. Fortunately, the volunteers saw the situation and dived straight in to save him.

## V

The whistle of birds and rustling of trees awakens him. He opens his eyes to see the red-blue hue of the last sunlight. Beside him, he hears sobbing and finds that it is his mom and sister; his father is pacing back and forth.

Everyone sees him awake and is instantly relieved. His mom and sister snuggled their heads around his neck, while his father touched his head to his head.

"Thank god you are ok", his father broke out first.

"I was sooooo scaaarreeeddd~", his sister said, crying.

"They removed so much water from you", remarked his mother.

Each of them takes a turn talking. Eventually, the horse-son told the family about everything that happened.

"It was all that fox's fault, I almost died thanks to him!" the horse-son blurted out.

"Why? What happened? What did he do?", questioned the fox-father.

"I was just practising near the west bank of the lake. And suddenly, the cunning fox just sprang up beside me. I got so scared, I started panicking and then lost balance. I asked him for help again and again, but he just stood there", explained the horse-son.

"I see, it's ok. I think the fox-son was as shocked as you and didn't know what to do. It's unfortunate what

happened, but I don't think either of you is to blame.", horse-father iterated.

"Also, when I was in water, I saw his tail was like that of a beaver! He was cheating all this time; he doesn't know how to swim. It was his beaver friend that helped him cheat. That's why he passed so easily...".

"Son, I think you should take a break for a while, you look like you are still in shock. I don't think it's ok to accuse someone just because you are jealous of them.", the horse-father expressed himself.

"But...", the horse-son protested.

"You should take some rest..." The horse-father ignored his plea as he kissed his son's head.

The horse-son, disappointed by his family's disbelief, decides never to speak a word about it. He soon forgot about it.

## VI

After the accident, the horse-son took his time to recover for two days. While everything returned to normal, a bear stayed near the horse-son at all times, upon his father's request.

The fox-son continued to snicker to his friends while watching him, and the horse-son continued to practice swimming slowly and steadily.

Day after day passed, the horse-son began to get good at it. Not brilliant, but enough to stay afloat and swim around freely in the still water of the lake.

The day of the test came and passed, the fox-son was still in first place, and the horse-son managed to be in the top 100th. Both families celebrated their son's achievement.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. The horse-son kept practising near his family pond, and the fox-son ran around pranking animals. The committee organised by the mayor started preparing a standard operating procedure to safeguard the forest in the event of flooding.

Everything else went on as usual until the monsoon came.

## VII

The day was windless, with a breeze now and then. The canopy stayed still and produced no sound. This amplified the song birds, which brought melodies to everyone's homes and brought pleasantness to their ears and souls. The thick cloud above, blocking the harsh sun, finally gave the cool break everyone wished for. All the animals, of all shapes and forms, were out and about enjoying Earth's gift. The children were running around and chasing each other. The adults were lying and feeling pretty snugly with trees on their backs.

The answer to what time it was was a guess as good as any. The sun reached the horizon without alerting.

Soon, the night came, and with the moon came the winds. The adult started to notice it was nightfall, and as they began

to get their children inside, the winds blew hard. And the heavy winds brought along with them heavy rain and thunder.

Without anyone noticing, snakes and birds, who are usually the first to warn them, were already gone.

The winds and rains were nonstop, and there weren't any signs of them stopping. Everyone took their small ones and ran for safety. Some borrowed deep underneath, some shut their doors in their tree holes, and those who didn't have any structural support ran for the cave shelter in a hill. In a few minutes, the plains started to flood, and trees began to fall.

On the way, the horse-family and the fox-family arrive together on the path to the cave. Along with other animals, they are bumping into each other and running as fast as they can for their lives. While going uphill, the fox-son fell and slipped along the slope. The horse-son saw it and stopped instinctively and ran back to help the fox-son. The families then realised that the two weren't among them. They were far behind. Before they could even fully turn back, the soil of the slope between them fell apart. It took many animals in its wake.

Although both sides were separated—the family on the upper end and sons on the lower end—both sides were fine; they just needed to get over this enormous landslide to regroup.

"Wait! We will find some way to get you to over!" yelled the fox-father.

"Don't worry, we got this. You three go straight to the cave!" yelled the horse-father to the three girls.

There was a tremor beneath their feet.

"You should go! We will manage ou—" yelled the horse-son. As the soil and the rain sacrifice them to the flood.

The two yelled for their sons, but none of them heard them, nor could they do anything about it.

The two began swimming for their lives. The flood current took them further downstream on a river. It took sharp turns. And blew through all kinds of wood and rock debris. They struggled hard against it, smashing into obstacles that came between.

The fox-son, being lighter, was taken away faster by the current and was separated further and further apart from the horse-son.

The horse focused on himself, trying to keep his head above water and thought that the fox-son could take care of himself. Fortunately, he found a log running in the same direction as him, and with great effort, he managed to shove it in between the exposed tree roots on the bank of the river. He got on it, relieved for a second that everything was alright, to discover that the fox-son was struggling to swim just a few meters behind him.

"Swim harder! You can do it!" the horse-son yelled out.

"Don't swim directly against the current, swim across it!" he continued.

After a few seconds, he realised that fox-son was trying to say something. He tried hard to make out what he was saying. His nerves froze when he heard the fox-son was

begging for help. He remembered that the fox-son doesn't know how to swim.

Before he could find his beaver friend or himself to save the fox-son, the current got stronger, the log got dislodged, and both fell into the river. This time, he couldn't swim; he had once again swallowed a lot of water. He could only wrestle with water. He fought for who knows how long.

He was about to pass out, but was once again fortunate enough that the same bear leapt into the river and got him out. The horse-son tried to tell the bear about the fox-son, but either the bear didn't hear him or he didn't speak loudly enough. The horse-son fainted, and the bear started running toward the shelter at full speed.

## VIII

The sun filtered through the mingling tree leaves shines brightly and warmly. The trees and the birds are once again singing in unison. The horse-son wakes up coughing and sees his family under the same tree next to him. He is relieved that it was all a nightmare. Until he hears high-pitched crying from behind. Across the river, the same place where the fox-son and horse-son families interacted a few months ago, he sees the fox-son lying between his sobbing parents.

