

The Wolf Who Cried Boy

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I.

On clear nights, when I'm good, Mum puts her finger in the sky and shows me our home. One, two, three, *four* up, and one, two, *three* sideways from the Southern Cross. Little and bright and a billion light-years away.

'When can I go there?'

'I'm sorry, darling. We're never going back.'

Mum knows almost everything, but she doesn't know that. I'll go one day. I feel it pull me, from my eyeballs to my fingers and toes.

Or is that just the gravity?

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Last night was good for stars and the morning is blue and so cold you could bite it. Drips stayed on our tent and hitting the inside makes them jump off like a dog shaking. I hit three times and the broke pole falls. Mum closes our biology book.

'Maybe I shouldn't go today.'

'No!'

'I can't trust you to sit still.'

'I'll be good but. Better than last time.' I have to show I listened, so I open the page again to say all the ants we saw at the creek yesterday. Long skinny black ones. Yellow-middled ones with black heads and bums. And gold almost-see-through ones. 'See?'

Her mouth scrunches. 'What will you do while I'm gone?'

'Sit in Fortress One and do maths.'

‘Sit how?’

‘Sit quiet.’

‘And if you finish your homework, and drawing, and Lego, and you have nothing else to do?’

‘Sit quiet and be bored.’

‘And if someone comes? Iiiiiif Peter Pan swoops down and wants to fly you to Never-Never Land for chocolate donuts?’

‘Mum-mee.’

‘Need to hear you say it, kiddo.’

‘Crawl out the secret way and run superfast to Fortress Two.’

Her eyes crinkle, like, *Don’t try tricking me, buddy.*

I already tricked her but, because she thinks Peter Pan is still my favourite. I never told her it’s Captain America now. Mum hates him because *The dude has the methods of a fascist, and the wardrobe of a middle-aged cyclist.* You can tell that’s bad by how her voice goes.

Mum crawls around, getting our offerings for the Priestess. The green beanie she knitted. Crystals we grew in jars. Little straw baskets, like mice would use for laundry. Scones she cooked before the sun even woke up.

Our tent goes anywhere but today it’s behind big grey rocks (that came from a volcano but *don’t* have lava centres) and scratchy saltbush (that probly *does* taste salty but I shouldn’t try). The rocks and bushes are near cliffs above a *beautiful* rainforest. In the day all the trees make the hills a million different greens, forever. But at night it’s so black, the only way you can tell where the sky starts is the stars.

‘Pay attention please, Henry.’

‘*Kaching!*’ That’s our joke that attention costs money. I am paying it but, because Mum’s opening our Magic Backpack. She bestows on me Excalibur.

I don’t know if it’s the real Excalibur, from Camelot. Mum’s magic makes it look like a normal knife, made of wood and bumpy metal. If you stab someone with it they don’t just get cut normally, where their blood and guts fall out like spaghetti, and they slip in them, yelling,

Noooooo, my guts are spaghetti! Excalibur makes it worse in ways I don't even know. Turns them to slime, probly. Or maggots. Or static electricity. Even holding it is dangerous, and a big honour when you're not even seven, but—

'Henry.'

'Kaching!'

'What did I say?'

I remember really hard.

'I said be very, very careful with that.'

I nod heaps.

I'm not lying, but Mum's face scrunches again. 'I just won't go this week. We can stretch out the scones and—'

'I hate scones!'

Her eyebrow goes up.

'I hate having *too many* scones.'

'Good save.'

'But what if the Priestess has a really important prophecy?'

'Why do you want me gone so badly? I think you just want a new DVD.'

'No. But we don't have Weet-Bix, or rice cakes, or anything. And your tummy was grumbling last night. It was like, *Groooooaarrkk, give me some yummy food.*' I tickle her ribs, but it doesn't do anything.

'I'll be fine.' Mum's thumb tap-taps her leg. I'm *this* close to a whole week of no DVD and no practice time.

'If you don't have adult conversation soon, you'll probly go crazy.'

Mum stops tapping and looks at me with her weird-joke smile.

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We get to Fortress One and Mum hugs me so hard my bones break in matchsticks and rattle around my body. 'I love you so, so much. Do you realise that?'

‘Yes.’

‘And you’ll behave? You won’t leave, even for a second?’

‘Yes.’

I crawl through Fortress One’s entrance hole. Fortress One’s where I go when there’s danger, or emergencies, or Mum does secret meetings with the Priestess. It got made by a big tree growing down over even bigger rocks, like it’s bending to hear all the good rock secrets. Inside is a cave with a floor of old tree bits waiting to be new again.

I’m careful wiggling in so I won’t knock Mum’s twig people that dangle from the roof. *Or* tip her things of herbs. *Or* mess her salt squiggles on the ground. Together they make the most powerful charms you could think of. If wolfs attacked they’d bounce off *pachingkongbong!* and their furs would sizzle with acid.

I accidentally left Clifford and my school stuff in here from the false alarm yesterday, so I scratch his ears and say, ‘Sorry.’ I’m just joking but. He’s stuffed.

