

Master of the Cone

“Here, Bubo, I’m free!” cried Ella. Unnecessarily, since the sporty squirrel girl was always free. None of the other young forest dwellers were as fast and agile as she was.

“Come on, bring it here!” she called impatiently to her friend Bubo. The eagle owl was circling almost ten meters above her, waiting for the right moment.

‘It’ was a pinecone. And not just any pinecone, no, it was *the* pinecone, the holy Wonder Cone!

(Illustration text: Wonder Cone! Hot stuff! Trophy – very sought-after!)

A magnificent, brightly painted pinecone, probably the most sought-after object in the entire forest. At least, it was if you were playing with the other young woodland creatures.

Each team had to try to get the pinecone into their fortress, which was marked by a tree stump in the middle of the forest. Whoever managed it first earned the title of ‘Master of the Cone’ until the next game. Undoubtedly a great honour for the winner and a terrible disgrace for their opponents. Bubo was thinking it through. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his friend Pins standing within throwing distance of the target, waving. This tactic meant the hedgehog attracted the attention of their opponents and, most importantly, distracted the stupid raccoons. But it was clear to Bubo that Pins had only taken on this job because he knew the cone would never come to him. If only Pins had more confidence, thought Bubo. He quickly changed his plan. Team spirit! You had to be spontaneous sometimes. This was for his friend, Pins, who really needed a win. Bubo’s plan almost worked; his throw was perfect. But he hadn’t factored in the raccoons.

“Hey, Pins!” shouted Pepe, who had been hiding behind a rock. “I’m a forest ghost, boo!” The face he made would have offended any actual forest ghosts, but it had the desired effect. Pins was so startled he let the pinecone sail right through his paws.

“Oh man,” he groaned.

Pepe rolled around on the grass laughing, while his brother Carlos snatched the pinecone from right under Pins’ nose. If the other team managed to get the Wonder Cone into their fortress, they would win the game. Carlos was sure of himself. Too sure. If he had taken a quick glance over his shoulder, he would have seen Bubo silently approaching.

“Hey, Carlos,” Bubo hissed. “You have something that belongs to us.”

“Huh? Who? How? What?” he managed to stammer, just before he lost the pinecone. Bubo flew high, the Wonder Cone firmly in his grasp.

“Ten, nine...”

He could only keep the pinecone for as long as it took to count down from ten. Then he had to make a play. Where was Ella? His head turned in all directions before his owl radar found her among the tangle of branches.

“...eight, seven, six...”

From high above, Bubo looked through the dense canopy of leaves. He spotted a single gap. Just wide enough. He had to make it.

“...five, four, three...”

“Hey, owl!” he suddenly heard a voice above him. “Eat feathers!”

Oh no! though Bubo. Where had Larry come from all of a sudden? That hawk was always so flipping fast. And he was shooting straight at him.

“...one, zero!” Bubo finished the countdown and, just at the moment Larry should have collided with him, performed a somersault, leaving his opponent crashing into empty space. After one complete revolution, Bubo threw the pinecone with complete accuracy.

“I’ve got it!” Ella’s voice drifted up from down below. The cone had found the gap in the canopy and was flying straight towards her. All she had to do was catch it and get it into the fortress with one well-aimed jump – and they would have won! Ella jumped onto the branch below, doubled back, chose left at the fork of branches, took a running leap, caught the cone in spectacular fashion in mid-air, catapulted herself through the canopy of leaves and flew – smack! – right into a wall. With all four paws stretched out and the Wonder Cone clamped between her teeth, she slid down the smooth surface. Another, smaller smack as she hit the ground, then a slightly pained “ouch” – then silence.

A Sign Causes a Stir

In the blink of an eye, the squirrel was surrounded by the other woodland creatures.

“Are you okay, Ella?” asked Pins.

“Does it hurt?” asked Bubo, who had just landed next to her.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. I’ll live!” replied Ella, her eyes glued on something above them.

