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**My
Beautiful
Antlers**

Illustrated by
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Vu

Vu was bending over the rainwater puddle and was contemplating himself with admiration. It was exactly two months since he had left the herd and decided to live on his own. He was happy.

The deer was rather odd. He knew that he was different, but he always claimed that it didn't worry him in the least. On the contrary, he liked himself that way. Besides, what did appearance matter? Maybe his greater peculiarity was the fact that he talked a lot. Sometimes his sentences were so long and disconnected that he himself got confused. Other times he decided that he had to use all pretentious words that he knew at all cost, and then things got really bad. Vu believed that the more genteel means of expression he used, the more probable it was that his interlocutor would be impressed and would say to himself, "Well, yes, nature deprived him of one thing, but gave him another..."

Yes, yes, but it didn't exactly turn out that way. Actually his only interlocutors before he left the herd were mere deer who did not really care what clever or silly things Vu said at all.

Besides, he used to communicate mostly with his peers – young deer at about 2 years or a little more of

age, with antlers barely grown and raging hormones. The more Vu tried to impress them with clever things to say, the more they noticed only the obvious: he didn't have **TWO** antlers like the rest of the deer, he had only **ONE**. Vu asked his mother **WHY** it was so but she only waved her hoof carelessly and said "Don't Worry, everything will come into its place!"

But that second antler did not deign to come into its place. That's why Vu decided that if no one was impressed with his gift of speech, and on top of that they were all making fun of him, he didn't belong with the herd.

He left on a sunny spring day. He found a meadow hidden in the heart of the forest and lived there. Grass was growing on one end of the meadow, and he defined

it as "the most exquisite delicacy"; he used one of his favourite words to name the other end of the meadow – "boudoir". Where else if not in his new home could he surround himself with elegant things and let his imagination run wild. He didn't have that freedom with the herd, and he could be himself here. When it rained, a huge puddle formed in the boudoir. The deer loved to look at his reflection and admire himself.

He felt great the first days. Nobody was gossiping behind his back, nobody was making fun of him, nobody was sniggering. Strange were those youngsters from the herd. What was the big deal with his single antler? Don't we all have something to distinguish us from the rest? Vu really believed in that. So he never gave in to the feeling of shame of being different from the other deer.



“Here I am!
Wonderful as always!”

Vu exclaimed when he bent over the puddle. And you, Vincent, how are you up there, nestling in My Beautiful Antlers? No, no! Don't be too quick to answer. Now that I think of it, you must be wondering why I call my antler that way when it is just one?”

Vu made a dramatic pause but since Vincent apparently didn't feel like speaking, the deer cleared his throat and continued.

“If somebody speaks of me as the deer with one antler, the listener might come to imagine that I am a unicorn or, God forbid, that terribly ungraceful creature, the rhino. That's why my antler has a name, Vincent. It's called My Beautiful Antlers. It might be single but it's perfect: wonderfully formed, with exquisite symmetrical forms and a mossy surface as soft as velvet. Anyone would envy you, Vincent, living right here in My Beautiful Antlers...”

Vincent, however, didn't seem to be impressed with that speech at all and remained silent. Vincent was a ladybird who decided to spend the night on the deer's antler about a week ago and he apparently liked the mossy surface. He would fly off only to eat something and then come back to spend the rest of the time

lying about, listening to Vu's chatter; who knows if Vincent was enjoying himself or he simply wasn't paying attention, but some sort of friendship formed between the two of them. That was a very special ladybird to the deer, and the deer was a most ordinary deer to the ladybird. Actually, Vu had tried to make friends with a hedgehog, two rabbits, and a pack of wild boars since he moved to the meadow. But no single animal was impressed with his pretentious language. Vu was placed in a very awkward situation with the wild boars because he wasn't sure whether they were pigs or boars, so he decided to ask them straight away. The pack of boars, of course, didn't respond well to that, and all of them started to grunt menacingly towards Vu. He realized that he hadn't approached them appropriately, he apologized reluctantly and disappeared with quiet steps, his head bowed down. After that occurrence he was this close to giving up new acquaintances, but then he decided to try again. Alas, he chose a still more inappropriate friend. He started running after a wolf, and once the beast had seen him, he instantly started chasing him. Vu thought they were playing tag, but when he stopped for breath, the wolf bit his leg in a most impolite way. The deer saved his own skin by a hair's breadth and gave a pledge that he would not go to the forest ever again. His adventurous spirit gave way to fear.



