

The Lioness and the Zebra



Jane MEADOW

The Lioness and the Zebra

Jane MEADOW



In a green and golden valley, the sun rose soft and warm. The river hummed, the grass swayed, and every animal had a friend. Zebras nibbled beside gentle antelopes, and no one chased anyone at all. High on a smooth rock sat a small lioness cub named Lila. Her fur was warm golden-tan, her muzzle soft cream, and her amber eyes were wide with wonder.



Lila wore a woven grass bracelet with three blue beads on her front paw. It was a gift from her grandmother, who said, "Blue beads bring brave ideas." Lila had no brothers or sisters, so she spent her mornings watching the valley wake up. She liked the way the birds shared berries and the way the monkeys shared shade. "Why can't everyone be friends?" she wondered.



One bright morning, a young zebra foal trotted up to Lila's rock. Her stripes were crisp black and white, her mane had a soft dark tuft, and a green stone hung from a braided grass necklace. "Hello," said the foal. "I'm Zoe. You're not going to chase me, are you?" Lila blinked her big amber eyes. "No," she said. "I'd rather share my breakfast."



Zoe laughed a bright, bubbly laugh. "Then you're my favorite lion in the whole valley." Lila laughed too, and just like that, they became best friends. Every day they met by the old acacia tree. Zoe was a little taller, with long legs and rounded hooves, and she liked to count things. Lila liked to explore. Together they made a perfect pair.



They splashed at the edge of the big watering hole, where all the valley animals came to drink. Zoe spotted patterns in the mud. "Look, Lila! These hoofprints are new." Lila sniffed the air and wagged her short tufty tail. "New friends," she said. "Let's say hello." But the animals were quiet and worried. Something was wrong with the water.



Each morning, the watering hole shrank a little smaller. The muddy edges cracked like dry cookies. "Yesterday the water reached that rock," said Zoe, pointing with her white muzzle. "Today it doesn't." Lila's small rounded ears drooped. The valley had never been dry before. Even the oldest tortoise shook her head slowly. "I have never seen the water this low," she said.



A mysterious drought had crept into the magical valley. No rain fell, and the stream that fed the watering hole grew thin. The animals began to grumble. "Who took the water?" muttered a warthog. "Maybe the lions did," said a nervous gazelle. Lila felt her heart thump. But Zoe stood close beside her. "Fighting won't fill the hole," said the clever zebra. "Let's look for clues instead."



Lila lifted her cream muzzle and smelled the wind. "The stream comes from the hills," she said. "Let's follow it." So the two friends set off, one golden and one striped. They walked past the acacia tree, past the tall grass, and up the rocky path. Zoe studied the ground. "The stream is hiding," she said, tapping a dry stone with her hoof. "It went underground somehow."



They followed the dry stream bed until they found a heap of fallen rocks and brush blocking the way. The water was still there, trapped underneath! "The stream isn't gone," Lila said, her amber eyes shining. "It's stuck. We need to clear the path so the water can flow again." Zoe nodded. "But those rocks are far too big for one lioness and one zebra. We need help."



"Then let's ask everyone," said Lila. They hurried back to the valley and called a meeting beside the shrinking water. "Friends," said Lila, her voice small but steady, "the water is not lost. It is blocked in the hills. If we all work together, we can free it." The animals whispered and shuffled their feet. Some wanted to help. Some were not sure.



Zoe stepped forward, her green stone catching the light. "If we dig together, the water will come back for everyone," she said. "Lionesses and zebras, warthogs and gazelles, birds and beetles. All of us." The tortoise nodded first. Then the monkeys clapped. Then the warthog grunted, "Well, I'm good at digging." Soon every animal had a job, and nobody was left out.



They marched up the rocky path together, a long line of paws, hooves, and wings. The strong ones rolled the heavy stones away, and the small ones pulled out twigs and brush. Lila dug with her strong front paws, her blue beads bouncing. Zoe carried stones in a neat row and kept everyone smiling. "One more push!" she called. "We're close!"



Then, with a rumble and a splash, the water burst free! It rushed down the hill like a silver ribbon, laughing over the stones. The animals ran beside it, cheering and leaping. When the water reached the valley, the dry watering hole gulped it up happily. Everyone drank, and everyone shared. Lila and Zoe splashed side by side, dripping and giggling.



That evening, the magical valley glowed with warm light. "You were right, Lila," said Zoe. "Asking for help was the best idea." Lila smiled at her striped friend. "And you were right, Zoe. We found the problem, but only teamwork solved it." The tortoise patted the ground with her old foot. "Peace begins with understanding," she said, "and understanding grew here today."



From then on, the valley animals shared their food and shelter happily. The gazelles let the lions rest in their shade, and the zebras showed the monkeys the sweetest berries. Lila and Zoe met by the acacia tree every morning, one golden and one striped, the best of friends. They had proven that kindness and teamwork can solve even the biggest problems.



And whenever a new animal wandered into the magical valley, Lila and Zoe would greet them with a smile. "Welcome," they would say. "Here we share." The water sparkled, the grass swayed, and the blue beads on Lila's bracelet and the green stone on Zoe's necklace glittered in the sun. Peace had begun with understanding, and it grew and grew, just like their friendship.