

The History of the Pride Lands

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Prologue

This document contains both the history and the entire text of the six stories which became (or influenced) *Chronicles of the Pride Lands*, a four-part fanfic that now consists of:

CHRONICLES OF THE PRIDE LANDS
THE SPIRIT QUEST

SHADOWS OF THE MAKEI UNDER THE BROAD ACACIAS

Two earlier disastrous attempts at fanfic were lost without a trace, a tragedy that dominates conversation on The Lion King List to this day (sniff!).

The first four stories of the post-disaster period became the intermediate Chronicles of the Pride Lands. THE PREDICTION, THE SHADOW FALLS, and THE CHILD FROM THE STARS were released as “Three Related Stories,” and the fourth one, A DEATH IN THE PRIDE LANDS, was released separately.

The plot line of “The Child From the Stars” was later scrapped because of credibility issues. Together with a later story, “The Council,” it is a large relic of what might have been.

The first two stories were based on the life and times of Taka, known as “Scar” in the movie “The Lion King.”

“A Death in the Pride Lands” was inserted into “Chronicles” nearly intact. It was written to explore the leonine concept of death.

At this point, the rough-cut “Chronicles of the Pride Lands” needed a lot of work. Some of it was repetitive, time filling work. I needed clerical help. I turned to my most enthusiastic fan and found instead so much more—a fellow author and wonderful friend.

The fifth fanfic, THE COUNCIL, was the inspiration for “The Spirit Quest,” though its plot changed rather radically. This story, partly inspired by Plato’s “The Apology of Socrates,” was my attempt to show The Lion King as a Way of Life. A trial gave Rafiki a forum to express and defend his views in a reasonably short passage. It was the inspiration for Kinara’s trial in “The Spirit Quest.”

“The Spirit Quest” began as a series of reminiscences that Rafiki had, looking back on his youth from the perspective of old age, while undertaking a journey to find a young apprentice. Mercifully, it was restructured in chronological order. It contained mostly new material, though the last of the original six stories, RITES OF PASSAGE, was incorporated. It was the first work where David Morris wrote some material completely from scratch.

“Shadow of the Makei” came from the need to remove some good material from “Spirit Quest” that did not fit in to the focus of that work. From the resulting “spare parts” pile, a running joke started between Dave and I about writing the hyena’s point of view. We jokingly referred to this as the “Hyannic Trilogy.” I threatened him on more than one occasion of being “stuck” with it as a form of punishment.

As it turned out, the concentration on just WHAT it was that affected Taka took on a life of its own. Writing “Shadows” became a real joy as we discovered the fragile beauty of Gur’bruk and Kambra’s love, the ego of Shenzi, and the deep faith of Ber. We were worried that this might suffer the fate of most sequels. But that was not the case. As with The Spirit Quest, this work broke new ground in dramatic development and polish. Hyenas were no longer mere stock characters.

“Under the Acacias” took some material pulled from “Shadow” when we realized some entertaining and energetic material (sound familiar?) was not contributing to

the plot. We decided to pull back these chapters and give them the attention they deserve. So Uzuri and her terrible twosome of Togo and Kombi were given the spotlight, as is the lioness-chasing Ugas whose funeral in "Spirit Quest" was a scream. Rather than mere comic characters, they emerged as complex three-dimensional beings with thoughts and feelings about a great many things.

Last but by all means not least, the character of Makaka whose love for the lioness Uzuri was such a driving force in Spirit Quest. He was Benjamin Darden, my God son. Benjamin died at seven years of age when someone ran a red light and struck his mother's car. About a week before he died, he came to me and said, "If I died, would you be very sad?" I answered that I'd be devastated. "If you died, I'd be very sad, but when Jesus comes, we'll be together always." I'm counting on it, Ben. I'll be the old man with tears of joy in his eyes.

Enjoy these early works—they are made available due to public demand.

John Burkitt
Nashville, Tennessee
January 15, 1997

The Prediction

A Prequel to The Lion King.

Chapter 1

No Time for Naps.

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It was nearly noon, time for Taka's nap, but Mufasa gamboled up like a box of rubber balls, so full of cubhood enthusiasm that he was about to burst. His mood was contagious. "Taka, you just gotta see this!"

"Gotta see what?"

"What is it, son?" Akase purred. "Another hedgehog? A meercat perhaps?"

"Well, it's—" His tail twitched. "Yeah, a meercat."

"What's so great about a meercat? We see them all the time," Taka said, yawning. "It's almost noon. It's hot enough to melt your brain, if you had one." Taka rolled on his back, looking comfortable as only a lion can.

"But this meercat is DIFFERENT," Mufasa said with a sly wink. Taka saw the way Mufasa's tail twitched, something that always happened when he told a lie. He half-smiled with a toothy, wry grin.

"Different, eh? Well, I guess so. Is it okay, Mom?"

"If you're back soon. You miss too many naps, it will stunt your growth."

Almost before her jaws snapped together on the word "growth," Mufasa and Taka bounded off like a shot, startling a flock of noisy guinea fowl into a

connoption. They headed through the deep grass of the Mbogo plain, stopping once in a while to bound up like furry jack-in-the-boxes to navigate.

Deep in grass though they were, young Sarabi saw them fording the broomsedge and knew there must be something up worth seeing. She hurried across the rocks and plunged into the green waves. Before long, she joined them, panting.

"So what's up?" Sarabi asked.

"Oh, nothing," Mufasa said. "We were practicing-stalking." His tail twitched.

"Every time you're up nothing," Sarabi said, "You're up to something."

"We are going to look at—a meercat," Taka volunteered.

"A meercat?" Sarabi asked, a little unconvinced.

"Well, this one is different," Taka said.

"Then I want to see, too," Sarabi said.

"Good work, lame brain," Mufasa half-snarled. He cuffed Taka soundly on the cheek. Taka growled, and the two of them got tangled in a wrestling match. Before long, there was some snapping at ears and tails, and Sarabi running little circles around them, distressed.

"Stop it! Stop it right now!" Sarabi was highly indignant. "We'll never see that stupid old meercat at this rate—if there ever was one, which I doubt."

She had no effect. The snarls began to sound more serious. Taka was losing, as he usually did, but he wasn't giving up.

"Say Uncle!"

"Not till you—ow!—stop calling me names! Just cause you're bigger than I am doesn't make you smarter!"

Sarabi shouted, "I'll tell your mother if you don't stop! You're both lame brains sometimes."

"We're just funning," Mufasa said, on top.

"Yeah. We didn't mean anything," Taka said, wiggling out from beneath, and giving Mufasa one last hard swat with his claws out.

Sarabi looked Taka over, and seeing a small spot of blood on his right ear felt very motherly, began to clean it with her tongue. Taka could always count on her sympathy, but he wanted to look more manly at the moment. "Doesn't hurt."

"You're bleeding."

"Oh, it's nothing. Really."

"Yeah, really," Mufasa said, cleaning a nasty cut on the back of his paw by himself. "Well, if you insist on coming, there's this honey badger near the forest. He's white—whiter than clouds. Makedde says if you get a white animal to bless you, you'll be powerful and famous."

"Why?" Sarabi asked, continuing to clean Taka's ear.

"Everybody knows that," Taka said. "Tell her, Muffy."

Mufasa cleared his throat, and it was plain by the way he said it that he was imitating Makedde the Mandrill to some degree. Pacing about very solemnly, he took his voice down ever so slightly and looked at nothing and no one in particular. "When the Great King made all the animals, he gave them the colors of the Earth. There are some animals that are special from birth. Mandrills are marked around the eyes and mouth—that's why they can see the future and speak words of magic.

A white animal is one given the color of the stars, and it is special all over. Their powers are the strongest. That is why we do not hunt them—they are put here to protect us from evil spirits."

"I want to be blessed too," Sarabi said. "Either I get blessed, or I'm telling on both of you!"

With this settled, the three cubs headed toward the burrow at the edge of the acacia grove.

Chapter 2

The Burrow.

The entrance to the burrow was easily found, but they were in no hurry to rush inside. It was a forbidding little black hole barely large enough for a cub to squeeze in properly, not really enough to maneuver in. For that reason, Mufasa, who was the largest of the three, suggested that they call the badger out.

"I hear you breathing, badger. I'm King Mufasa—at least I'm going to be someday—and I command you to come out and bless me and my friends!"

They could indeed hear the sound of muffled breathing coming from the depths of the tunnel. Carried by the walls of the burrow, it sounded loud like the sound of the sea in a shell, and it was quick, almost urgent and upset. They didn't know if he was afraid or angry.

"Maybe he's deaf, Your Majesty," Taka said with a laugh. "You pulled me all the way over here for a hole in the ground? I bet it's a rabbit. Just a scared little rabbit! And YOU called ME a lame brain!"

"But there was a white badger here, honest!" Mufasa looked at Taka, then at Sarabi. "You do believe me, don't you? I mean, does this smell like a rabbit to you??"

Taka sniffed carefully of the opening. He'd never smelled a honey badger before, but he knew it was not a rabbit. It was strange and pungent, and full of possibilities. "I've come this far," Taka said. "If I'm going to get blessed, I guess I have to go in there."

"You'll never do it," Mufasa said, looking at the dark hole with a barely repressed shudder. "He sounds mad. Besides, it's dark in there, and you're afraid of the dark."

"Says who?"

"Says me, that's who! You always think the hyenas are going to get you. Sometimes you won't go to sleep till high moon." (*Midnight*).

Taka was deeply stung. Often he would wake with the same nightmare of being ripped apart by hyenas. Akase, always listening with a mother's ear, would be there quickly to comfort him with warm kisses that smelled like lioness love and let him rest his head on her soft belly until he fell asleep to the music of her breath.

He never knew if Mufasa woke and simply kept his eyes closed. Now, there was no doubt. Taka's stomach knotted. He looked at the hole and knew what he must do.

Sarabi cuddled up next to Taka. "Don't do it if you don't want to. I sure wouldn't."

"That's cause you're a girl," Taka said, but he looked at her kindly. Then he faced the dark hole. "I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm not afraid of the badger, either. I'm a lion, and lions aren't afraid."

As Taka reluctantly headed down the dark shaft, inch by inch, he kept talking. "We're not going to hurt you. We just want your blessing." The sound of breathing from the depths grew faster, as did Taka's.

"Hey Taka," Mufasa said, "You don't have to do it. I'm sorry I called you a dim wit."

"It was lame brain," Sarabi said.

"Whatever." Mufasa snapped. "Hey Taka, come back. I was only funning about you being afraid of the dark." He grew impatient. "Taka, I SAID I WAS SORRY, all right?? Now come out of there or I'll tell mother!"

They heard Taka's voice from the depths of the tunnel. It was thin stammering. "We don't want to eat a badger, we just want to see you for a moment, OK? You're a hunter like us. We won't hurt you, understand? Is it OK with you?" In a moment there was a plaintive call. "It's dark in here. Please don't hurt me." It was Taka.

The sounds of breathing quickened again. There were some sounds of movement. Then silence. After a moment, Mufasa looked at Sarabi. "I didn't think he'd do it. Either he's very brave or very stupid."

"He's not stupid," Sarabi said firmly. "If you hadn't called him stupid, he wouldn't be down there! Just because he's smaller than you are doesn't mean he's..."

