

The Lost Boy

(TW: implied child death, mentioned parent death, homelessness)

Shivering, Mason pulled his knees closer to his chest, trying to keep his body heat under the blanket and close to him. Winter was always the hardest and coldest time outside but where others could go home and warm up in front of fireplaces, he was forced to stay out in the biting cold, fighting for every last bit of warmth. When his mother was still alive, this was no problem. Their house had a small fireplace they could curl up in front of together under a multitude of blankets with a cup of tea in their hands. It was warm and cosy and he missed it dearly. But ever since her death, that warmth was gone. Not to be found in the orphanage where he was shunned and excluded, going as far as to bully him into a homeless life without a care in the world and definitely not out on the streets where he was constantly fighting for survival against the weather, starvation and other desperate people. Life out there was hard and the difficulty was not made easier by his young age and him being on his own.

Exhausted, he eyed the small paper cup placed right by his feet and the few coins placed inside of it. The morning rush was over and now most people were at work, so he wouldn't get a lot more until lunch or, in the worst case, that afternoon when everyone goes back home. Those were always the busiest times and more people were open to giving a small boy begging on the side of the street some money, supplying him with enough to afford something small to eat each day.

With a sigh, he picked up the cup with shaking fingers, pouring the coins into his hand. Counting through them and getting some more leftover cash out of his pocket, he decided he could treat himself to some breakfast today. Carefully, he pulled his coat closer around his shoulders before pushing off the blanket and stuffing it in his backpack, the cup following close behind.

The bakery welcomed him with open doors and toasty warm air inside and he took the longest acceptable time possible choosing and ordering his breakfast to soak up as much of the warmth inside as possible. Finally, with a sandwich in his hands, he positioned himself outside the door, to still catch some moments of hot air whenever someone entered or left the shop, and started eating it in small bites. Fully immersed with his meal, he didn't notice the man walking towards him.

“Hi kiddo! Here, you look like you could need this”, a voice suddenly spoke up in front of him. Mason lifted his eyes from the sandwich halfway up to his mouth and took in the

stranger in front of him. He was wearing casual clothes, slightly hidden behind a dark green coat and a green hat, and a steaming cup in his hands. A hand that was lifted in his direction. "E-Excuse me?", Mason asked, confused about what the man wanted from him. "I got this for you. You seemed cold, so I bought a hot chocolate. It's gonna help and give you some warmth from within. Here!" And with that, he moved the cup even closer to Mason. "Are- Are you sure?" He couldn't believe it – and he was, of course, slightly suspicious of the whole situation, his mother had warned him about strangers and some of their motives many times when he was younger. But the streets also taught him to be grateful for everything you could get, so he was torn regarding the situation at hand.

"Yup, one hundred percent", the man said cheerily and smiled at him. Carefully, Mason took the warm cup out of the man's hands, immediately closing his fingers around it to warm them up. "Thank you", he murmured, not daring to meet the others' eyes. "It's really no problem at all, I'm glad I could help." The man gave him one last grin before turning around and walking away, disappearing in a crowd of people. Mason's gaze lingered on the last spot he saw him a little longer before shrugging slightly and taking a careful sip of the hot chocolate, almost collapsing with how good it tasted - it's been too long since he's had one, he thought, taking another delighted, lingering sip. Slowly, he moved away from the shop, returning to his usual spot.

Over the next few weeks, the man came back several times a week. He always brought something with him, a bottle of water, a cup of hot chocolate, some bread or other small snacks and meals and Mason started to trust him more and more, even going as far as to call them friends at this point. He looked forward to his visits, not just because of the food and drinks he got but also because the man was friendly and easy to talk to. He learned that his name was Peter, he was still quite young, younger than Mason would've thought, and he didn't live here. Apparently, he was there on a special journey but no matter how many times Mason asked, he wouldn't specify any further. He also told him about his friends, other boys around his age, that he met somewhat similarly to him and how amazing they were. After many of their talks, Mason felt like he knew them personally as well, as if he had already met them. He loved listening to Peter talk while eating a little snack, it was without a doubt the highlight of his weeks.

But one night, something changed in their routine. It was particularly cold and because Mason had been fighting with the flu for a few days, he had buried himself deep into his jacket and blanket, not letting any of the important warmth escape. It was the first night in a while where

he slept deep and uninterrupted, not being woken up by a cough or his fever. He was immersed in a wild dream when something disturbed his sleep.

“Hey, Mason. Come on, wake up. Hey!” Insistent shaking brought Mason out of his deep slumber. Yawning, he rubbed over his eyes, trying to get the sleep out of them and then blinked up at the shadow in front of him. “Hi kid! Sorry to wake you up so suddenly but I wanted to show you something!”, the shadow spoke to him excitedly. He looked at the silhouette more closely, squinting his eyes to try and make out more features. “Peter..?”, he questioned quietly. “Yeah, good morning, sleeping beauty”, the aforementioned man laughed and suddenly grabbed his hand. “Come on, let’s go!” Grumbling, Mason let himself be pulled along by an excited Peter, barely listening to his rambles while trying to get more awake and aware. “Where are we going?”, Mason yawned when a sudden realization hit him, “I didn’t grab my backpack! Peter, wait, my stuff!” Said man didn’t hesitate and just pulled him further along. “Don’t worry about that, you won’t need that for where we’re going. And it’s a surprise, so don’t even bother asking ‘cause I’m not telling you!” This woke him up a little more and he looked at Peter confused. “Why not? We’re going there anyway and I’d really rather know-” “It’s kind of like my home, okay? That’s all you’re getting”, Peter interrupted him, throwing a glance over his shoulder. Groaning, Mason relented. “Fine. But please tell me it’s not a long walk because I’m still super tired.” Peter came to a halt, chuckling quietly. “You’re such a cry-baby, damn. Want me to carry you?” Mason would have been embarrassed if the offer wasn’t so tempting. So only hesitating slightly, he nodded, climbing up on Peter’s back as soon as he crouched down. “Thank you, Peter. You’re the best”, he mumbled before promptly falling back asleep.

