

A Fowl Tale

Eoin Colfer

Irish author Eoin Colfer is the creator of the bestselling Artemis Fowl series, which includes Artemis Fowl, Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident, Artemis Fowl: The Eternity Code, and, most recently, Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception. His other books include The Wish List, The Supernaturalist, Benny and Omar, Benny and Babe, The Legend of Spud Murphy, three books for those age six and under, Going Potty, Ed's Funny Feet, and Ed's Bed, and a guide to his own series, Artemis Fowl Files: The Ultimate Guide to the Best-selling Series. His latest is the next Artemis book, Artemis Fowl: The Lost Colony. He grew up in Wexford, Ireland, where he still lives with his family.

In the droll story that follows, he shows us that those prepared to sing for their supper must be careful just what they sing ...

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I

In medieval Europe, travellers were always welcome to a bowl of stew on one condition—they were required to spin an interesting tale. On this occasion, an unusual traveller joins the queue of Erik the Boy King.

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FINALLY, it was my turn to speak. And a good thing too because I was famished. I'll just spin them my yarn, I thought. Whatever it takes to get a bowl of stew, and maybe a good deal more.

“You there,” said the boy king, pointing the sword at the knight below me. “Tell us a tale.”

“Just a minute,” I protested, swooping down to the table. “I believe I am next.”

The assembly was surprised to hear a bird speak, but I didn't get the big reaction I usually get. Generally there are cries of aaarrgh! Witchcraft! And boil the demon chicken. But this time, just a few raised

eyebrows. I suppose after the stories already told this day, the assembly has become accustomed to the fantastic.

I fluffed my feathers. “Well? Do I get my rightful turn? Will you deny a bird his feed?”

The boy king smiled. “Proceed, Master Chicken.”

“I am not a chicken,” I said, feeling slightly miffed. “I am a dove. It’s a completely different thing. Chickens are dirty creatures who chatter incessantly and deposit their droppings on whatever patch of ground they happen to be inhabiting. We doves are far more discreet.”

“Accept my humble apologies and pray proceed, Master Dove.”

I bowed in thanks. Now for my story. Not mine, of course. There must be one I could drag up from childhood memories. I would make them drag mine from me.

“Ahem, yes. My story. Once there was a noble knight who searched far and wide for the holy grail.”

A noble knight behind me in the queue raised a chain-mailed finger.

“That would be me, and that would be my story.”

I changed tack hurriedly. “On a fine summer’s day three little pigs decided to move out of their mother’s house ...”

“Heard it,” said the boy king.

I tried again. “One morning, a lonely orphan received his invitation to attend wizard school.”

The boy’s sword quivered a hairbreadth from my beak. “The line is long, bird. Tell your tale or forfeit your meal.”

I tried to make light of the situation. “There are only seven real stories anyway. What matter the tale, as long as it is well told?”

“There is only one story here and now, Master Dove,” said the boy king, frowning. “And that is yours. Are you willing to share it?”

I snapped at an impertinent flea between my feathers. “The whole af-fair is a tad embarrassing. Not something one likes to talk about in polite society.”

The knight chortled. “One talks about? Polite society? You’re very well spoken, for a chicken.”

“Dove!” I snapped. “And yes, polite society. I am, after all, royalty. Or I was, until I was transformed.”

The knight elbowed a hermit beside him. “Don’t tell me, you’re the missing Prince Husnivarr.”

I didn’t answer, just clicked my beak modestly.

The knight drummed his fingers on an armoured forearm. “So, you’re saying, little chicken, that you are Prince Husnivarr? Heir to the Mont Varr kingdom, not to mention the mountain of gold. But every one knows that the Husnivarr brat was transformed into a pig.”

“That is so untrue,” I chirped. “Well, perhaps I was something of a brat, but I was never a pig. Never. There was a pig in the vicinity when my transformation took place, and it caused some confusion, that’s all.”

“Whatever you say, porky,” said the knight, winking at the assembly. I was really beginning to dislike that man.

“Speak, Prince,” said the boy king, interrupting the general laughter. “Your own story this time.”

It was time for my story. It was that or hunger.

“It is true,” I began sadly. “I am Prince Husnivarr, or rather I was. This poor battered bird you see before you was once the heir to the richest kingdom on earth. I lived a privileged life in court. My duties were light and my comforts were many. I grew spoilt and petulant. My father, a noble king, decided that a good old-fashioned task would strengthen my character. One day he called me into his throne-room and sat me by his side.

“ ‘One day the big chair will be yours, Husni,’ he said. ‘And I don’t think that you have the bottom to fill it. I’ve been watching lately, and you have no respect for your fellow man or beast. You need to learn that respect before you can be king.’

“There was a golden tray on his knee and on the tray rested a common grey rock. It was about the size of a rabbit’s head and streaked with white.

“ ‘This is the Karma Stone,’ my father explained. ‘My magicians brought it back from Persia. We had to dig a large chunk from the moun-tain of gold to pay for it.’

“ ‘Very, eh, pretty,’ I said, reaching to stroke the stone.

“ ‘Not so eager, Husnivarr,’ said the king, grasping my wrist. ‘The Karma Stone moves people who touch it through their circle of life. It ac-celerates their incarnations. Watch.’