I find my maths page, where I’m up to the question $9 + 5$. Maths is fun, because you turn it to nine soldiers plus five soldiers in your head, and other people think your answer is just a number when you actually made a army.

Before I even start, Mum pushes our DVD player inside. ‘As a special treat, if you keep the volume very low, you can have *one* rewatch.’

This is suspicious and I go on my belly to see back out. Mum’s chalking the Fortress tree with little sideways eights. That’s a special letter that means infinity, which means forever. She does three more in the dirt with her finger.

‘Now. I’ve added an extra hidden binding spell this time. For you.’

‘Why?’

‘You know why.’

‘*Stop it!*’

‘I have to, sorry. If you go exploring again – if you set even your tiniest pinky toe outside – pretty soon your bum will itch so badly you’ll go *crazy*.

Worse than itching powder made from nits! And when I come back, and your finger's smelly from scratching, I'll know. And you'll never be allowed to stay alone again.'

'Don't!'

'My magic's feeling super strong today, too. I bet I could do a simply astounding Firespire. Wanna see?'

I trace my maths question, but I'm not actually doing it. 'Firespire's boring.'

'Okay, then. How about ... Fae Folks' Flame?'

I look up and Mum smiles like she knew I wanted that one all along. It's my favourite but, so that's not psychic.

Mum shakes her fingers and wobbles her head. Her eyes close and her hands make cups on each other. You can feel the magic come up off the dirt and whoosh around you, making the air go thicker. Goosebumps poke out my arms like, *Let us see, too!*

Mum's cup hands twist back and forth, back and forth, with one cup pouring into the other. Her mouth whispers the oldest starwords. I can't understand her, specially with how she says the words, altogether in a traffic jam. Her face lines come out. Lines from laughing at jokes, or scrunching with worries, or *Being mum to a cheeky little monkey*.

Without stopping whispering even to breathe, she gets her pink lighter out and *shrick-shrick-shricks* till it flames. Her eyes open huge. She puts the fire on her bottom hand and lifts. *'Flagranto!'*

The absolute millisecond the lighter touches her hand, the Fae Folks' Flame is there. It's only for a bit, and not big. But it's *phenomenal*. A blue fireball with spiky yellow hairdo. Inside, a thousand million sparks do one twinkle each, then disappear. Like a galaxy going alive then dead, faster than you could blink.

When it's gone, Mum smiles. She's puffed, even from that. Before I was born she could do a Fae Folks' Flame so giant it'd burn this whole rainforest and cook all the animals like furry sausages, *woomf*. But since her magic got stolen she can only do little ones. Even that's dangerous, in

case the Wolf King's looking just this way. The magic would be a alarm yelling, *HENRY AND MUM ARE HEEEEERE!* And wolfs would run from everywhere, jumping from trees and digging up from holes underground, with teeth and claws and guns and spells. They'd smash us to chunks and chomp our meat till we're blood and organs and hairy broken skeletons in the mud.

'Did you like it?' Mum says.

'It was a good one.' I remember I'm mad at her and go back to 9 + 5.

'I'm leaving now, kiddo.'

'Yes.'

'I love you. To the moon and back.'

'And the stars!'

'Absolutely. And to the stars.'

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I wait till Mum's definitely gone then crawl out the secret way. I won't get to rewatch *Singin' in the Rain*, but Mum didn't charge our player, so it probly wouldn't even get to the backflips or 'Moses Supposes'. Plus practising is more important. I tell Clifford, 'Stay!'

She did infinities in the dirt here, too, and I suck in my belly so I won't wreck them. Excalibur's in my pants loop and it's hard not to stab my leg. That's really important, too but, so I'm careful.

I run the secret steep way down to the creek, to be quicker. Our rainforest has a million secrets. Logs rotted to tunnels, going underground. Leafs bigger than the whole of me. And coloured mushrooms that could kill you if you ate just one nibble. Even its name is a secret because people call it Gippsland when Mum says it's really called Gunaikurnai Country. I get that, because I have different names, too.

The hill makes me go too fast, which is why Mum says, *Be patient, honey, go round*. I'm still doing okay, but then a stupid dumb wattlebird *flip-flaps* out a bush to scare me. I yell and spin and my hair goes over my mouth and in my eyes, making me blind and suffocated a second. That makes me trip on a stick, then bounce my elbow, bang my knee and skid on my belly.

'*Owwwah!*' My pant-knees already had holes, so now they're ripped and my *real* knee is skinned. The sticky red blood gets mixed with black dirt and leafs and rocks, and stings like a burn.

I'm not allowed to talk to other kids anymore, and Clifford's the only dog we can have, so I sometimes pretend birds are my friends. They look

at you more than goannas or deers, and when you're talking they do noises like, *Really, Henry? That is so interesting.*

The wattlebird is my first bird *enemy*.

'I wish you were still a dinosaur!' I yell the way it went. Then I sit and cry. But *then* I imagine it flying back. It'd be looking for juicy worms in the dirt and peck my blood instead. It might remember that being a real carnivore is delicious and go hunting for the rest of me.

I'm busy anyway but that makes me leave faster.