Just then there was a loud, menacing growl and a cub's shriek of agony. "I'm going! Oh God! Let me go! Please!" Taka came stumbling out of the hole backward, his face covered in blood, and one of his eyes protruding from its socket. The white badger came out after him, but saw the other two cubs raise the fur on their backs and snarl, and he reluctantly went back in his hole. Taka laid on the ground shivering. "Don't touch me! It hurts! Somebody help me! I want my momma!"

Mufasa stared at the unseeing eye in a pool of blood. It took a moment for him to tear himself away from the horror and move. "I'll get mom—no, I'd better get Makedde." He started off, then stopped. "No, he'd have to come back here. Can you walk, Taka?"

Taka struggled off the ground and began to limp. "I'll try. Is it far?"

"No. Just follow me."

Chapter 3

The Prophecy.

It was a long and painful trek to Makedde's home in the Baobab tree. Makedde, the sage Mandrill Baboon, was teaching his younger brother Rafiki how to divine the future with a bowl of water. This technique, called scrying, is the best way to tell the future. For water, they say, has risen higher than birds fly, clear to Heaven. It returns to Earth charged with the energy of the gods. This is so, for any lion sees the new green in the grass after a rain. To the trained eye, traces of the past and the future remain in the reflections.

Makedde dropped his work at once when he saw the blood spattered cub and his two friends. "Rafiki, mix some herbs, quick!" He looked at Taka's eye closely. "Oh Master Taka, what have you done now!"

Makedde held up his hand on one side of Taka's head, then the other. "No sight on that side. This is bad. Very bad. But perhaps I can fix."

Makedde got some herbs from Rafiki and squeezed them on the ground. The dust became mud, and he took this mud carefully in his hand.

"Courage, little one." Taka gnashed his teeth. His good eye closed tightly and his ears went back. The cool mud surrounded his damaged eye, not hurting as badly as he thought it would. Then with a press of his paw, Makedde popped the still-intact eye back into its socket. With infinite care, Makedde took water from a gourd dipper and washed away the mud. As he did so, he chanted rhythmically:

*"May the sorrows of this victim
like the incense of acacia
rising swiftly to the Heavens
Waken pity, bring compassion
For a body that is broken..."*

It seemed like an eternity to Sarabi before Makedde stopped. She worked up the courage to ask, "Will that eye work again?"

"Rafiki," Makedde asked, "You heard the lady. The answer lies in the future. What will come of Taka?"

Rafiki was nervous. It was his first time to scry for another. So he looked into the water thoughtfully, trying to remember all his brother taught him. "Wait, something appears. It tells me..."

"What?" Sarabi asked impatiently.

Rafiki stared into the water as one possessed. His voice deepened and was labored. "Hear what makes warm blood run cold. Taka, for you the road is long and hard. Bitterness your food and shame your drink. Those who smile to your face show their teeth as you leave. Friends come from unlikely places, then abandon you in your hour of need. Be wary, slow to trust and quick to suspect. He who is first to touch you shall bring about your doom, and she who gives you love shall turn to hate you."

"Rafiki!" Makedde shouted. "Control it!"

"Are you sure?" Mufasa said, horrified. "Is this going to happen for sure?"

"The boy does not know what he's saying," Makedde said angrily, shaking Rafiki until he snapped out of his trance. "He does not control the water—it controls him. When I can see you alone, Taka, I'll tell your future and I will do it right."

Taka started to cry. "Do they really hate me?"

"No, Taka," Mufasa said firmly. Then he looked a little embarrassed. "We all love you, even if you are my brother."

"But what if it's right?" Sarabi asked. "At least part of it?"

"We'll make sure it's not true," Mufasa said. He went to his brother and draped his paw over Taka's shoulder. "There—I'm the first one to touch you. I'm your bestest friend in the world, so you don't have to worry any more."

"And I'm the one that loves you most," Sarabi said aloud, not caring who heard it for once. "When we grow up, I'm going to marry you." She, without thinking, touched Taka's face with her warm tongue. The taste of blood reminded her of her mistake. "Oh Taka, are you all right?"

Taka stared at her, then tilted his head. He smiled. "I can see you! I can see you with both eyes!" He nuzzled her affectionately. "You would never hurt me, would you, Sassie?"

"Never! Not in a million years."

Taka gave her a weak lick. "We will always be together, I promise. You did mean it—about marrying me—didn't you?"

"Yes, Taka."

He smiled. "I just know I'm going to catch it when I get home, but it was worth it. Really. Will you walk home with me?"

"Of course I will," Sarabi said.

"Dad won't spank you," Mufasa said. "It's me that's going to catch it. But I don't care, if you're OK. You REALLY should have come out when I told you to. Now THAT was being a lame brain."

The three cubs bounded off as quickly as Taka could keep up. After they were quite a way from the Baobab, Rafiki said, "Brother, I'm quite sure of what I saw. I don't know why I said it, but I knew it was so."

"I know," Makedde said. "But sometimes it is in the telling that things come true. You may have started the troubles by filling their young heads with ideas. Sometimes silence is the wisest prophesy of all."

Rafiki hung his head. "Can't I undo it, brother?"

"You must look after them now. Use your magic to guard them the way I protect the Pride Lands. Even if you can't undo the prophesy, perhaps you can alter it."

"Perhaps," Rafiki said, watching the lion cubs disappear into the tall grass. "By the gods, I will try."

The Shadow Falls

A Prequel to The Lion King.

Chapter 1

A Sign of Power.

Mufasa's pride was all out of proportion to the straggly pioneering hairs that made his head and throat look somewhat shaggier than the rest of his body. But that was matched by the pride of his parents Ahadi and Akase. Ahadi insisted that he was equally proud of Taka, and Taka wanted desperately to believe it.

Taka had a dark mane, something most lionesses consider very attractive. Often his mother Akase told him that happiness and power do not always go together. For while power may be inherited, happiness may be found by anyone. She would tell him that his dark mane was a sign that he would be king in some lioness' heart. "Someone will love you for who you are, not because you are king." Taka did not believe this, but he believed in his mother and in her love. And to some degree, he believed Sarabi loved him though they were prone to more arguments in recent days.

But now Taka was very unhappy. The Mantlement Ceremony is all that Ahadi and Akase seemed to talk about—all everyone seemed to talk about. That first trace of mane is for many male cubs a sign that they are about to venture out into The Big World, and brings as many fears as it does hopes. It is the wakening of their interest in lionesses as more than playmates. For Mufasa, it was a step closer to the kingship—the prince was growing up. No one expected the brother of Mufasa to go out into The Big World, and he, like Mufasa, would be honored by all subjects in the Pridelands.

And yet there was no doubt that everyone of every species would be staring at the future King. Taka's Mantlement was the last big step that the public would take interest in, and he had to endure it in the huge shadow of his brother.

Immersed in this thought, Taka sat alone on the point of Pride Rock and looked down on the wide savanna below, now occupied by a few wildebeests, but soon alive with bowing and scraping subjects looking on their King-to-be. And that what's-his-name brother of his—the one with the scar. Only recently had the other lions begun to talk to him without staring at the eye. He'd long passed the stage where those who were dying to know more about it could ask, "How are you feeling?" or "Can I help?" Now it was as healed as it would ever be, and they had gotten used to it. But along with the familiarity came the rumors—mostly true—about how he was marked, and the nickname Scar. Oddly enough, no one blamed Mufasa in the least for what had happened to Taka's eye. Instead they wondered who would be stupid enough to go into a badger's hole in the first place. Everyone knew how badgers acted underground—that is, everyone with common sense.

"Hey, Taka!" said Mufasa, sitting alongside. "Thinking about the big day tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, you don't look too happy about it."

"I'm just fine," Taka said firmly. "I can't help the way I look."

"Yeah, right." Mufasa hopped up lithely and sat on the other side of Taka to look him in the eyes. "What's your problem? I mean, it's your big day too. Everyone who's anyone will be there to look at your new mane. Besides, the babes dig it! I mean, without a mane you're just another kitten."

"You must think I'm really stupid," Taka said. "Who's going to care about me? Half of them don't even know who I am. I'm just that kid with the funny looking eye."

"You help protect the Pridelands," Mufasa said. "That's important. And hey, if something happened to me, you'd have to be King." He made a sweeping gesture with his paw over the empty savanna. "They all know that. And they know they better treat you with respect, or they'll have to answer to me."

Taka stared at Mufasa right in the eyes, something that made his brother feel uncomfortable. Mufasa could almost feel Taka looking right through him, examining his bones and sinews. He was looking for something he could remember from long ago, from days when friendship could be taken for granted in the innocence of early cubhood. "Would you miss me if I died?"

"Of course I would," Mufasa said, a little irritated. "What kind of stupid question is that?"

"Don't call me stupid!" Taka looked at him differently, with more of the blindness of anger. "I hate it when people call me that!"

"I didn't call you stupid," Mufasa said, backing back. "What is your problem, anyway? Go ahead and sulk—that's all you ever do now. But you watch yourself tomorrow. You're the son of the King, and you act like it. I don't want you spoiling my Mantlement, understand?"

"I understand clearly. I won't spoil YOUR Mantlement, brother."

On that word, Taka left the point of the rock and headed down quietly.

Sarabi was lying half-asleep in the shade of an acacia tree when Taka walked by. Her keen senses were stirred by the light tread in the grass. She looked up quickly, then relaxed her ears. "Oh, it's only you, Taka."

"Only me?"

She frowned. "Not another one of those moods again. Get a little fuzz on your neck and you lions take yourself soooo seriously." She took a half-hearted swat at him. "Tell me, Taka, will you be like that when I get you alone? Smile if you think wicked thoughts."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Smile if you think I'm sexy."

He looked away. "Cut it out, will you?"

In a sultry half-purr, she added, "Smile if you think you'll live through the honeymoon."

He broke into an embarrassed grin which he tried to hide behind a paw.

"Optimistic little devil, aren't you?" She nuzzled him affectionately. "I like that much better. I hate it when we fight."

"So do I," Taka said. "I should let you have your way more often."

Sarabi's eyes narrowed to slits. "I don't want to have my way more often. I mean we should agree to disagree. Don't patronize me."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Then how did you mean it? I'm not stupid you know."

"I know." Taka licked his paw and tried to groom what there was of his mane. It was a nervous habit. "Sarabi, let's never fight again. I was thinking about the prophesy. I've been thinking about it a lot lately."

"I don't believe in it," Sarabi said firmly.

"Still, you can't blame me for worrying. I mean we never used to fight before that stupid thing with the badger." He licked his paw again and began to nervously rub at the other side of his neck.

"Please don't do that," Sarabi said.

"Don't do what? Oh..." Taka put down his paw. "Do you think you'll always love me? I mean, Makedde said sometimes we make our own destinies. If we work hard, we can change them."

Sarabi nuzzled him. "There are times your own mother couldn't love you," she said. "This is not one of them. Forget the prophesy—I liked you better the way you were, when you trusted me."

"I trust you now," Taka said, beginning to groom his mane again. "I don't think you'd ever WANT to hate me. But things can happen—bad things."

"Like what?"