“My father placed his hand on the stone and immediately transformed. He became a stoat, then a wolf, a tall shaggy beast that I could not identify, then, once more, himself. Finally, he removed his hand.

“ ‘You get what you deserve, you see. It only took me three incarnations to become a man. Strength of character, you see. And when I die, I will be-come a stoat once more. You, Husni, I suspect it will take you a thousand years to become human again. Would you like to know how many stages there will be for you?’

“ ‘No,’ I replied.

“ ‘I insist,’ said my father, placing my hand on the Karma Stone.

“My transformation was immediate. The world grew huge as I grew small, and only my human thought-process kept me from flying away. I was a mosquito.

“ ‘Aah,’ said my gigantic father mournfully. ‘It is worse than I thought. You will begin your next cycle as a mosquito. Very low on the reincarnation scale.’

“The urge to suck his blood quickly faded, as I transformed into a dung-beetle.

“ ‘Still an insect,’ noted the king. ‘I hope you become a mammal soon, for your mother’s sake.’

“My shell popped and disappeared, fur sprouted along my back, and I became a rat. I could clearly see my own nose and the whiskers quivering like tiny foils at its tip.

“ ‘A mammal,’ admitted my father. ‘But not a very noble one.’

“Then disaster struck. A crazed pig, escaped from the kitchen, burst into the chamber, pursued by a trio of cleaver-wielding butchers. Pandemonium was immediate. I was in the throes of becoming a dove and could barely follow the sequence of events.

“The pig charged my father’s chair, knocking him over backwards to the floor. His head cracked against the stone flags, knocking the life from his body. My contact with the Karma Stone was roughly broken before my human senses had asserted themselves. I had become a dove, with a dove’s brain and vocabulary. The pig lunged, the butchers swiped their cleavers, and I flew. Oink, roar, and coo!

“I followed my dove’s instincts and found an open window. In minutes, I was miles away, riding the tails of a west-bound wind. For two years I roamed the skies as a simple dove, with no inkling of what had befallen me. Until one summer, I made my home in the eaves of a cottage and heard human voices once more. These voices stirred something within me, waking memories and senses.

“I realised that I must return immediately to my grieving family and assure them that their son and heir is alive and well, if a little indisposed. Once they hear what my late father did to me, I feel sure that I will be welcomed with open wings, eh, arms. So that is my quest, and I have only stopped here for a much-needed meal.”

I finished my tale, dipping my beak in a convenient water-jug. My story had been a success. Already the waiter was filling a bowl of stew.

The knight removed his helmet. "A fascinating story, chicken. Prince Husnivarr you say?"

"Alas, yes," I said. Sad yet noble.

"Amazing. The Karma Stone, you say?"

I snapped my beak. "Yes, yes. That's what happened."

The knight removed one gauntlet. "And tell me, chicken ... I mean, Prince, about your famous family birth-mark."

Birth-mark? I had a famous birth-mark?

"Ah, yes. Of course. The heirs to the mountain of gold always have a birth-mark in the shape of a ... birth-mark. The exact details escape me at the moment. Not all my memories have returned."

The knight peeled off his breastplate. "Let me refresh your memory. The birth-mark is in the shape of a peacock's fan. Rather like this one."

There was a birth-mark on the knight's side, in the shape of a pea-cock's fan.

I flapped my wings nervously. "So, that would mean that you would be..."

"Prince Husnivarr," completed the knight. "I've been away on a campaign. Not a pig or chicken in sight."

"This is ridiculous," I blustered. "I am Husnivarr, rightful heir to the ..."

"Mountain of gold," completed the knight. "More of a molehill I'm afraid. Oh, it was a mountain once,

but that was before empire tax and a few decades of war. I'd be surprised if there's a single sovereign left in the treasury now."

I felt like fainting. "No gold?"

"Not a penny."

"There's still the castle," I said, grasping at straws.

"There is that," agreed the knight. "A fine castle with portraits of me in every hall."

"Ah ..." I could feel all eyes on me now. "Perhaps I exaggerated my story slightly ..."

The boy king drew his sword again. "So, you're not a magical dove."

"No. A parrot actually. An albino parrot."

"And how did you learn to talk."

"I always knew how to talk. But I learned to understand in a magician's laboratory. Some chap called Marvin, I think."

"Merlin?" said the boy.

"That's the one. I think breathing in the gas from his potions boosted my parrot brain somewhat."

The knight broke the tension. He laughed until his armour rattled, and salty tears gathered in his beard.

"By God, a conniving parrot. I've heard it all now. I want to thank you, little chicken. I haven't laughed this much in a decade. Not since I was turned into a pig."

They were all laughing now, and I sensed that a meal might still be on offer. I waved a wing towards the steaming pot.

“I’ve told you a story, do I get a bowl? Just a small one. I eat like a bird.”

The knight snatched a bowl from a passing steward. “Of course, young prince. Your lies are worth at least a few chunks of boiled meat.”

I peered into the bowl. The soup was grey and unappealing.

“And what meat would that be?” I asked.

Prince Husnivarr winked maliciously.

“Chicken,” he replied.

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