“What’s wrong, did you dislocate your head on impact?” joked Bubo. The twisting head thing was actually his speciality. As an owl, he could turn his head completely backwards, which had made Ella laugh more than once.

But this time she didn’t respond to his joke. Her gaze was fixed upwards, along with all the other animals. Now Bubo saw what was draining the colour out of his friends’ faces.

In front of them loomed what looked like a flat, rectangular tree with two straight, shiny grey trunks. A sign! But it wasn’t the sign itself that worried them, it was what it depicted: a happy, two-legged family in summer clothes. They sat in some kind of huge shell, grinning broadly. Behind them, you could see more shells grouped around a large blue area. Although Bubo and the others couldn’t read what was written on the sign, the images were clear: a swimming paradise was to be created here. And the sign also showed who was responsible for this catastrophe – in one corner was the face of a man, grinning with satisfaction.

“That wasn’t here yesterday,” said Ella in a hoarse voice, rubbing her throbbing skull. Unease spread among the playmates.

“The Furless Ones want to flatten our forest!”

(Illustration text: Forest Bliss leisure park coming soon. Secure your little piece of paradise now – secure your beach property.)

Freddy the badger said what everyone else was thinking.

“And flood it!” groaned Alzo the fox.

“This is the end,” wailed one of the otter kids.

“That’s crazy,” said Jesse the racoon, but he was referred to a fruit lollipop, which consisted of a wild strawberry on a skewer and which he had just found in his fur.

One by one, the animals fell silent and only isolated whispers could be heard.

“Sikari is here,” someone whispered. From behind them, a path opened up as the crowd parted and an imposing lynx strode through it, awe-inspiring. She was the leader of the woodland creatures. She turned around in front of the large sign and looked around at them.

“Younglings,” Sikari spoke in a calm tone. “I would have preferred you not to see this. But it cannot be hidden any longer. It’s true. The Furless Ones are after our forest.”

There it was. The thing everyone had feared.

As if on command, the young woodland creatures all started shouting at once:

“Can they do that?”

“Where will we live in the future?”

“What about my mushroom farm?”

“I’m afraid!”

“Man, this lollipop is still really good!”

“Calm down,” Sikari interrupted the commotion. “First of all, this is a matter for the Forest Council. They will meet this evening and discuss the matter in detail. I assure you, there is no need to worry.”

But the young forest animals were by no means reassured by this. From all sides they stormed Sikari with questions, who calmly answered each one. She liked the Younglings very much. This was the name for young animals in the Endless Forest. Although they were already independent, they did not yet have to bear any responsibility for the forest community. Many of the older animals envied their carefree life.

But a big crack had just appeared in that.

“‘Don’t worry!’ Man, she has some nerve,” said Ella, as the animals were on their way home a little later. “Dear children, the world will end tomorrow but don’t worry! We’re not babies anymore!”

“Exactly,” Bubo agreed. “We can decide for ourselves when to worry.”

The eagle owl was on foot for a change, hopping alongside his friends.

Ella was jumpy, hopping about in zigzags. “I think we should find out more. Then we’ll know whether we’re really in danger.”

“What do you mean? That we should go to the Furless Ones and ask them?” Bubo teased her. “Besides, do you hear that?” A deep rumble came from the pit of his stomach. “Someone’s hungry.”

“For now, it should be enough to find out what is discussed at the Forest Council tonight.” Ella looked at them conspiratorially.

Pins raised his eyebrows. He’d been holding back, but now he said to Bubo, “She’s finally lost it. She must have forgotten that Younglings are allowed at the Council.”

“It could get us into a lot of trouble,” Bubo agreed. “But I think Ella is right. How else are we going to find out what’s going on?”

“For real?” groaned Pins. “Fine, go and get yourselves in a whole heap of trouble. But count me out. The raccoons spied on the meeting once and ended up having to sweep the big meeting place for a whole lunar cycle. No thanks, not interested! Besides, I’m totally exhausted.”

“Well, go and hit the hay then,” teased Ella. “It’s much safer. You won’t accidentally get dragged into an adventure.”