"I don't know what kind of things, but you know. I mean, maybe I'll do something really stupid and you wouldn't love me anymore."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the prophesy and Pride Rock are tied together somehow. I really believe that. I'm coming of age, the time when a lion goes out into The Big World to make his fortune. Other than food and water, I have one need. One need above all others, and that is to be loved. Right now, Mom and Dad still love me. Maybe not as much as Mufasa, but they do. And you love me, don't you?"

"Yes! How many times do I have to tell you??"

"Once," Taka said quietly. He put his left paw on her shoulder. He could feel her tremble. "It's time we stated our intentions. I want you."

"We're too young," Sarabi said. "They would never agree to this."

"Then don't ask them to," Taka said. "If you will always love me, pledge to me. I won't ask more until you come to me of your own free will. But we'll go away together. We'll leave tonight at high moon."

"You're really very nice," Sarabi said. "But how are you so sure you will want me as your lioness?"

He put his left paw on her shoulder once more. "Our love could move heaven and earth," he whispered seductively. "It would spread like ripples in a pond. You know I want you. When you look at me, when you touch me, I want you. Sarabi, look at me. I want you."

She felt his eyes meet hers. It was what lionesses call *The Look*. She wondered if the gossip was so about dark-maned lions. "I believe you." She tore herself away from *The Look* and glanced down at the ground. "You will be Lord Protector. It is

foolish to go away when you are wanted here. It is safe here—out there in The Big World it is so uncertain. We have to think about our children."

"There is only one certainty I want," Taka said with barely suppressed passion. He held out his left paw. "Before the gods, before the stars, before the assembled host I swear to give you my protection, my love, and my comfort forever." He looked at her pleadingly, like a small cub who's afraid of the dark. "Come on, Sarabi. Say it."

She started to hold her paw out to touch his. It trembled. She put it down. In the intensity of the moment she could not speak.

A painful moment passed. Taka's face changed visibly—It was like watching him die. "I understand," he said. "You are only a small lioness in a big world. How could you hope to fight destiny?" His ears laid back dejectedly and his tail hung limply. He trotted off into the bush without another word.

Sarabi watched him draw further and further away until he was a small speck of tawny among the brush. Panic seized her, and she found her tongue. "Taka! Wait! I'll do it!" Apparently he did not hear any voices but those in his head. "Taka!"

She collapsed on the ground and began to sob.

Chapter 2

Friends in Unlikely Places.

Taka was leaving the Pride Lands without even the traditional blessing from his mother. He had never learned to hunt, secure in the belief that he would always have a home. The truth is he had no idea what to do next, whether to return and beg Sarabi's forgiveness or to keep going and take some small comfort that he might still be missed by some constant hearts. Anything was better than being hated by all, even death. For a brief moment, he considered it the only way to keep the prophesy from coming true. Perhaps with the kings of old among the stars he could look down and see the sympathetic tear fall on his remains.

He stood on the brink of the river valley. Not far from where he stood was a sheer drop-off, the kind of place where a lion could fall and fall without suffering on the craggy slopes, and then just stop. Just stop—what a thought. Would it hurt? Would it have time to hurt? Would it matter how he landed? Just when he was about to plunge to his death, he caught sight of a lone hyena feeding on a gazelle carcass. Through his deep grief, he felt hunger. Even if he chose to die, he must not die hungry.

Running down to the kill, he bared his teeth. The hyena, a female, backed back before the fierce onslaught. He glared at her, the first hyena he'd ever seen close up. Something about her took him by surprise. Down one side of her face were horrible scars, and the eye was missing. He stared at the horrible wound, stunned by the thought that in this way she was just like him, only she was blind on one

side. And somehow he noticed how she was staring at his eye. For several quiet moments, they stood there and looked at each other.

"I have young, my lord," she said at last. "Have pity on me."

"Indeed," he said. "There is enough for all. I am..." he hesitated to say it aloud for the first time. "I am solitary. It is the time of my Mantlement. I must eat as well."

"What happened to yours? Your old man do that?"

"What?"

"You lions think we are crude," she said. "Not good enough for the Pride Lands. But we don't drive off our sons into the cruelty of the unknown. We love them. Tell me, stranger, have you ever heard of a hyena jumping to his death?"

The reply caught him by surprise. "No, I don't think I have." He quickly changed the topic. "You say you're a mother. Where are your cubs? They must eat too. I won't hurt them. I'm only a danger to myself these days."

"I can tell." She called softly behind her. "Shenzi. Banzai. Edward. It's all right. Come on out."

Three small pups came out of the brush and stared at the lion. Taka had never seen young hyenas before. The small female looked as their mother must have once.

"My name is Taka," he said quietly. "Don't be afraid." He lay his large bulk down like a huge sphinx. When he looked less threatening, the pups came over and cautiously sniffed of him.

"When you get where you're going, and you will, you remember this day. Don't hurt your son. Don't drive him off. Learn from this."

Taka sighed deeply. "I've learned enough to know this. Stay with me. We can help each other. If the sun sets on me alone, I'll most likely kill myself."

"Your troubles aren't not so bad. Many lions come through this just fine. Someday you will find love and security—I feel it."

"But you don't know my story."

"When you have eaten, tell me."

Taka attacked the carcass with desperation, but after the first few bites took the edge off his hunger, his wisdom took over. He stopped while there were still some choice portions and insisted that his friend, whose name was Miriam, finish it.

For those of you who don't know Taka's whole story, there is an account called *The Prediction* that may answer your questions. Everything written there and which you have read he told her, and more. For well on an hour or more he poured out his heart to her, and as he did, he watched her nod her head gravely once in a while. It made him cry to tell it, but they were tears of healing, and he felt much better.

Out of lion manners, he waited to hear her story. But she would not talk of herself. Instead, she felt compassion for Taka and taught him all of the pass phrases and signs that would let him pass safely through her lands. But most importantly, she gave him some advice that would change his path forever. "I know the mandrill of which you speak. He told my fortune too. He said that I would meet friends in unexpected places, but they would turn on me in my hour of need. You

have not turned on me. Maybe it's what he says when the fruit gets old and ferments. I suspect it is one of those odd things he eats that no decent animal would touch. My advice is to forget the prophesy—it is nonsense that has cost you dearly. Apologize to your lover. Kiss your mother. Make your father proud of you. And remember old Miriam. If you do become King, teach your children that we all have feelings under our different hides. Remember the pass phrases and see me again someday. We will talk."

Chapter 3

The Confrontation.

Sarabi was in tears when Mufasa found her. He nuzzled her affectionately and turned to face her when she looked away. "Sassie, tell me about it."

"It's Taka. He's gone."

"What do you mean by gone?"

"Gone. He's left the Pride Lands. He begged me to come with him, and I thought about it. Now I wish I had. He's out there alone, Muffy! He's kind and gentle, but he doesn't know a thing about life in The Big World."

It came as a complete surprise to Mufasa, though he believed her at once. He tried not to panic himself for her sake. "Did he say where he was going?"

"No. He just left." She began to cry again.

"Sassie, don't cry. I know how much you love him. We all love him. Maybe when he cools off, he'll come home."

"Do you think so? Do you really think so?"

"Yes. But it may be a long while. He's a proud lion."

She looked down. "What will I do? I always thought it would be Taka and I—just the two of us and our cubs. What's left for me? I will grow old alone and unloved."

Mufasa felt a lump gathering in his throat. "Sassie, I'm going to tell you something, and it's going to sound awful under the circumstances." He looked her in the eyes. "Sassie, I didn't want to get in my brother's way. But things have changed, and I have to say this or I'll burst."

"Is it what I think it is?"

"Probably." He nuzzled her gently. "Oh gods, Sassie, I feel like such a wretch! Like the lowest thing that ever crawled out from under a stone. But I love you. I've always loved you. There were times I would have given anything if you loved me instead of Taka. But I don't want to lose my brother or hurt him in any way. Don't hate me for saying this."

"I don't." She nuzzled him. "I've always known how you felt. You can't hide a thing like that."

"Maybe you don't love me the way I love you. At least you like me, don't you? I mean, I'll make sure you always have what you need. I'll take care of you. If you'll be my mate, I'll do anything for you—anything at all."

"Even forgive Taka?"

"Forgive him? I miss him already! I want him to come home."

"I need time," Sarabi said. "I'll have to think about it."

Chapter 4

The Mantlement Ceremony.

The next morning, the green plain of the Pride Lands was covered by zebras, antelopes, elephants, giraffes, and many other peoples who pushed and shoved for the best position. Zazu, the King's majordomo, strutted about nervously. He had never spoken in public before, and the huge audience was unnerving. King Ahadi looked drained, though he kept up appearances. Queen Akase had a difficult time sitting still beside her husband. She stared into space.

Zazu shouted, "Behold, the Prince Mufasa, son of King Ahadi!"

The crowd bowed and scraped. Zebras whinnied, elephants trumpeted, and antelopes stomped their hooves. It only stopped when Zazu spread his wings.

The King met his son at the tip of Pride Rock. "Let all within the sound of my voice know that my son is coming fast on the path of his forefathers. Look, he bears the sign."

Akase took Ahadi's place. "Look down o gods and bless my son who is this day a lion." She shuddered visibly. "And bless my son Taka, wherever he is. Have mercy on him."

The crowd was expecting a long, elaborate ceremony. Ahadi's rise was celebrated with a whole day of rejoicing, and there were no kills made. Usual enemies were friends, and for many eaters of grass, it was their first chance to see a lion up close, much less touch one and live to tell about it. A hush fell over the sward. The zebras looked at one another and the elephants shook their head. When Zazu dismissed them, they stalked quietly away, aware that something very bad had happened.

Mufasa left the peak, and headed back to the cave where he had spent his cubhood. "So I am a lion now."

"You are a lion now," Sarabi answered. She came from the dark shadows to meet him. He put his left paw on her shoulder, and she purred a deep purr. It could only mean one thing.

Mufasa said "Before the gods, before the stars, before the assembled host I swear to give you my protection, my life, and my comfort forever."

She trembled, but nuzzled him affectionately. "Till the last beat of my heart, to the last breath I sigh, our lives are one, so help me gods."

"Bless you, Sassie. I'll love you forever."

Just then, Zazu came excitedly into the cave. "Good news, everyone! You'll never guess!" He bowed deeply. "Your Majesties, Taka is coming back! I've spotted him in the brush and he's headed this way!"

The Child from the Stars

A Follow-up to The Lion King.

Foreword:

It is best to read *The Prediction* and *The Shadow Falls* before undertaking this work. This is a sort of follow-up, a closure of issues begun in those stories. But it is independent. Its time frame is shortly after the end of the movie *The Lion King*. I dedicate this work to the many friends who encouraged me in expressing my love for the movie in this way.

Chapter 1

The Sign.

It was in the middle of summer on one of those nights when the slightest whisper would carry a mile in the heavy air, and there was not a cloud in the sky. Simba was staring at the stars, something he did often with a feeling of regret for what might have been, but no longer the deep guilt that had burdened his cubhood. Nala lay still in the quiet of his cave, Tanabi clinging to her lithe warmth and softness in the peace of untroubled sleep.

