

## the hunter and the elephant

Once, a hunter went to hunt. He lost his way and wandered deep into the forest. There he met an elephant, who asked him, "Sir, why are you here alone in this jungle?"

The hunter told the elephant about having lost his way.

"Stay with me for a few days, as my guest. I shall then take you back to the town myself," offered the elephant. The hunter agreed, and went home with the elephant.

The elephant treated his guest very graciously. After a few days, he carried the hunter back to town on his back.

The hunter walked down into the market place, where there were a lot of shops. In one of them he saw some beautiful toys and dolls on display. He asked the shopkeeper what they were made of.

"They are made of a very rare and costly material called ivory — the tusk of an elephant. If you bring me some ivory, I will make you rich," replied the shopkeeper.

Avarice took over the cunning hunter's heart. *Why don't I return to the forest, kill that elephant, bring back the ivory, sell it and get rich quick?* he thought.

He returned to the elephant's cave at once. Taking out his bow and arrow, he announced, "Oh Elephant, your tusks seem to be worth a lot of money in the town. I am going to shoot you down and cut them off."

"You horrendous human! I was your only friend in this jungle. I showered so much love on you. You want me dead just so you can be wealthy, do you? Do I look like an idiot?" bellowed the elephant. It lifted the hunter high with its trunk, crashed him to the ground and trampled him to death. ❖

## emperor goat

One day, when there was no one at home, the goat, which had been tied to the same spot since the day he was born, found that his tether had worn out and he was free to move. When he stepped out into the open, he was overwhelmed by the splendour of the world around.

Nearby was a big jungle. In the centre of the jungle was a huge hill. All around was a lush green. The hungry goat happily pranced and ate his way towards the hill. He had never experienced such joy in his short life. He sampled a hundred different flavours of leaves, until he could eat no more. He drank the clear, bubbling water from a cool stream, and then looked around for a comfortable spot to lie down and chew his cud. But there was no place in sight. As he searched for a cozy niche, warm like his own pen, he happened upon a cave. The bones strewn on the floor and the strange stench of death were a bit off-putting to the vegetarian goat, but he thought the place would do for a short stay. So the goat sat down, half-shut his eyes and began chewing his cud.

Now, this cave was the abode of the lion, the king of the forest, who had stepped out for his daily hunt. On returning and seeing a strange pair of tracks near the cave, he was momentarily stunned. There were no goats in the jungle, so the lion did not recognize the tracks. Also, up until then no other animal had dared to approach the cave. They were too scared. *So what is this animal that has so bravely entered my cave?* he wondered. To tell the truth, the lion was slightly shaken. *Perhaps the animal that's inside there now is much larger and fiercer than me,* he thought and silently peeked in.

Remember that our lion had never seen a goat before! A glimpse of his face, with his pointed beard, half-shut eyes and patiently chewing jaw, terrified the king of the jungle. The goat had never seen a lion before, either... but then our goat was very brave.

The lion did not know what to do. Thinking it would not hurt to find out who was now occupying his lair, he asked hesitantly, "Excuse me please, who is inside my home?"

"Who's the cheeky chap who has the gall to speak to me?" demanded the goat in a stern voice.

Unnerved by the loudness of the goat's tone, the lion was now very sure the beast inside was really huge. Still, he thought it best to be civil to the guest, and introduced himself.

"I am Lion, King of the Jungle, and you are in my house. Welcome!"

It's true that the goat had not seen a lion. But he had heard many horrifying tales about lions and other predatory animals from his mother. *Oh, no! I'll be dead by tonight. Still, why should I die a coward? Let me face death like my brave forefathers*, he thought.

"Ah, you are that chap who calls himself the king, are you? King of the jungle indeed! Step inside, mister. I am Emperor of *All Jungles*. I am waiting to gobble you up. I knew you would return to your dark cave. Hurry and come in," he called out.

The lion did not wait a moment longer. With his tail tucked between his legs, he ran off, making the ground quake as he sped.

The wily fox saw the lion scampering away in fear. It was normal in the jungle for other animals to bolt this way on hearing the king's roar, but this was too strange! So the fox trotted alongside, calling out, "Oh King, oh King...!"

The lion, desperate for someone to listen to him, stopped and gasped. "Fox, am I happy to see you! Have you ever known an emperor?"

"An emperor? What is that?" asked the fox, scratching his forehead.

"The king of all kings, the greatest of us all..."

"Oh, those! Only humans have those. Why should we animals bother with stuff like that?" asked the puzzled fox.