He decided that if it was meant to be, fate would send him a true friend, and it would not be necessary for Vu to risk his own life.

Therefore, when Vincent landed on his antler one day, Vundabah looked up to the sky and nodded with gratitude. Just in case. He did not know whether there was something up there that sent him a friend or whether that was just a confused ladybird that had landed on his antler by chance. Vu named his new friend with the pompous name of Vincent and he never stopped talking to him. He even tried to feed him grass once, and whenever he saw other ladybirds on the meadow, he quickly went the other way, so that Vincent would not decide to go back to his own kind and desert Vu. Vincent was far from putting so much feeling in their relationship, he didn't even utter a thing. But to Vu's eyes, the ladybird's arrival was a sign from fate, so he felt happy. Little did he know, however, that it could get even better. Moreover, he didn't have the faintest idea that the better it got, the bigger the risk was that nothing would ever be the same afterwards.

But he was about to find out because Constance came soon.





CONSTANCE

He accidentally found her barely alive one morning. One of her wings was injured, her beak was a bit crooked, and her body was covered with baby fur feathering. Apparently, it was a little bird that was learning to fly. The deer, who was striding proudly towards his boudoir for his morning in-front-of-the-mirror time, spotted her from afar. He winked a few times, hid himself behind a bush, and then peeked with curiosity. The bird was still there, waving one wing and cheeping mournfully. It seemed that she had been peeping all night long because her voice was hardly audible (it was weak and wheezy). Vu had tried to speak to birds before, but every conversation usually ended with pain in the neck because at best they replied to him from up above while they were flying. Vu wasn't sure if he should come closer, but his curiosity was literally gnawing at him. Where had she come from, what was wrong with her, and most importantly **WHAT** exactly was she. Well, he knew she was a bird, of course, but all feathery creatures looked the same to him. He shook his head, gathered strength, and came out from behind the bush. He approached the bird slowly, pretending

to be digging the dirt carelessly with a hoof when he exclaimed with surprise: “Well, well, what have we got here!” He was just about to ask the bird what she was straight away, when he thought that she might get angry with him, just like that pack of wild boars, so he chose a totally new approach... “Constance! For God’s sake! What has happened to you?”

The deer knelt before the bird and she was so surprised that she stopped trembling for a moment. We must give it to Vu that he definitely DIDN’T know how to start a conversation.

“You must be mistaking me for someone else, deer.” The bird cheeped. “I am not Constance. I don’t think I have a name. I am just a swallow.”

A swallow then! Vu thought. He was pleased and he continued.

“No swallow is just a swallow. Just as no animal is just an animal. We are all different, so every one of us deserves to have a name. I am Vu – short for Vundabah. I made it up myself. It comes from Wunderbar which means Wonderful in German. And that’s what I am – Wonderful.”

“Or rather weird. Where is your other antler?” The swallow lifted herself up a bit and gazed at Vu with



curiosity. We must give it to her: she **WASN'T** any good at making conversation either.

"I don't have one." The deer replied, held his head up proudly, and continued: "But I have a lovely "My Beautiful Antlers". Isn't it perfect!"

He then shook his head and started moving it about on all sides, so that Constance could enjoy the view of his perfect antler.

"Whatever", said the bird indifferently. "Where am I?"

"In the third meadow from the right on the left side of the mountain." Vu recited. "Would you like me to show you around?"

"No," the swallow huddled up as if cold wind had blown and continued in a thin voice: "I want to go home."

"Where do you live, Constance?" Vu asked.

"I don't know..." the bird murmured in a thinner voice. "I... that was the first time I came out of the nest. I was learning to fly. The others told me that I wasn't strong enough, that I wasn't ready, but I didn't listen."

"What happened then?" Vu asked with interest, but also a certain amount of anxiety.

"Well, the wind blew... strong... it turned me around... I tried to spread my wings, but I couldn't resist the gusts of wind, so they carried me on and sent me into a tree. I think it was that one," she pointed at the tree right next to them with her beak. "I hit myself badly, I fell down, and I started screaming for help. But none of the others heard me. How far must I be..."

"Oh, Constance! My dear!"

Vu said and reached out his hoof to stroke her head.