Tanabi was going to be spoiled. There was no doubt about it. Simba wanted Tanabi to be his own person, but he also wanted to exorcise the grief of his past by giving him every happiness and advantage he lacked as a cub. In short, he worshipped the little elf with unquestioning and unfathomed love.

One of the stars seemed to shine a little brighter than the others. Simba was convinced it was his father Mufasa, who drew a little closer to the world of warm blood every time his heart was tugged by the faithful. It gave him comfort to see him guarding the host of the milky way—a heavenly symbol of the circle of life. "Father, grant me wisdom. There is so much I never learned, and if only you could show me a sign..."

Suddenly, a brilliant white flare streaked across the sky and struck the ground among the distant trees. "Pfff! What's this?" He thought of waking his mate but saw how she draped a paw across Tanabi even in sleep. "You may as well sleep, Nala. The show's over."

Perhaps it was, and perhaps it was not. He could not sleep, and he wondered if what he saw was a sign. He wondered aloud, "Should I wake Rafiki and ask him what it means?"

"Indeed you should," the upbeat mandrill voice chimed. Rafiki labored up the rock, staff in hand. He was getting too old for this sort of exertion. "Did you see what I saw?"

"I sure did!" He quickly let his ears fall back. "Let's keep it down. They're asleep."

Simba met Rafiki on a ledge halfway down. There was gratitude in the old Mandrill's eyes. "Good manners crown the King."

"So what was it we saw?"

Rafiki thought a moment. "It was a sign. I'm not sure what kind, but a sign."

"You don't even know if it's good or bad? Should we investigate?"

"My idea exactly," Rafiki said. "But I would not go alone."

Simba smiled. "Are you afraid, old friend?"

"Well that depends," the Mandrill said evasively, "if it's a good sign or a bad sign."

Chapter 2

Spirits Among the Trees.

It was in the trees along the southern border of the Pride Lands that the bright light fell. And with some fear, the two friends headed out across the open sward into the unknown. This place where the forest met the grassland was good hunting ground, but this was strange quarry. To make it worse, there was quiet in the air—no birds sang, no crickets chirped. It was as if nature herself was holding her breath.

And then there was a stirring in the trees. A pattern of tawny brown followed by another, smaller pattern.

"My Lord Simba!" cried the lioness, falling before the King. "It is Elanna. I bring you a gift from heaven." That was strange enough, for Elanna had disappeared during the fight with Scar, and was presumed dead. Beside her, a young cub, only slightly older than Tanabi.

The cub, a male, was nudged gently toward Simba. "He was sent to us before his time. We return him to where we know he will be cared for and loved. There is a lioness in her milk, I believe."

"My mate," Simba said, as if in a trance. "Do you mean this is the falling star?"

"None other, my Lord."

Simba looked up. Through the trees he saw a few points of white fire in the heavens. "Oh gods, what a strange thing!" He looked back at the cub. The small cub looked back and trembled.

"There now, little one. Don't be afraid of me. What is your name?"

"Fabana," the cub stammered. "It means swallow."

"I know." Simba turned and faced Pride Rock. "That is where we are going, Fabana. You've come a long way. It is just a little farther to a safe place. Since the gods have so favored me, I will be your father. My name is Simba. Your mother's name is Nala."

"Simba," the cub repeated. "Simba and Nala." Then he turned to face Elanna. She shook her head softly, and a look of sorrow crossed her face, pulling back her ears. She shook her head again. "You are their son now. I must go back from where I came."

Fabana watched her as she disappeared into the shade of the trees. He trembled. "Don't go. Don't go!"

"Poor Elanna," Simba purred. "Poor Fabana. Come, my son."

Chapter 3

An Air of Mystery.

Nala immediately took to the newcomer. With her, the cub found a new mother and a new name for she would always call him, "Fabana, the poor dear," as if it were his name. Fabana clung to her like a second skin, though he would once in a while play with Tanabi. He never called her mother, always Nala, but he would call Simba "father." Simba preferred "dad," which is what Tanabi always used. Indeed, he wanted Fabana to trust him and confide in him. Fabana was fragile and candid, and those qualities made all who saw him want to protect him and call him as Nala did, "Fabana, the poor dear." But Simba had other motives, for he was more curious than most lions about the heavens, and in particular about Mufasa.

But Fabana would answer no questions about what it was like to die, or if it hurt, or what heaven was like. He'd never heard of Mufasa, much less met him. That troubled Simba deeply. It also troubled Rafiki, for he had questions of his own.

The other lionesses regarded him with curiosity. Indeed some of them referred to him not by his name but as "the Star Child." At least it was not an unflattering name like Scar. But the moment they could find an excuse to be near him, they would look at his sad little face and shower him with affectionate titles like "honey tree" and "fuzzy love," and it was not clear who would be the most spoiled, Tanabi or Fabana.

After a week had passed, Rafiki saw Nala sunning herself on Pride Rock. He panted and grunted his way up the hill, complaining to himself about why lions can't live on the ground like other decent people. "So there is the mother of two," he said at last, out of breath. He placed his hand on her forehead, muttered a blessing, and kissed her cheek. "My dear lady. You make my day complete."

"Rafiki, you flower-tongued devil, what brings you here?"

He silently pointed to the timid cub who was wrestling with his more confident brother. Already Tanabi was on top of him, finding little resistance though he was smaller.

"So it's about Fabana, the poor dear."

Rafiki sighed. "I had to be a shaman like my brother. Mumsie never approved, rest her soul." He sat his staff down and sat in that peculiar cross-legged stance that was so impossible for lions. "The boy is sick."

"Sick?" Nala's ears came to attention. "What's wrong? Can you help him?"

He began to draw in the dust. "You can help him—or you can help Simba help him. No, his body is strong, but inside he is dying. He misses his mother."

"There's nothing we can do. She's dead."

"I doubt it sincerely, my lady. Not unless it happened this morning. I was deep in meditation when suddenly it came to me. I had never heard about anyone who died that came back to tell about it—not as a warm furball anyway. Fabana is saying what he was told to say—by his momma. Look at him. He has Elanna's eyes. Other than that, he is the image of his papa. Even you see it."

Nala looked closely at Fabana and sighed. "I had my suspicions, though I didn't want to believe them. But what about the sign? How do you explain that?"

"It cost me plenty, but the monkeys in the southern forest found the child that fell from the skies. A heavy black stone. Not cute like him."

"Then my sister is alive?"

"Alive she is. And that is her boy. Her love for him must be very strong for to warrant such a great sacrifice. Her heart must be breaking. I have seen her hiding in the brush just to catch a glimpse of the child. She does not hunt, she does not scavenge. I believe she lacks the will to live."

Nala stirred from her perch. "We must find her and bring her home."

"What about Simba?"

"What about him!" Nala replied. She hesitated for a moment, then looked at the small, sad cub. "His lies are his mother's. Simba loves him. That will not change."

"And what about Elanna?"

"I don't know what she has to hide, but I want her back. I won't turn my back on her."

With that, she headed into the cave where her mate lay unsuspecting.

Chapter 4

The Truth Outs.

A great deal of time passed as Rafiki waited outside the cave for Simba to come out. He would look in his eyes and see if all was well for Fabana.

"What??" he heard Simba cry. The rest was too faint for his aged ears, and he dared not interrupt them.

"Mufasa, you must help them," Rafiki muttered. "Open your son's eyes and show him the way of true wisdom. Protect the boy and his mother, and bring them out of exile." Rafiki had always loved Simba as he had always loved Mufasa. And yet there was the nagging feeling that he would not forgive Simba if he harmed the child in any way. "I'll raise him myself if I have to. Witness it, o gods! But I am old, and the boy belongs with his family. Show him the wisdom in mercy."

A few moments later, Simba emerged. Rafiki called his name, and when Simba looked around, he gazed into his eyes for a moment. Rafiki smiled. "You have learned from your pain."

"And what did you know of this, old friend?"

"Me??" Rafiki looked at the ground and shuffled his feet. "I am shocked. Shocked and insulted." Simba smiled at him indulgently, and Rafiki straightened up.

"The son of Nala's sister is welcome here, even if he is Scar's son." He looked at the cubs playing together. "Even ripples from a large stone must die someday. I will undo the hatred caused my brother, and the hatred he has caused. Maybe my nightmares will stop as well."

Simba bounded over to the cubs. Rolling on the ground like a playful kitten, he called, "Tanabi, Fabana, come here!" He nuzzled them both affectionately. "I have a surprise for you, Fabana."

"Yes, father?"

"Don't *yes father* me, you little sneak. Let's go find your mother and bring her here to live with us. Would you like that?"

Fabana's eyes grew wide. "Father, do you mean it?"

"I'm a King. I don't lie."

Fabana sprang on him, giving him warm lion kisses and burying himself in the tresses of Simba's mane. "Yes! I want my mom to live here!" He hesitated. "Can we maybe go find her today?"

"Today? Why not right now! Right this very second!"

And so it was that Fabana the poor dear became Fabana the joyful. That is not to say there were no hard feelings among some of the lionesses, but those passed with time. And as Fabana grew into a kindly and compassionate lion, there were those who recognized some of Taka's better traits in him. They would tell him stories about his father, omitting the sadness and hatred that blackened the final days. And perhaps, just perhaps, they allowed themselves to miss the tragic cub with the marked eye that went down the wrong path.

A Death in the Pride Lands

Chapter 1

Far Away from the Rest.

Misha was sitting on a high rock outside her mother's cave. It was one of her favorite spots because she could see far in all directions.

Her mother Ajenti asked, "What are you looking for so intently?"

"Grandmother is coming. It's time for our walk."

"Come in, Misha. She's not feeling up to it today. I'm sorry."

"But she promised. She was sick yesterday and the day before."

"If you love her, let her break the promise. That's what happens to you when you get to be her age," her mother Ajenti explained.

"Will I be like that someday?"

"Yes, but it will be a long, long time."

Misha sulked. She had grown to love those walks to the water hole with Yolanda in the early morning hours. Her grandmother was an encyclopedia of great stories of the old kings, of the gods, and even the latest gossip. And while they were supposed to take these walks for their exercise, Yolanda would always end up seeing something that brought back a memory, and the walk would become a talk.

Misha was bright, and it didn't take her long to figure out that her grandmother would only get older with time. *That age* was keeping them apart more and more, but never for three days in a row. She tried to imagine life without her grandmother—even the thought depressed her.

Ajenti nuzzled her affectionately. "Why don't you go play with Tanabi? He really likes you."

"He's OK," she answered half-heartedly. Misha was really crazy about Tanabi, but it was just not the same. That was Grandmother's special time, and it was for no one else. If Grandmother couldn't come to her, she would go to Yolanda. It would be a pleasant surprise.

There were several places Yolanda loved to go. Some of the more challenging ones, like her favorite branch in a low-hanging tree, had been neglected lately. She was more apt to be dozing on one of the large rocks that caught the morning sun. Misha went to the rocks, but no one was there. She wasn't at the tree, either. And the small cistern where rainwater filled a cave in the rock was visited by two lionesses, neither one of which had seen her.

Simba wished Misha a cheerful good morning. "Tanabi was looking for you. That is, if you're not taking your morning walk."

"But I am, Your Majesty, if I can find my Grandmother. You haven't seen Yolanda, have you?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"I thought you were supposed to know where everyone is. You're king, aren't you?"