"'Stuff like that?' Are you crazy? I am running from one such emperor—in fact, the Emperor of *All Jungles*. Come along, let's run off together. We'll look for a forest that has no kings or emperors," begged the lion.

*Wow*, smirked the fox to himself. *Our king may be huge; he may have a loud roar; he may look majestic. But when it comes to brains, he's a nincompoop.*

"Oh King, why don't you sit for a while in the shade, under this tree. I have never seen an emperor. So I'll go take a quick look, and return soon..."

"Why would you want to do that, silly?" asked the lion. "The emperor will pick you up, fling you in the air like an appalam and

crush you to bits. He wanted to eat me, and here I am running to escape. Do you think you are braver than me?"

*No, there's no one braver than the king. The beast that can fling him in the air and crush him like an appalam is yet to be born. I must check out this new creature,* thought the fox, and ran off to the cave.

The lion hid under a thick bush to wait for the stupid fox.

At the cave, the fox recognized the prints as goat's tracks. He knew because he had stolen several goats from the village himself. He peeked in to be sure, and then returned to the lion, laughing to himself.

"Oh King, that is no emperor. It's a mere billy goat! Perhaps you were scared of its tiny pointed beard. Some goats—the highly intelligent ones —do have nice, shiny beards. Now come with me. I'll show you how it trembles on seeing me," the fox said.

The lion was not ready to believe the fox. *That beast dared to challenge even me, the king. I'm supposed to believe that it will tremble with fear at the sight of this fox? Ha! Pure humbug!*

The fox could see that the lion was not yet convinced. "King, you stand behind me. Let the beast eat me first. While it's doing so, you will have time to run away," he said.

The lion almost burst out into a roar. *A lion, hide behind a fox? What a thought!* "This is sheer nonsense. Idiot, why would the beast want to eat you? It's waiting there to eat me. It will attack me and you'll immediately take to your heels. I know how wily you can be, mister.... So get lost!"

"So, now you're afraid that I will run away and leave you to be eaten, is that right?" said the fox. "Fine—then tie our tails together. Make the best knot you can. Then I won't be able to run away."

The lion thought this was the best suggestion so far. He tied their two tails together, and they both headed to the cave.

The fox poked his head into the cave and asked sarcastically, "Hello sir, when did you arrive?"

He had expected the goat to spring up in terror and race out of the cave. But this was no ordinary goat. This goat had made a lion scuttle off in fear. How could a mere fox outfox him? The goat remained seated with half-shut eyes, chewing on his cud.

"Dey, didn't you hear me? Are you deaf?" the fox challenged. "What gives you the guts to stay seated in front of the king? Don't you know how to respect authority?"

The goat turned his head reluctantly and softly said, "Go ask your king to come in!"

The fox winked at the lion and signaled him to step forward. The lion did so, trembling.

When the goat saw that their tails were knotted together he could not control his delight. "Very smart, my friend! So you have brought the lion, as you promised. You are indeed the wiliest fox I have known. Thank you!" he congratulated the fox. "So what are we waiting for? Is the lion going to come in and offer himself, or do I have to come out to attack him?" he asked and made a move to rise.

The lion squeaked loud enough to be heard all through the jungle and fled, dragging the poor fox all the way. Soon, of course, he was a dead fox. ❖

## amaravathi

Every full moon night, at the banks of the village pond near the edge of the forest, there was a festive gathering. That was the time when the ladles from all the homes would meet to discuss their kitchens and the people who worked in them. "Today, I served saambaar!" one ladle would yelp. "Oh, is that all? I served sweet payasam today," another would say. "Lucky you! I was made to serve kanji all through the day," another would grumble.

But there was one old, worn-out ladle listening to all this chatter who was sad and despondent. Because it was of no more use, it had been discarded in the loft. Disgusted with its life, it jumped into the pond and drowned itself. God, seeing this honourable suicide, decided to revive it and turn it into a beautiful golden lotus flower in the same pond.

The next day, after finishing his kingly duties, the raja of the land was taking a stroll when he happened upon the pond. He saw the beautiful golden shining lotus, and plucked it out and took it back to his palace, where he put it in a glass case. That night, he heard a weeping sound from the case and opened it to find a beautiful baby

girl. The childless raja and his rani decided to bring the child up as their own. They named her Amaravathi.

The time came when Amaravathi was old enough to be married. Her father decided to give her hand to Indrakumaran, a prince.

One day after the marriage, she was giving Indrakumaran an oil bath. Thinking of something funny, she burst out laughing. Indrakumaran looked at her puzzled.

"Oh, it's nothing!" said Amaravathi. "I was thinking of my birthplace. There, snails would till the soil, crabs would pluck weeds, and the trees would bloom with pearls, with corals strewn below."