When he woke up again, he was in a vastly different place. Instead of streets, houses and shops, he was surrounded by lush grass and flowers, massive trees and a sparkling sea flashing through the bushes. It looked magical and beautiful and he never knew such a place ever existed. “Woah! What the hell? Peter, what did you do, where are we?”, he asked astounded, his eyes not able to settle on just one thing to look at and take in. Were that mermaids in the background?! “This, my dear friend, is Neverland! My home!” Even though he couldn’t see Peter’s face from this angle, he could hear the smile in his voice, the pride and joy he felt towards this place. “This is everything you could ever dream of and more.” He carried on to a small clearing ahead of them, letting Mason down from his back as soon as they stopped there.

“Guys, gather around!”, Peter suddenly called out. “This is Mason, he’s new here so please be

nice to him!” After a second of silence, the bushes started to rustle and one after the other, young boys came out into the clearing, looking curiously at Mason. Shyly, he scooted closer to Peter, waving at the gathered boys around him. Some of them smiled back while others looked at him suspiciously but one boy, taller than him with tanned skin, came towards him. “Hi, I’m Talin!”, he introduced himself, holding out his hand for Mason to shake. Mason took it, shaking it quickly and giving the boy a nervous smile. After scrutinizing him shortly, Talin let go again, nodding at the other boys which started a loud cheer among them. A chorus of “Welcomes” and names were thrown at Mason who was too overwhelmed to catch all of it. With a final squeeze of his shoulder, Peter let go of him and took a step back. “I’m going to leave for now though, you guys have fun here, I’ll be back soon! Welcome Mason the way we welcome people here!” And with those final words and a last hair ruffle for Mason, he turned around and jogged off, leaving them behind. The other boys started bustling around, readying up the area and themselves, leaving Mason to drown in his thoughts and worries until it became too much for him.

And while everyone else was celebrating, preparing a meal and starting music, Mason sneaked away in search of a quiet moment for himself. Everything moved so quickly and he didn’t know where his head was in all of this, so he wanted to just sit down somewhere and sort the thoughts running around his mind.

But the quiet never lasted for long and soon someone joined him in his spot. Quietly, Talin sat down next to the other, looking straight ahead at the sea in front of them. “Are you okay?”, he asked quietly, not wanting to startle the boy and have him close off from him. For a long second, everything was quiet and Talin worried that the other wouldn’t want to talk to him when he heard a shaky intake of breath from the boy next to him. “He.. He just left me, you know? He was so caring in the beginning and, and he took me here, which I’m so grateful for, really! But- But he’s gone now and he’s not coming back and I- I just don’t know what to think”, he sniffled, his body occasionally being rocked by a hiccup. “I, I thought I finally found a friend who would help me and now he’s, he’s just... gone.” With every word, his voice got quieter in a desperate but futile attempt to hide just how hurt he was.

With a resigned sigh, Talin pulled him into his side. “Let me tell you a little something, Mason, okay?”, he started, “I was the first boy here and it was amazing. Peter and I used to spend a lot of time together and just play around and have fun, no responsibilities, no worries, just the two of us. But then, he started going away a few hours a day. And then it became more hours that one day. And then it became more days in the week. And it kept on going like that until I barely saw him anymore and I can tell you, I was devastated. And then he comes

back one day and introduces me to Nick. And I detested that new boy. I really did! To me, he was the reason I lost Peter, he took my best friend from me and I was convinced, I could never forgive him for it. And then we spent a few days and weeks together and you know what? He actually wasn't that bad to be around. Sure, he's an annoying little prick but I really grew to like him!" Talin threw a sly smile down at the boy who was looking up at him with wide eyes. He could still see some tears in the corners of his eyes, so he continued on. "I was very sad that I lost Peter, we were so close at the beginning. But, I had a new buddy now. And every now and again, Peter would bring new people here – like you! And we welcome them with open arms because we have learned that Peter only brings awesome people here. Everyone is a little sad that Peter doesn't stay around too much but we have each other, always and no matter what! So don't worry about him too much, he will come around every now and again but from now on, you have us Lost Boys and we've got you, so it's all gonna be just fine!"

Mason looked amazed, his eyes big and round and his mouth hanging just slightly open. New tears gathered in his eyes and his grip around Talin tightened just slightly. "So... I'm not alone anymore?", he asked in a whisper. Talin's gaze softened and he squeezed the smaller boy's shoulder. "No, you're not. We're all here now and we're not going anywhere. Neither are you. This is forever."

And as the floodgates opened and Mason started openly sobbing, Talin pulling him into a tight hug to reassure him, a silhouette watched from the crown of a nearby tree, smiling down at two of his boys before blending back into the shadows and disappearing.

!! The idea for this story was inspired by the song "Lost Boy" by Ruth B.!!