Simba smiled pleasantly. "Indeed I am. But I'm not a miracle worker. If I see her before you do, I'll tell her you're looking for her. She's been kind of sick lately. Maybe she's still asleep."

"I checked," Misha said, distracted.

Without saying good bye, Misha hurried on, but she had no idea where she was going. Everywhere her Grandmother usually stayed was deserted. So she must be somewhere unusual. On a whim, she took the path down to the savanna that stretched out before Pride Rock. The grass was tall, and it was easy for a lioness to disappear completely, a thought that was most upsetting to the antelopes and zebras. "Grandmother! Yolanda! Are you out there?" She hunted everywhere, which was not easy for a fully grown lioness, much less a cub. "Grandmother! It's me, Misha!"

Just when she was about to give up, she saw Yolanda walking alone into the distance.

"Grandmother! It's me!" Misha hurried over to her in the tall grass. "Wait up, will you! I've looked everywhere for you! Couldn't you hear me calling you?"

Yolanda stopped for a moment to let Misha catch up, then resumed her slow, steady tread. "I'm sorry I didn't come by for our walk. I haven't felt well."

"But you feel well now, don't you? I mean, you're walking now."

"Honey tree, I'm walking now because I don't feel well. I don't want to be at home when something happens to me. They would either have to move me to a more suitable place, or let the hyenas desecrate my den. Either way, I don't want the ones I love to remember my death, but my life."

"Are you going to die?"

"Someday we all have to die. It's part of life."

"I wish you wouldn't say that. You know I'd be sad if you died." She ran a few steps out front, which was not difficult at the rate Yolanda walked. "Can I walk with you?"

"I suppose I have no choice, and I could use someone to talk to."

"Maybe you'll tell me a story. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to be with my husband. Your grandfather. You never knew him. His name was Simba, too. Just like the King. He was a good mate. Seeing him will make me young again."

"Not really. I mean you just mean feel young, don't you? I thought he was dead."

Yolanda smiled, indulgently.

"Can I see him too?"

"Someday, Misha. Not now." She walked across the plain slowly, painfully. Her joints had been stiff in the morning, but there was something more akin to lameness that was obvious even to Misha.

"Are you all right?"

"That doesn't matter now. I'm tired. I'm just so tired."

"Then let's rest for a minute."

"There will be time for rest later," she said, determined. "We are not far enough yet."

"Far enough from what? When is far enough?"

"I'll tell you."

She walked on. The exertion made her perspire, and her breath was labored. She stumbled over a small rock the way Misha might fall in a gopher hole. "What are you trying to find?" Misha asked. "There's nothing out here but grass."

"That's the point," she said. "It is the sort of place no one would go without a good reason."

"Why don't you rest now?"

"Are you tired, Misha? You're so young and strong. I'm so..." Yolanda stopped. Her teeth bared in a grimace of pain. "Oh gods!"

"Grandmother!"

Summoning all her reserve, she calmly said, "You were right, Misha. This is the place. We will rest here." She collapsed into a heap and moaned. "I'm so tired, Honey Tree. I could use some sleep. Why don't you go play someplace else right now and let me rest. I'll be all right."

"Grandmother?" Misha said in a trembly voice. "Should I call Rafiki now? He's just over there."

"No, honey tree. I'll be all right." Saying that, she lay her head in the grass. "Oh, can you feel the cool breeze, Misha?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She closed her eyes. "Isn't it wonderful? It's been so hot recently with no rains to freshen the air. But it may be a fine day after all. Nice and cool." Yolanda took in a deep breath, and let it out in a long, slow sigh. Misha anxiously watched her chest for a long time, waiting to see it rise and fall. She waited for a long time.

"Wake up, Grandma! You can't sleep here!" She ran nervously around the body, nipping her on the paws and licking her on the cheek. "Don't leave me, Grandma. You can't die. You just can't!"

Backing back from the body, Misha looked about for someone, anyone who could help. Why did she have to go so far away into the brush? Maybe Rafiki could help. Oh that the gods would let him be at home!

"Is anybody out there?"

Finally she spotted a lioness in the tall grass and ran toward her. "Help! Help! It's Yolanda!"

"It's not safe here," the lioness said. "You must go."

The voice galvanized her. Misha stood frozen to the spot and stared at the sad, kindly face. It seemed to shine with its own inner light, and she didn't know whether to be happy or terrified. "Please don't leave me. I don't want you to go. I'll do anything. Just stay a little longer, please!"

"It's not safe," the lioness said firmly. "The vultures are here and the hyenas are not far behind. Run, honey tree. Run home now!"

Misha was grief stricken, but she had to flee before the ghastly funeral took place. She couldn't hope to face off the scavengers at her age. And so she ran toward Pride Rock. She ran and ran like a mad thing and did not stop until she found her mother.

Chapter 2

Making Sense of Death.

When Misha found her mother and told her what had happened, Ajenti moaned as if from a wound. She ran up the side of Pride Rock and out onto the peak and roared one heart-rending roar. The other lions didn't have to ask what happened, for Yolanda had been expected to die. They roared as well, setting off a wave of sound that washed over the Pride Lands the sorrowful message. It may have lasted a few seconds, or a few minutes—time seemed to stand still. But when Ajenti lithely slinked back off the pinnacle and disappeared into the grass, so did her public grief. From now on, she would discuss it only with friends and family, and only when asked about it. They all understood that she loved her mother—there was no need to keep proving it to everyone. Indeed, if anyone asked her if she was heartbroken, and no one would, they would likely catch an indignant rake of her claws.

For a couple of hours, all Misha could do was huddle next to her mother. Ajenti needed her small, warm presence. But there came a time when Ajenti needed to be alone for a while. It was her turn to remember when she was the cub, and Yolanda would tell her stories of the old kings, and groom her with her warm moist tongue. That was done best alone.

Misha wanted her mother, but she welcomed the chance to head out unescorted across the savanna to the baobab tree. Her heart was full of questions that must be answered—it was her first experience with death.

Rafiki had an odd habit of talking to himself. He put some small pieces of fruit into a bowl and took a bone in one hand while holding the bowl in the other. "Look out, little ones! Here comes the elephant!" He began to mash them into a paste. "Oh no! This is just awful! Shame on you, you ol' elephant! Heh heh!"

He got an egg. Rarely did he use meat in his diet, and then it was only carrion. The egg was the closest thing he had that day, a prize he had filched from a nest only that morning.

"Oooh, it must be done so carefully!" He said, positioning the egg on the edge of the bowl. "A-one," he said, tapping it once lightly. "A-two!" he said tapping it a little harder. He turned the egg slightly. "A-three!" And at last with a smile, he said, "Here goes nothing!"

"Rafiki!"

The shell shattered in his fingers. Egg loaded with shell fragments dribbled from his hand into the bowl. "A-four," he said with a sigh, and shook off his hands. "Who's there?"

"Are you busy?"

"Misha!" He smiled, wiping his hands off quickly. "Come in, my dear! Sit!" He planted a kiss on top of her head and giving her a hug. "You honor my humble home."

"Oh Rafiki, she's gone! Grandma Yolanda is gone!"

"I heard the cry," Rafiki said. He understood a bit about how lions grieve, so he was careful in his approach. "You have questions for Rafiki?"

"Well, yes."

"Come sit beside me," Rafiki said. He put his arm around her and said, "Now ask your Uncle Rafiki anything at all."

Misha's eyes brimmed with tears. "I didn't want her to die. Why did she have to die? She was so good. Can't you help her? Why do the gods let good people die if they can do anything they want? Why?"

"Oh, the little lady starts with the biggest questions." Rafiki sighed. "For one thing, no. I'm sorry, but it's beyond me to call her back. If I could have helped her, I would have helped Mufasa. As for why there is death, there is a legend among the mandrills about how death came into the world. My father told me, and he learned it from his father. I will not tell you, for it is not the truth."

"What is the truth?"

"Death has always been a part of this world. It is part of life. Otherwise there would be no more room to move about. It makes room for new generations to grow and flourish. It renews the world. It makes sense."

"I see." She sighed longingly. "But why even live, if all you're going to do is die someday? What's the point?"

"Because if you didn't live, I couldn't put my arm around you and have these little talks." He kissed her again. "Your blood runs red with mud. It is the soil of the earth mother that binds us to the great Circle of Life. When we die, the water which is the life force returns to heaven with the morning dew. We are then freed from the mud, and freed from its pain. All except the pain of separation, and that will take care of itself with time. Remember even here the spirits of the blessed look down on us, and their prayers for us are always before the gods. Watch the night skies, and feel the love surround you. You will know your grandmother is alive."

"I saw her," Misha admitted. "She told me to run away before the hyenas came."

"You saw her?" He said it like he believed her. She was glad to tell someone about it. "Grandma was shiny all over, lit up like the moon. Mother says the stars are the spirits of the great kings, but where did she go? Will she see my grandfather?"

"The stars cannot be counted. Could there be so many kings in a hundred creations?" He smiled. "She is a star like your grandfather, and if the life she led is any measure, she'll be the most beautiful star in the sky."

Misha lay her head on Rafiki's shoulder. "I love you."

"I love you too." He gave her a little pat. "Now how about a little snack?"

"What'cha got?"

"It's sweet, it's disgusting. You'll love it."

Rafiki got the wooden bowl back out and stirred the contents up really well. He put it before Misha, who attacked it with gusto. "What is it?"

"I call it elephant stew."

The Council

Dedicated to David Morris, author of *The Lion King Encyclopedia*, without whose interest this fanfic would never have been written.

Chapter 1

The Essential Ingredients.

...And it was that Aiheu the Beautiful, having made the World of *Ma'at* (soil) gave it to his spirit children for a dwelling place. And they praised him, for the land was very comely. But in the first days, which were called the Days of *Ka* (spirit), some were not as happy as Aiheu had wished.

"What has this land to do with us?" they asked. "The sun does not warm us. The waters do not cleanse us. The wind does not cool us. How can this be our home when the grass does not stir beneath our feet?"

So Aiheu took *ma'at* (soil) and mixed it with *maja* (water) that it may be shaped. And for those *ka* that desired to know pleasure, he clave them to bodies which he formed from the mud, breathing into their nostrils the breath of life, that so long as they should draw breath, they should be part of the World of *Ma'at*, and that the sun would warm them, the water would cleanse them, and the wind would cool them. These and many other pleasures he gave them for a birthright, but he also gave them a warning. For pain is the brother of pleasure, and those who are of *ma'at* must accept pain with the pleasure.

THE LEONINE STORY OF BEGINNINGS, Variation D-4-A

Rafiki awoke with stiffness in his lower back. At his age, he was frequently sore in the mornings and had to take an herbal preparation to get himself back in the thick of things. Because the medicine had to be fresh and moist to work, he had to make up individual doses as needed. That meant working while tired and sore. Still, Rafiki did not complain. For one thing he lived alone, with no one to complain to, and for another, he was a shaman and accepted what life brought him as gracefully as he could.

Soaking in a water-filled gourd, some Bonewort would loosen the tightness in his spine. He carefully removed just enough to do the job. It was followed by Senophalix bark and roots from *Psamnophis gelleri* for pain. But the final ingredient was a powder made from Alba, a red flower. It did not grow nearby, and he had to trade to get it. The small cache of this drug was nearly exhausted, and he put in a little less than was his custom. He had requested some from the apes that lived in the forest near his baobab.

