

The Lonely Snake

by Julie Britt

A solitary snake, his belly full, stretched out in the sun. His uncoiling swept sand and small rocks to the left and right.

Ah, he thought, I have the power to move mountains from my path. See how the lowly earth makes way for my comfort.

For a while, the snake indulged himself in vivid fantasies in which he ruled the earth.

Surefooted horses carried him on their soft hindquarters, lest his travels render him exhausted and vulnerable. Great fowls of the air beat their wings and pierced the stillness with their cries to herald his passage. Fish swam rapidly in circles, creating geysers in crystal ponds from which he could drink as if he were sipping from the finest marble font in the grandest castle.

Wolves encircled him, their fangs bared to ward away any evil creature that dared to stage a coup. Winsome she-snakes lined up outside his royal chamber...

A scurrying in the brush distracted the snake from his reverie. Probably just a field mouse searching for his companion, who ventured close enough to become my dinner a while ago, he thought.

Great lions brought in plump, sweet field mice, dangling them by their tails so the snake could pick those that were fit for a king. The lions dropped the choicest ones in a pile. The snake would toy with them until he was ready to dine. If the snake was feeling particularly charitable toward his subjects, he would allow them to munch on his castoffs. The lions and wolves were delighted to be offered a nibble or two.

Hmm, it is good to be satisfied. My dinner mouse was so pleasing to the tongue, the snake thought, smacking his lips. It will be hours before I must dine again. This leisurely life is fine.

The snake stretched anew and returned to his fantasy, the comforts of which lulled him to sleep. But his nap was shortened by a troublesome dream in which he was not a lauded royal. Instead, he

was a vile creature whose presence struck fear and loathing in all who gazed upon him.

Alas, he thought, gazing around his lonely spot on the barren sand, which was growing cold. I have no royal subjects. I have no steeds to carry me across the land. The wolves do not guard my resting place. No fair maidens desire me, and lions seek the plump mice for themselves. What's more, the great beasts would pounce on me and shake me to death within their powerful jaws if they caught me unaware.

This is my lot, to sneak and hide and spend my days in uneasy solitude. Oh, if only it were not so.

By and by, the snake was surprised again by a skittering motion in the bushes. Warily, he coiled, ready to defend his sad life. Then out peeped a little field mouse, tiny, unappetizing and, apparently, as brave as any lion. Why, he walked right up to the snake.

"Pardon me, good sir, but I am in search of my brother, who was traveling this way of late."

Recovering from his surprise, the snake decided to engage this strange mouse in a bit of talk. It had been a long, lonely day.

"Pray tell, what did, ah, uhm, what does your brother look like, my dear mouse?"

"Like me, good sir, only bigger," the little creature said, stretching up onto his tippy paws and puffing out his cheeks and chest.

"Well, I'm not sure whether I saw him. What would he have been about?"

"He was looking for a safe place in which we could pass the night," the mouse said. "We have traveled from afar and have had many exciting adventures. He bade me hide in yonder tree stump while he secured more suitable lodgings."

"Then, young mouse, please rest here a bit and tell me about your adventures."

“I must beg your forgiveness, kind sir. My brother surely waits for me back at my stump.”

“Little fellow, have you not just come from yon stump? And was your brother in evidence there?”

“Yes, sir. No, sir.”

“Then consider this. Your brother, at this very moment, is probably tucked safely within some far den and cannot make it safely back to fetch you before nightfall. Why, he probably is grateful for the knowledge that you are sheltered in your stump, where he will seek you come daybreak.”

“Your wisdom surely surpasses mine,” the mouse said. “You speak the truth. I shall return to yon stump, where I will rest a while, contemplating my good fortune in finding a gentleman of your obviously superior intellect. Then my brother and I will restart our journey on the morrow.”

I like this bright fellow, the snake thought. I shall converse with him longer.

“But, sweet mouse, the stump is not far, and see, the sun has not yet entered its own night abode. Pray stay a while longer, then I will see you safely to the tree stump.”

“Well, as you were gracious enough to solve my dilemma and express interest in our adventures, I will grant your request,” the mouse said.

So the wee mouse sat down and explained that he and his brother had left home in search of great adventure, and they had found it. He was a fine storyteller. The snake felt as if he were alongside the little fellows as they escaped hissing cats and stalking eagles.

The snake confided in his new friend that he had spent many lonely hours in the sand, wishing for a fine companion such as himself.

When the little mouse grew tired, yawning and shivering a bit in the gathering twilight, the snake escorted him, as promised, back to his stump. The mouse curled up inside, and the snake coiled around the stump.

"I'll keep you safe, my new friend," the snake said. And they passed a quiet night together.

When the snake awoke, he felt refreshed, as if he had shed his old brown skin for a new coat of iridescent colors.

"Ah, it is good to have a friend," he said.

When the mouse awoke, he immediately began making plans to search for his brother.

Oh, how can I tell him his brother is no more? Surely he will hate me, and I will have no friend. I cannot bear to go back to the lonely solitude that plagued me before he came to me. I must distract him.

But the tiny traveler would not veer from his goal, in spite of the snake's tricks and protests.

The snake grew weary and a bit hungry. His companion's brother had been a fine, fat specimen, and quite satisfying, but it was time for another meal.

No lions will bring sustenance, he thought. And evil enemies may lurk nearby. I must fortify myself.

"Little mouse, my love, I must go on a hunt for my breakfast. Pray tarry here until I return."

"But, kindly serpent, my brother awaits. Family obligations, you know. Before I go, please tell me, on what do wise snakes dine?"

Oh, but this is getting tiresome, the snake thought. He hesitated but a second, then gobbled up his new friend.

Much later, sated again and sunning himself, the snake reminisced about the pleasant hours he had spent with the wee mouse. He was sorry he had eaten him, for it is easier to find a meal than to share true friendship.

Alas, I am alone again; at least I have memories to comfort me, the snake thought. And he spent the rest of his days dreaming about the little mouse and the sweet companionship they had shared.

What is the moral of this story? Only this: It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Or: You can't have your mouse and eat it, too.

