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Opening extract from

# The Gentle Lion and Little Owlet

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"One day, I will fly high and fly far. I want to see further than the view from our tree," cheeped the owlet. "I want to see the whole world!"

"When I was a young cub," growled the lion, "I lived in a far away land called Africa, with mountains and jungles and great grassy plains. I would love to go there again."

"When I can fly, we will!" said the owlet with a hoot.



As night painted the sky inky dark, the lion and the little owlet gazed up at the stars.

The lion told his new friend about the land in his country – the different shapes in the stars and the huge, hot African sun. The owlet listened until his fluffy head dropped. He fell asleep curled between the lion's paws.

# The real story

Based on events that happened at Paignton Zoo Environmental Park, Devon, England, in June 2010.

It began when a small tawny owl chick landed in the lion enclosure at Paignton Zoo and came face-to-face with Indu, a seven-year-old female Asiatic lion. As the crowds gathered, worries over the owlet's safety grew, but a rescue attempt was impossible because zoo keepers could not enter the enclosure.

Lions are renowned as cunning hunters and deadly carnivores. They can weigh in at up to 180kilos while the owlet would have been a matter of grams. The owlet could have been swallowed in one easy mouthful. Indu looked at the owlet and the owlet looked at Indu – but nothing more happened.

It is thought that the owlet flew away in the night. No-one can be absolutely sure that the lion did not eat it - however, the keepers are confident that if she had, there would have been evidence in the form of fluff and feathers.

The lion and the owlet became famous, with their pictures making many national newspapers. Sheila Hassanein, a frequent visitor to the zoo, was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, capturing this amazing moment on camera.

Paignton Zoo is a registered charity, www.paigntonzoo.org.uk.