The other mandrills thought Rafiki a bit strange. They didn't understand his need for the flower, but they happily raised the fee to what they thought he could

afford. For that reason, precious time that could be spent serving others was spent collecting large bundles of herbs and other notions for payment.

Mixing the ingredients into a paste with his bowl and antelope bone, he downed the bitter mixture with a frown, and quickly took some water and honey to purge his mouth. Perhaps the medicine did not work immediately. Yet he felt better at once, knowing that help was on the way.

While he waited for relief, he settled down for his morning prayers, which always began with thanksgiving, then ran through the name of every lion on the Pride Lands whether they were ill or well, and ended with a modest request to "Remember old Rafiki who trusts in you."

Breakfast was a simple affair. Mango was his favorite, followed shortly by ripe *Kannabia australoaffricanus*, which he called by an equally unpronounceable Mandrill name. Honey was not easy to come by, since he'd grown old enough to make climbing a problem. Besides, even at the best of times, there was an element of luck involved. So he put only a few drops of honey on the fruit to season it, and ate his breakfast. Perhaps in the next life, there would be honey enough for his sweet tooth, which only grew stronger with age. He felt he would know sooner rather than later, a fact brought home by the silver hair that reflected in his scrying bowl.

Only after breakfast was over and he'd rubbed his teeth with the chewed end of an acacia twig did he start out on the day's business. Alba was waiting for him; the apes said it would be waiting for him in three days, and the time was up. They were robbers, but they were never late. One, two, three hard-won bundles of roots and leaves were sprinkled with water, wrapped in *Rattasia* leaves, and secured with long acacia thorn pins. The barter was gathered up with the care it deserved to ransom the modest stash of tiny red blossoms that waited for him in the forest.

Chapter 2

The Art of Conducting Business.

Rafiki recognized the two mandrills that came to meet him at the edge of the wood. They looked a bit distracted, and when he showed them the bundles of herbs, they just nodded.

"What's wrong? Am I crawling with rats that you should look at me so?"

"You have been summoned to the Council of Elders."

"I will get them a gift," he said. While it was custom to bring a gift to the chief elder, he was more interested in flight, and the mandrills seemed to know that. "Our orders are plain, sir. You will follow us now."

Rafiki frowned and harumphed indignantly, but he was frightened. It couldn't be good news. The guides for their part were very rough, and he had asked them more than once to take care with old bones. "You will be old someday."

As the trees closed in around him, he looked back briefly to see Pride Rock standing like a sentinel on the horizon. He tried to remember what it looked like. The memory may have to last for a while. Rafiki had been estranged from most of his own kind since he was young. It was during the cubhood of Mufasa that an incident (explained more fully in *The Prediction*) bound his fate with that of the lions of Pride Rock. Since that time, he had not been a frequent visitor to the Council of Elders, a select group of shamans of which he was still nominally a member. The times he had shown up, there was a strain that made Rafiki feel like jumping out of his own hide. This was the first time he'd been summoned, and he felt sure he was being investigated. His stomach knotted.

It did not take long to reach Council Rock where the meetings took place. It only seemed far removed because Rafiki had devoted little thought to it in recent years. His appearance there with his two strong escorts on either arm raised quite a stir. Some of the mandrills were old acquaintances. One was his older brother Makkede whose frailty and trembling limbs pierced his heart with a spear. There were many younger faces. Once he had been one of the younger faces, so full of hope and promise that he was rushed in a week before his coming of age. The elder that headed the group, Lord Malaki, had waived the age requirement and in those early days supported him strongly. Rafiki had loved him once like a second father.

"It has been a long time since you honored us with your presence."

"Too long," Rafiki said, the polite reply.

"Too long indeed. You live so close by. Brother Hamitu traveled the better part of an hour to be here. Amatueh is always sore by the time he gets here, but he is faithful in his attendance. We meet every full moon."

"I am aware, my lord."

"Indeed. We have inquired about you, Metutu." Rafiki cringed at the name, Simian for *The Plain One* which his father gave him at birth. "All we have to gauge your loyalty to the faith are the rumors about you. Some of them are worthy, my friend, but others are..." Malaki looked around at the others. "...others are very disturbing."

"Lord Malaki," Rafiki said with his head bent low. "I am true to the gods and to my vow. For I have healed the sick, comforted the grieving, and given clear council. For this I only ask my basic needs."

"Indeed, you are a healer. But do you always give clear council, Metutu?"

"Lord Malaki, my name is Rafiki, by order of the King."

"All right, Rafiki," the elder said, in a tone that did not invite more corrections. "So be it. Perhaps you will satisfy our curiosity and tell us what you need so much Alba for? It is a pretty flower—nice and red—and it is a shame to see it harvested for no reason."

"It has value," Rafiki said. "It is the blood of mercy."

"The blood of mercy!" Malaki said with a smile. "Isn't that a quaint notion, Metutu! Oh, I mean Rafiki. I forget that you asked the King to strip you of your heritage in favor of a lion's name." Rafiki heard some grunts of disapproval. "Pray tell us about the blood of mercy that we might be enlightened."

Rafiki was furious, but he was also very frightened. He had been asked a direct question, and he must give an answer.

"In the third year of King Ramalah, my Lord, there was a certain lioness named Alba the faithful. She was a servant of Queen Chakula from the time of her coming of age, and often times the Queen entrusted her with her two sons N'ga and Sufa. Once, when Chakula was a prowl, the earth shook, and the cave where Alba dwelled was closed with the twins inside. Five days it took to dig them out, and Chakula had no hope to find them alive. But when the cave was opened, N'ga and Sufa came out alive. Only Alba was dead. Because she was a dry lioness, she opened the deep veins of her arm to nurse them, that they might survive. It was from the spot she lay that the first flower grew that bears her name, red as the blood of mercy."

"You and your lions! By the gods, what an ugly story!"

"It is a beautiful story!" Rafiki said, pulling himself up to full height. "It is sacrificial love, the most powerful kind of love. My lord, when you don't love something more than life itself, life is not worth living! And those who would love the deepest must risk the deepest suffering. I dare to presume I would give my life for my friends. Are you saying you would not?"

"The lions have taught you to roar as well. Do you know whom you address, you fool?"

"I know you well. You are worse than a fool, for you think your ignorance is wisdom. You demand of the gods, and they give you what you demand, but I ask of the gods with humility and love, and they give me four-fold what I ask. You wanted to know what Alba was for. Freely I hold out the blood of mercy to you, not a flower but a lesson. We do not suffer because Metchac stole dates from the garden of the gods. We suffer because love is worth any price or any pain. Suffering is a gift of the gods."

"Blasphemy!!" The head elder took dust in his hands and poured it on his head. The other apes hooted and shrieked, losing all semblance of dignity. "Brothers, do you still wonder if the rumors are true?? Down, wretch. On your knees!!"

A couple of large mandrills forced Rafiki to the ground with a sickening thud. He moaned from fear and the pain in his old legs.

Malaki shook the dust off his head. "You think I will make you a hero to your young by killing you? No, you old fool. You will leave this world as you entered it—helpless and plain and forgotten." He went to a large stump covered by a rock. Casting the rock aside, he snatched out a small clay bowl. "The totem of Metutu! I spit on it! I kill it! Witness, all of you!"

Malaki smashed it on the rock and flung some of the pieces at Rafiki. "No more! No more are you a shaman. Go to your grave with your name unspoken, your powers destroyed!" He took Rafiki's staff and broke it in two. "He is *Corban* ("forbidden") and it is death to the ape that brings him herbs, or speaks the name of Rafiki in my hearing! Go Metutu! Die in exile!"

Strong arms yanked the aged mandrill from the ground and pulled him back. Rafiki stumbled along without his support. He was rudely pulled through thorns, over rocks, and shoved under low branches. He knew he was being deliberately

humiliated, and it hurt worse than the discomforts of the trail. "Please remember my old bones! The gods are watching, and they know I am innocent. Do you hear me? Innocent!!"

Finally, at the opening of the savanna, he was shoved face down on the ground and his nose rubbed in the dirt. Rafiki trembled. He knew Malaki's speech was for the others' benefit, and knew he may well be killed quietly. He murmured, "Spirits of the living gods, receive my Ka. I have failed you, but oh how hard I tried."

"This is the boundary of our land, lion's whelp. If you cross it, we will kill you!"

Chapter 3

The Touch.

Rafiki waited a long time until the sounds of ape feet could not be heard. Then he waited even longer. Only when he felt safer to leave than to stay did he get up, dust himself off, and began to stumble toward the baobab tree. "Thank you, gods. I never thought I'd come home again."

It was a long walk home without his staff. Sore and still trembling, he entered his home and looked about. On the walls were sacred paintings that helped protect the Pride Lands and its rulers. There was one painting of Simba, the mark of his anointing still visible on his brow. Rafiki went to the picture and stroked it lovingly. "I cannot help you now, old friend. Oh gods, they spared me out of cruelty!"

There were marks along the wall, each of which brought back its own memory. Misha's cubhood paw print in red ochre, the twelve moons of the year with their guardian spirits. A small tuft of fur gathered with anguish and love from Mufasa's body. Simba's claw marks when he was four moons old. "See how high I can reach?? It's higher than your shoulder! Stand next to them—I'll show you." The broken tooth of Ahasi kept on a cord of antelope sinew. The sun and moon, and Alba the Faithful with a red stain of blood pricked from his own finger with an acacia thorn.

There was no way he could live there, surrounded by so many memories. "What still waits for me but death?" Among his cache of herbs was Deadly Amaranthus. He wept. "Is this all I have left? Death, my final friend has come to call?"

"Rafiki?"

It was a lioness' voice. He turned about in a start. "Uzuri?"

"What happened to you? You're crying." Uzuri stared at his hair and his tear-stained face. "Have you been in a fight?"

"I had a bad fall," he answered. "Oh look, you're hurt!"

"It was a buffalo," she said. There was a four inch gash in her shoulder. Rafiki looked at her and wondered how she could be worried about him at a time like this.

"I have had trouble getting herbs lately," he said, feeling helpless. He got a gourd of water and dipped his hand inside. As Uzuri gritted her teeth and pulled back her ears, he carefully smoothed his hand over the open wound, hoping to wash it off.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Rafiki's hand began to tingle. Uzuri said, "I thought it would hurt. You are very good."

Rafiki placed his hand back on the wound. "It feels strangely warm." He waited till the warmth grew, leveled, and then subsided. Then he bent down close and raised his hand gingerly, as if he had lifted a rock and expected something awful to run out. There was nothing but smooth, silky fur. Amazed, he parted the fur with his fingers looking for the cut.

"What did you do? The pain is gone!"

"I don't know, old girl."

Then another extraordinary thing happened. Uzuri took her paw and tongue and groomed Rafiki. It was something he thought lions would never do for an outsider, even his good friends.

"Does that feel better?"

"Uzuri, it may have saved my life."

"I should groom you more often, you flower-tongued devil." She bussed his cheek. "I hope you feel better soon."