“Oh, enough with this Constance, deer! Leave me alone!” The swallow tried to turn away, but the pain in her wing cut her through, and she froze all at once.

“Oh, my dear!” Vu cried again. “Come here,” he continued and gently lifted the bird in his muzzle; he ran down the slope towards the sunny part of the meadow. “You will warm yourself up here and I will bring sticks and leaves to wrap you up. Do you eat invertebrates?”

“They are called Worms, Vu!” The swallow groaned. She was already basking in the sun, and was beginning to soften up a bit in the sunrays.

“All right.” The deer mused. “I think I know where we can find some, but you must come with me.

“Can’t you bring me one and drop it in my beak?” Constance sobbed.

“Don’t be cheeky, you are not a baby bird anymore. You can do it yourself!” Vu scolded and nudged her so that she got up.

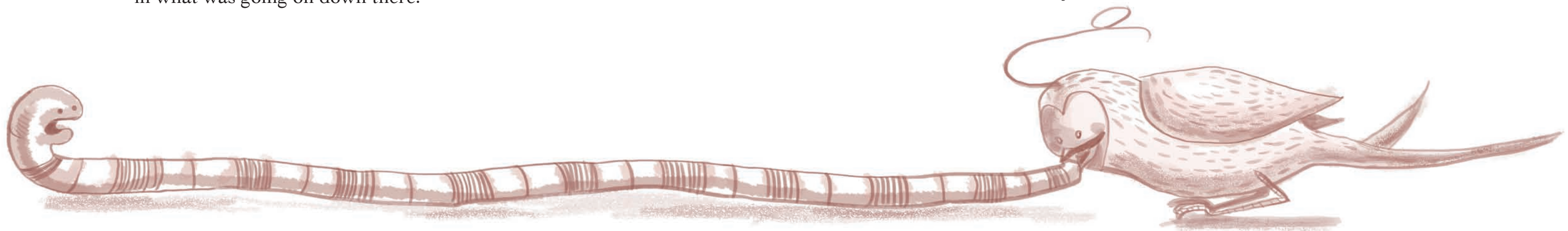
The two of them swayed along the way to a big stone at the end of the meadow – just where the forest started. The ground was moister there. Vu kicked the stone with his hoof and a few Worms moved underneath. Constance lit up and threw herself upon them at once while Wu made a disgusted face and asked Vincent not to look. Vincent, however, didn’t seem to be interested in what was going on down there.

Little by little the ice between Vu and Constance started melting.

He told her about the herd, the deer and their mockery, about how he left, how his mother came to visit him sometimes. He told Constance that he went to the forest to look for friends at first, but it never worked out somehow, so he employed a new “It will happen if it’s meant to be” strategy. The bird was not of the same opinion but decided to say nothing. After that, of course, Vu didn’t forget to mention Vincent’s unusual appearance and their wonderful friendship. He devoted a bit longer to that topic than it was necessary because Constance obstinately refused to understand how a completely mute ladybird could be one’s best friend. In the end, the swallow simply waved it all aside because it was not an easy task to argue with a deer like Vundabah. There were no accidents in his opinion, only fate.

“You, my dear Constance, did not find yourself here by chance either. Our paths are connected. I believe that it’s me whom you must receive valuable advice on life from before you fly south.

Not that your parents wouldn’t do well, but I am far wiser than any other animal in the forest. Vincent knows





it, and that is why he has been living with me for more than ten days now.

“What I think is that I found myself here only because of the strong wind!” Constance snapped at him. “And how can you possibly have such a high opinion of yourself! This is very annoying! No surprise that Vincent pretends to be mute. Before you know it, he might say something and then you’ll never let him be.”

“There is a different kind of relationship between Vincent and me, dear Constance. Do not fret. I am sure that I will come to love you as much one day. I think that I will need a day or two in the least, but keep it in mind that Vincent will always come first in my heart. Don’t take offence, you are wonderfully unpolished and I can see potential, our relationship might develop despite the short time in which I must teach you to fly...”

“Oh, please, shut up already!”

The swallow interrupted him. “You seemed to want to talk about me but it’s all about you again.”

“Yes, you are right, I apologize. You know, when you have been communicating only with yourself for such a long time, you don’t really have that many topics in mind other than **YOURSELF**. It is difficult for me to change but I will listen to you this time. Come on, tell me.”