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The creek goes shallow here but still wide, like a giant scratched a charm with her finger. The water babbles, which Mum says is all the fish gossiping about what the frogs got up to on land. It sounds nice now, but if I was a creek animal I'd probably yell, *Can I just have one second of peace and quiet, please?* and take my family to a nice pond. Animals haven't lived as many places as me but, so maybe they don't know there are better ones?

When definitely no one's round I take my shoes and socks off and roll my pants up.

The creek water stabs my feet with ice knives. I close my teeth to catch my yell. My toes get numb, but it doesn't make them hurt less. I walk to where the big ferns grow half in the water, looping over, long and swishy. They hide stuff underneath. That makes them perfect for practices.

I puff a huge breath, just in case the spells got stuck deep down in my belly. Then I cup my hands and turn them, like Mum. I can't speak starwords, so hum 'I'll Make a Man Out of You' from *Mulan*, because it's about getting tough and doing kung fu. I grab Rockface's cheeks. She's a huge rock that's stuck in the land like a tooth. The lines on her front make a face. That's why she's Rockface.

I do two almost-starts, then, '*Superstrengho!*' I push with all my muscles at once.

Mum says our story is a fairytale. Only the queen isn't evil. Mum's a good Star Queen, I'm a good Star Prince, and we're being chased by the evil Wolf King. Heaps of fairytales are real, allegedly.

If you know where to look, kiddo, the world is full of magic and monsters.

I think Mum's mostly right. We're a story. Not a fairytale but. She only thinks that because she's old and doesn't watch Marvel. People who come from space, with powers, and fight baddies aren't fairytales anymore.

In real life, we're superheroes.

The rules for being a superhero are you have to be tough, and nice, and know the right thing to do, and do it no matter who says you're wrong. Plus you have to have superpowers, even if they're just being really rich.

I don't know what my powers are yet. Not being rich but, because we can't even afford Coco Pops.

If I get to choose, I want super strength. I wouldn't just use it for punching wolfs' heads off. I could carry stuff so Mum wouldn't be tired. Carry her even, because it would be like a feather to me. And when the Chariot runs out of petrol we wouldn't have to walk or wait on scary roads. I'd give a giant push and we'd take off, *shoom!*, only I'd be tied to the back on a skateboard so it pulled me, too. I could even fire us on a giant catapult over the ocean to Antarctica. We'd be safe there because it's mostly scientists and penguins.

Thinking how I'll save Mum makes me push Rockface even harder. I scream, 'You're really true, Henry!' because sometimes superheroes get powers from finally *believing* they're super.

Rockface isn't moving but, and my muscles get tired.

There's still heaps more powers to experiment with. Super speed, shapeshifting, lightning fingers, ice-making, invisibility, impervious skin, quick healing, flying, and more I don't even know yet.

I won't do quick healing or impervious skin, actually, because my knee isn't even scabbed yet, so that's definitely wrong. I am impervious to spells but. Mum told me by accident last week. And now it's for sure because her spell didn't itch my bum at all.

The only power I never try is fire-making, because if I ask Mum when I'll get my magic she always says, *We'll just have to wait and see*, but the one time I asked if I'd be a fire-maker, too, she was so sure she grabbed my shoulders. *Star children never get the same magic as their parents, so don't even try burning things. Are you listening, Henry?*

My arms are basically broken spaghetti now but I keep pushing, being tough. Giving super strength one very last go, I close my teeth and whisper, focusing all my powers. I squash my magic up with the words, and mash in Mum's sadness and worries, too, then whisper them down at the creek, only aiming *through* the water. Past dirt, rocks, oils, diamonds, dinosaur bones and Atlantis, plopping in lava then erupting back up through Portugal, zooming out to the sky. Right to space, to where our home star goes in the daytime. I push the hardest I ever pushed.

'For ... Mummy ... *Please ...*'

And, actually, I think I can feel it. No, I *definitely* can. My hands are getting hotter. The magic is working! It's electrically sparking me to be super strong and tough and—

My hand slips and I fall off, donking my chin on Rockface. I bite my tongue, then splash my arms and knees in the creek. Water goes in my mouth, tasting like slime mixed with tongue blood.

I get back up and punch the creek. 'I hate you!'

It makes a big splash, but not a super splash.

A grey-brown thing moves in my eye corners. My *peripheries*. A rabbit hops from under a fern bush and watches me. For a break, I experiment mind-controlling it. I'm too sad to think of stuff to do but, so I just make it eat more grass.

The rabbit's ears go pointy, which I *didn't* say to do. It looks away and, quick as lightning, runs back in the forest. I look the way it looked.

Under the trees, on the mud, a giant brown boot stomps. The other boot stomps next to it, squelching sideways. The branches open and there's a man in trackie dacks and a blue T-shirt. His hair sticks out everywhere and his beard is a giant bottlebrush upside down on his face.

Mostly I look at his gun. It's shiny wood and long black metal. And even though guns aren't alive and don't think things, you can tell it's mean. My whole body gets a numb-toes feeling.

Beard Man looks at me and his eyes go small.

'Henry?'