When she left, Rafiki sat before his scrying bowl and looked in the water. Dared he hope that anything would appear but his own face looking back?

For several moments, he stared into the water. His hope began to fade, and he started to believe the blood on Uzuri was from the buffalo. He sighed deeply. Looking at his hands, he couldn't believe it was an illusion. "I saw it happen. I saw the cut. Send me a sign, o gods. What has happened to me?"

Just then he heard his name again. "Rafiki?"

He looked out of the baobab tree, but saw no one. "Are you hiding in the grass? Simba, is that you? Playing jokes on old Rafiki again? It's not funny!"

"Rafiki?"

The mandrill realized that the voice was not coming from a certain direction. It was all around him. It was a deep, familiar voice he had not heard in a long time.

"Rafiki!"

"Mufasa?"

"So much silver hair. Has it been that long, my old friend?"

The familiar honey-like smell of the blessed came in on the west wind. Rafiki fell on his face. "Mufasa, how I longed to hear your voice again. I need you so. Tell me the gods have not forsaken me. I have so much work to do, and I am just a tired old monkey. Malaki has stripped me of everything I live for."

"Malaki has stripped no one but himself. Even what he thinks he has will be taken away. But to my servant whom I named long ago, I bring good news. With their own hands, the gods have made you a totem which cannot be broken. Once you received four-fold what you prayed for. Now they give you four-fold-forty."

"Then I can still be of service?"

"Of course. And when the mists gather about you, I will gather your Ka to me. You will sit in glory among the great kings of the past, and the gods will anoint you with holy oil."

Tears of joy flowed down Rafiki's face. "I touch your mane," he said, reaching out. "I touch your mane!"

"I can feel it," Mufasa said. "And I will not forget you."

In a moment, the wind blew the last remnants of the incense into the east. The moment had passed. And yet Rafiki rose to his full height, no longer plagued by a pain in his back. He strode confidently outside into the clean, honest grass and felt it part around his waist like a golden stream. A gentle breeze that took the edge off the passionate sun, and all was right with the world.

Laughing, Rafiki ran across the field. He startled a flock of guinea fowl out of their wits, but he hardly noticed their raucous retreat. Overhead, a familiar silhouette came closer to the ground. "Rafiki, I say! What's the matter? Have you lost what remained of your good sense?"

"Good old Zazu! I'm fine! Never better!"

"My, you're in a sunny mood today! Do you have good news to share with the King?"

"Yes!" Rafiki thought a moment, then smiled. "Tell him I said life is worth living."

Rites of Passage

Foreword:

This work takes up the story of Misha who first appeared in *A Death in the Pridelands*. Though it is best to read ADitP first, it is not necessary.

Chapter 1

The Waiting Game.

Misha never formally fell in love with Tanabi. As youngest cubs they were the best of friends, practically inseparable. Most pride members never thought of one without the other. They would nurse together at Ajenti or Nala, which was their mothers' way of recognizing the budding relationship, for out of this friendship Ajenti was expecting a new son and Nala was expecting a new daughter someday. Of course by this time they had long since taken to an adult diet and a more adult appearance. And with this came a more mature love that deepened rather than replaced their old feelings.

Ajenti still had authority over her "little girl," and forbade her to carelessly lead on Tanabi because she was still not a lioness. Indeed, Misha was still her cub despite her feelings, and this would not change until she had become a lioness in the eyes of the pride. As her new feelings for Tanabi grew and deepened, she longed for the rite of passage and the freedom it would bring.

Misha was sunning herself on the rocks when Tanabi came by. "Look, Missy, notice anything different about me?"

"Oh yes! It's wonderful! Look, Mom, his mane is one day longer than the last time he asked!"

"That's not very nice," Tanabi said. "After all, I mainly came by to wish you luck on this evening's hunt. I hear it's your first?"

"You know good and well it is." She smiled. "I talk about it as much as you talk about that stupid old mane—forget I said that; it's not stupid at all. It's beautiful, like you."

Tanabi bussed her cheek with his tongue. "Tomorrow is my mantlement. I guess I've run it into the ground by now, but I delayed it because of you."

"Because of me?"

"Because this evening is your first hunt. I want you to stand with me tomorrow at the ceremony. I want to make an announcement. You will be a huntress and I will be a hunter."

"What will you hunt?"

"I will hunt you."

"Do you think you can catch me?"

"I will," he said passionately. "Don't worry, I will be very gentle. I have had a talk with my father." He shuddered and spoke in a near whisper. "The time for talk will soon be over, Missy. My love will be more than kind words."

"I know."

"Tell me the truth. Will your feelings for me come back a lioness, or will they be a cub? I know you are my friend, but do you look forward to this union? Are you sure you will want me?"

She pressed up against his side and walked slowly forward, rubbing along his flank and finally drawing her supple tail seductively under his throat. "I want you now. Once that blood is on my cheek, I won't even stop to eat. I'll come right back here and find you. It will be everything you hoped for—I promise."

"Misha," Tanabi whispered, nuzzling her affectionately. His hot breath on her cheek was intoxicating. "When you kill, take time to savor the moment. You know I don't become a lion till tomorrow. A foolish, fleeting passage of the sun and a few grand words from my father. I hate ceremonies—they're so inconvenient."

"And so long," Misha said. "Keep your speech short. After all, you'll really become a lion when we're alone."

"Oh gods!" He nuzzled her again, then stopped himself. "Please leave now. I cannot trust myself."

"Sorry, Fuzzy Love." She gave him a brief, chaste touch of her tongue on the cheek. "Love ya."

"Same here. Good hunting."

Chapter 2

Game is Afoot.

It seemed an eternity until time for the evening hunt. Misha was first at the gathering place in the shadow of Pride Rock. When the other lionesses came in one by one, she chatted nervously.

In fact, lionesses loved to talk when they were gathering for a hunt. It was therapeutic to get all of it out of their system before the silence of the stalk. And so Misha ended up with a lot of free advice on everything from hunting to raising polite, well-behaved cubs. In fact, Isha even asked if her mother had had *The Talk* with her. She said yes, shyly.

"Isha, what is it like to be with a lion?"

They laughed. Malaika said, "Get her talking about that, Honey Tree, and there won't be ANY killing tonight."

"I could tell you some stories," Isha added, giggling. "Remember Taka?"

"Taka?? You and Taka??" There was more laughter.

"No! Not in a million years!" She feigned indignation, then added in a low voice, "But I heard on good authority that he and Elanna used to sneak out to the..."

"Watch what you say about my sister!" Nala let a little fang show.

Isha looked at Nala and added soothingly. "Come on, Nala. Aren't you the least bit curious? You said yourself you didn't know what Elanna saw in him. I did too, so I went straight to the source. El' didn't hold back, not one little detail..."

Nala's jaw hung slack. "No, you don't say! She hasn't told me anything."

"Well she's not here tonight, and if you can keep a secret, I'll lay it all out for you in her own words..."

The lionesses drew closer together, expectantly.

"Hush!" Uzuri said. "Misha's still a child for now." Uzuri was the hunt mistress, the one whose skill and stamina made her the unquestioned leader on the chase. Her words were respected and not dismissed easily, even by Nala. "The love between a lion and lioness is a beautiful thing," Uzuri purred. "Don't let the fires of Tanabi's ardor mislead you. When the time comes, he will look in your eyes and plead for you to love him. You will come willingly, gladly. When he is lonely, hurt, or undecided, he will turn to you. You will tell him he is wonderful, and when he smiles you will shine like the sun. Love is nothing to be frightened of, or ashamed of."

Sarabi added, "At times he will be stubborn, irresponsible, an overgrown cub. He will make you angry with his foolish ideas and irritating habits. You will start to cuff the life out of him, and then he will turn to you and need your forgiveness as dry grass needs the rain. And you will forgive him gladly because he loves you so. Somewhere in the middle of all this, you will make love with him, and it will be good. But mostly I remember how safe I felt with Mufasa's strong and beautiful

body next to me all night long. When I would awake at high moon, I would stroke his mane. He would not wake up, but he would purr softly." Her lower jaw quivered. "I'm sorry. Listen to the foolish old lioness going on about the past."

Misha said, "Don't say that. You're NOT foolish."

It was not Misha's first hunt. Her mother had taken her out alone on several occasions and showed her how to hunt small prey. Once Ajenti had even tackled an antelope, and as the poor beast plead for his life she explained the right killing technique, gently mouthing the throat in a strangle hold, and pointing out the best places to bite haunches and get a tackle hold. As she commanded, the poor beast held perfectly still, his heart pounding like a drum and sweat breaking out from nose to tail. True to her word, she let the buck go unharmed.

But this was Misha's first time to go out with the other lionesses. That warm life that she would take in her jaws would want to live for one more hour, even one more minute. She would have to be firm, but when possible she would be quick and merciful. The thought took her mind off Tanabi long enough to sober her up for the ritual ahead.

"Time, sisters," Uzuri said. "Isha, Nala, you will flank me. Malaika, you will lead the left flank. The rest of us will follow her, except for you, Misha. You will come with me. Now silence!"

They wouldn't speak above a whisper from this point on, and words were few. They fanned out to form a clamshell formation in the tall grass.

Indeed, there was no need to discuss the angle of attack, for Uzuri's quick, subtle gestures of ears, head and tail spoke volumes. She headed the group toward the watering hole from the grassy side, heading into the wind. It was a simple enough plan, one more geared toward easy, small prey than the large animals needed to satisfy the Pride's hunger. It was meant to be Misha's moment, a passing on of the heritage that had gone down endless generations, and would go to her daughters as well.

Something had always been missing from Misha's life. For her many friends, she still had no idea what happened when the hunting party left. Even in the enforced quiet of the stalk, there was a feeling of sisterhood and singleness of purpose that she would not—and could not—find anywhere else. Not a lioness breathes that cannot recall their first kill as if it were yesterday. The only thing that changes over the years is the size and swiftness of the prey. First kills often get better with age.

In the quiet, calculated tread of stalking, they heard the buzzing of insects, the singing of birds, and only the faintest folding of grass blades beneath padded feet. Misha had used her skills in play, stalking and wrestling Tanabi in laughter-filled bouts beneath the acacias. It was now put to serious use. Sometimes she would let Tanabi win, because she loved him. Now she must win at all costs because she loved him. And yet as much as she loved Tanabi, she resented the pressure that her feelings were putting on her first hunt. "I must win," she thought. "Concentrate!"

Through the grass, Misha could barely make out the Thompsons Gazelles they were stalking. What luck! The same species she'd been shown by her mother! She knew where to strike and what to do. The gods were with her!

The watering hole was the great common denominator. The tall and the small, the weak and the strong all had to drink. Some creatures, like lions, took the water for granted. Others treated it like a prize which must be stolen by a skillful thief. The gazelles were among the best thieves, but they were not infallible. And that evening they were letting their guard down ever so slightly.

Uzuri played a cagey game. From time to time one of the gazelles would look up nervously, scanning the horizon for signs of trouble. At that moment, all the lionesses would stop without need to say a word. They were approaching from downwind so they could not be smelled. They would succeed if they took as much time as they needed to do a good job. Too much time, and the Gazelles would finish and be gone—they didn't hang around watering holes longer than necessary. Uzuri could size up that window of opportunity like no other, and she was exploiting it well.