Indrakumaran knew the story of Amaravathi's birth from the lotus. So he was confused and angered by her statement. "If what you say is true, take me to your birthplace and prove it. If you're lying, then you should prepare to leave this palace forever," he ordered.

Amaravathi didn't know what had come over her to make such a tall claim. Perhaps she had been narrating a dream, something she had imagined. Not knowing what to do, she went out to walk around. If she couldn't prove her claim, she would be chased from the palace. *It would be better just to die right now*, she decided. She came upon a snake's burrow in a termite mound, and thrust her hand in to be bitten.

The snake that lived in the burrow had had a boil on its back for a long time and was in great pain. When Amaravathi pushed her hand in, she struck the boil and broke it. The snake, finally relieved from its suffering, came out of its burrow to see whose hand it was, and saw Amaravathi.

"Amma, who are you?" asked the snake. "You have done me a great favour. Think of me as your brother and tell me your problems. I shall help you in return."

Totally surprised at the snake's pleasant nature, Amaravathi said, "Anna, this is what happened." She told him about her boast. "There's no home I can show off to my husband as my birthplace. That's why I had decided to die."

"Do not worry," said the snake. "Bring your husband here. I shall make all what you said come true."

She returned to the palace. After a week, she asked Indrakumaran to accompany her to her birthplace. She took him to the snake's burrow, and found that it had transformed into a beautiful palace. The snake had become a young man, who received them as her brother.

It was a full moon night. Amaravathi took her husband out into the garden. There were many snails slowly making their way across the ground. She pointed to their glistening tracks and asked, "Doesn't it look as if the snails have been ploughing the land?"

Then she pointed to a cactus bush on which crabs were crawling, opening and snapping their claws as they moved. "And there you can see the crabs plucking weeds," she said.

A little further on was a tall murunga tree, with white pearl-like flowers. Its tiny fallen leaves in the red dirt beneath the tree looked almost like hard corals. "Do you see the tree blooming with pearls and the corals strewn below?" Amaravathi asked Indrakumaran. The prince had to agree that she had indeed told the truth.

Amaravathi thanked the snake-brother and begged to do something in return.

"Nothing much, just give me your first-born," said the snake. Without thinking, Amaravathi promised to do so.

The days passed into years. Amaravathi gave birth to a handsome son. On hearing the news, the snake came to the palace demanding the boy.

"Snake-brother, the child is still very young. I shall slowly wean him and then hand him over to you," pleaded Amaravathi. The snake agreed and went back.

The boy grew into a young lad, and the snake came back.

"Please do not be angry with me, Snake-brother. I just want to see him going to school. After that I shall hand him over." Once more, the snake agreed and left.

The boy began his schooling. Not wanting to delay any further, the snake came and took its seat on the windowsill in the boy's bedroom. The boy, seeing it, rushed to his mother and said, "Amma, your brother, with his round ruby eyes and his pointed snout—your brother who saved you that day, my maternal uncle—he's here to see you!"

Fearing the snake's anger, Amaravathi came running into the bedroom. But the snake had tears in its eyes.

"Don't worry, Sister," said the snake. "I was only testing you. Your son has called me his maternal uncle. He will be blessed."

Promising to always look out for his nephew, the snake returned to its burrow. Indrakumaran and Amaravathi lived happily ever after with their son. ❖

## four hundred goats

A father and daughter were grazing their goats in the forest. There were four hundred goats in all.

Without warning, dark, heavy clouds raced in from the horizon and swept across the sky, with flashes of lightning and roaring thunder. The father stood gazing at the impending rain. He knew that a long heavy shower would spell doom for his herd. They could not stand exposure to extreme cold or dampness.

As the father wrung his hands, the daughter gathered the herd, lifted her skirt and, in a flash, shoved all the goats into the dark cave between her thighs.

The father gaped at her in shock. *Oh my dear God, I never knew she had one this deep! What do I do? Where do I find a man who can fill that and make her happy?*

Afterwards, the only thought that occupied the father's mind was finding his daughter a suitable boy. He spent considerable time travelling to far-off regions, searching.

He was returning from one such trip when he was caught in a raging storm. He had to cross a flooding river to get home. He knew there was no bridge, nor any boats which could take him across.

He was told that a few miles downstream, a kind soul had made a temporary arrangement for people to go across to the other side.

He walked until he found a log bridge, on which there were several people walking to and from the other shore. He joined them.

It was only at the other end that he realized what the bridge really was.

*Aha! He is indeed the right man to keep my darling daughter happy forever,* the father decided then and there. ❖