The tension was great. Misha held herself in check. There could be no sudden movements until the signal, and no sounds. Even the charge had to be silent, for that extra fraction of a second, or maybe a precious whole second, before they were spotted may make the critical difference. Misha watched the head lioness' ears and tail tip, waiting for the signal.

Suddenly, the ears went up and the tail lashed. At once several missiles of golden fur sprang toward the herd which hovered in a moment of disbelief, then blossomed like a tan flower in all directions. The earth rumbled like a living thing.

The party turned to the right. For a moment the gazelles acted as one large beast, keeping in tight formation like a single life. However, one of the gazelles fell behind the rest, and Uzuri headed for him, sparing Misha the decision. The other lionesses began to focus on the hapless tommie as the distance quickly narrowed. Then the others fell back and Uzuri said, "Misha, take him!"

Her heart pounding, her nerves strained to the limit, she closed the distance. The gazelle turned, which slowed him for a half second. Misha's gut reaction paid off, for she had expected the turn.

Misha sprang. Her powerful arm reached over the neck, and with an electric tingle her paw gripped the heaving, furry target, bringing her snapping jaws to—empty air. She fell back, and got a vicious kick in her shoulder from the fleeing antelope.

She rolled over twice, but she quickly recovered and started to run again. By then he was far away.

"Misha, come back! Stop!"

She obeyed Uzuri, but looked back crossly. "I need this kill."

"You lost this one," Uzuri said. "That's life." She came to Misha and looked at her shoulder. "Can you walk?"

"I'm fine," Misha said, bitterly disappointed. She walked about. "I'm just a little sore."

"You're not bleeding," Uzuri said. "You'll be all right, but we should head back now."

"We can't head back," Misha said, horrified. "We just can't! Please, I'm fine! Really!"

"We will hunt again two nights from now. If you are fine then, you will be welcome to come. It was my fault, really. I should have reviewed your training and helped you more. I know you have a male waiting for you, and I'm sorry."

Just then from the bush, a young rabbit that couldn't take the suspense anymore darted toward his hole. An alert lioness sprang for him and tore him in her teeth.

"You should have let Misha try," Uzuri said crossly. Then she changed her expression. "Sisters, perhaps it is not too late." She dipped her paw in the blood and said, "Misha, come here." Misha obeyed, and the head lioness tried to touch her cheek with the blood.

"Please don't," Misha said, backing back.

"They won't tell," Uzuri said, glaring at the others. "Will you?"

"No," the others replied. "Certainly not."

"But I will know," Misha replied. "Every time my husband touches me, I will think of this. They say you never forget your first kill, and I'd have to live with this for the rest of my life. Please, Uzuri, don't tempt me."

Uzuri gravely nodded. "Wisely spoken." She nuzzled Misha affectionately. "You have honor, like your mother."

Chapter 3

The Score is Announced.

For the tenth time that hour, Tanabi asked his father if he'd caught sight of the returning hunting party. He wished that he could sit out on the point of Pride Rock, but he was being coached on what to do by Rafiki in the quiet of the cave where he was born. Zazu could not see well at night, and only Simba had time to scan the horizon for the flakes of tan.

"Do you think they will be back soon?" Tanabi asked.

Simba came down off the point and went to his son. "Look here, Tanabi. I tell you what I'll do. You let me sit out there and watch in peace without one more word, and when I see her, I'll arrange a quick, private ceremony as soon as she comes in. It will be our secret. There will still be a public ceremony tomorrow, but by then you should be in a very good mood. You understand?"

Simba went back to the point on the rock and sat back on the warm spot he'd made. It was still rather comfortable.

"Dad?"

"What is it now, son?"

"Thank you."

Simba smiled. "You're quite welcome." He wanted his son's mantlement to be everything that his was not. Timon and Pumbaa had been the only ones to witness Simba's coming of age, and they did what they could to make it a happy time for their young friend. The Pridelands had not seen a real royal mantlement ceremony

conducted the way they should be done for years, since Ahadi had first sprouted that ruff of fur. The blessing was not just on the lion being honored. It was a blessing on all who flew, walked or swam. It was the reason why those who fear lions still loved and venerated the Lion King. He was the one through whom the blessings of the gods came to all. Those who came to the mantlement ceremony would crowd around hoping to touch that mane and derive strength from it, strength they would pass on to their own offspring.

Perhaps Simba was anxious to make sure this would make the gods happy and make up for all the years missed. But he was also anxious that his son be happy. He spotted the lionesses returning from the hunt. "Look, it's them!" Simba said, prancing like a cub. "Tanabi, did you hear??"

Tanabi came bounding out of the cave. The two lions met in the middle of Pride Rock and wrestled like a couple of kittens. "Getting to big for your mother's milk, eh?"

"You're just jealous."

"I could still make you wait till tomorrow."

"Father!"

"Go greet her, my son. Bring her here. Remember, I get to kiss her first."

Tanabi got off, shook the dust off what mane he had, and headed quickly down the side of Pride Rock. "Just wait till I tell her," Tanabi thought as he forded through the grassland like a ship on silver seas. Their eyes shone green and gold in the moonlight. Two were the lights of his beloved. "Misha! Misha, dearest! It's me!"

Uzuri passed him without looking up, a glum expression on her face. Isha shook her head as if to say "Don't ask." Then came Misha behind her, her head bowed, and a dusty footprint on her swollen shoulder.

"Misha?"

Misha looked at him silently, then burst into tears.

"It is better you go now," Uzuri counseled. "She will hunt again soon."

By the time they got back to Pride Rock, there was no need to tell Simba what had happened. "I have given Zazu clear orders," Simba softly purred to his son. "He is to be your chaperone till Misha makes her first kill. I trust you, but we must silence the gossip before it starts."

Chapter 4

The Ceremony.

It was to be a mantlement ceremony as held in the days of old. All of the celebrations would be strictly observed, including the one day moratorium on hunting that allows the animals of the Pride Lands to celebrate the prince's good fortune. Even the cheetahs were expected to abstain from blood, something that was probably unpopular with them, but they carried themselves with too much

dignity and too little strength to complain. Misha was depressed. There would be no hunt that night for her to prove herself. Indeed, after a careful examination, Rafiki told her she would be off the hunt for at least a week.

To lift her flagging spirits, Nala asked her to sit with her during the mantlement ceremony. It was a place reserved for a sister or, had things gone well, an announced mate. Nala knew what Simba would never know—she had turned down the gift of another's blood. Nala respected her, and even considered pleading for an exemption so she could be wed on what should have been her son's perfect day. But as Simba reminded her, it was not just a custom, but a religious custom designed to protect the young and inexperienced.

The morning of the ceremony, space close to the rock was at a premium. The elephants and zebras came in close, followed shortly by the buffaloes and gazelles. The giraffes said they didn't mind being in the back because they were tall, but it was clearly noted that they fought their way forward over the course of a quarter hour until they were almost to the elephants.

Zazu stood on the tip of Pride Rock and looked over the huge assemblage. The speech he'd planned to make once for Mufasa came to mind the way Ahadi and Makedde had taught him and Rafiki had rehearsed him. He spread his wings, and the crowd came to a startlingly quick hush. Such was the power of the King and his representatives.

"I speak the words of Aiheu the Beautiful who breathed into our nostrils the breath of life: Come, let my children grow in grace and stature, and let my gift of life endure from generation to generation as long as the sun shall rise and set. And I place a sign among you that my favor endures forever."

Zazu, deeply moved, added, "Listen well, all of you. The sign has appeared once more on Prince Tanabi, the true son of the King. The gods have remembered us through him."

Tanabi came forward. At the sight of his new mane, short as it was, the crowd bowed deeply in silence. The sight of so many standing so quietly was unnerving. For a moment, he forgot about his troubles and straightened with pride.

Simba stood beside him to give the blessing. "Great are you Aiheu, father of all races. Anoint Tanabi, your chosen servant with the blood of mercy and rain of love. Fill him with the wind of freedom. Stand his feet on the soil of faith. Shine upon him with the light of knowledge. And through him, bless all flesh that holds you dear."

Quietly, Misha whispered, "And let him know how much I love him."

Nala touched her cheek with her tongue. "He knows, Honey Tree. He knows."

The ceremony, and Tanabi's speech, was not rushed. There was no need. And for those who would read the *Chronicles of the Pride*, the particulars are worth the effort. But Misha did not pay much attention. She was depressed, and after all the grand speeches and blessings were over, she slunk away silently to mope. Tanabi started to follow her, but was advised to give her some time alone.

That night, when the crowds were gone and quiet reigned once more, Tanabi looked out across the Pride Lands. "It is peaceful. Just for tonight there is no fear

in any heart." He looked at Simba with a half smile. A zebra colt walked right up to me. He asked me what I was. Can you believe he didn't know what a lion was?"

"He came to you in his innocence. Remember that moment," Simba said. "They have thoughts and feelings too. You must remember that zebra and never hunt for sport or kill cruelly. Son, I might have been born a Zebra, or an antelope. I would have loved my child no less than I love you here and now."

"So after all is said and done, it's all a matter of luck, isn't it?"

"That, yes. But we may go beyond luck through faith and courage, and rise to the challenge. Misha's love is courageous, and in time it will overcome all challenges. All she needs is to build her faith. You must help her believe in herself. You must believe in her."

"I wasn't talking about her," Tanabi objected, but then he sighed deeply. "Who am I trying to fool."

Chapter 5

The Three of us.

Early the next morning, Tanabi showed up at Misha's den. "Good morning, Misha. It's a fine time for a walk—just the three of us."

"It IS lovely this time in the morning," Zazu said in a very upbeat voice. "Misha, you know what Rafiki said about your shoulder. Let's start out with a nice short walk—loosen up the old muscles and put the spring back in your step."

"Anything to get back in the hunt," Misha said tiredly. She stretched, wincing briefly as her shoulder pain flared up.

They walked away from Pride Rock, down the path to the watering hole. Though the ban was lifted, most animals kept only a convenient distance between themselves and a pair of talkative lions on an early morning stroll. Tanabi looked at a herd of skittish zebras, wondering if one of them was the colt he met the day before. "It's a shame we can't have a truce more often."

"Like today, perhaps?"

"Heavens, no!" He whispered to her, "Every day without you is an eternity."

"I think about you all the time," Misha whispered back.

"I will wait for you, Misha. As long as it takes, I swear it."

"Don't make promises you might not be able to keep. I may not be any good at hunting, and you will come to forget me."

"You only have to be good once. I will never forget you. Your love is in the bones of me."

"Would you really wait for me, Tanabi?"

"I've always waited for you, haven't I?"

"I hear you love birds whispering down there," Zazu said. "I hope it's not some sort of plan."

"Matter of fact it is a sort of plan," Simba said. "A plan to get her well again."

Zazu fluttered down and lit on Tanabi's backbone. The smooth lion tread swayed Zazu ever so gently as he perched there. "Your Highness, I do sympathize. We hornbills have some rather ridiculous mating rituals too."

"Are you saying our laws are ridiculous?"

"Oh no, Your Highness. Just that while I'm not a good judge of lion beauty, I know a natural pair when I see one. When a hornbill and his mate are that struck on each other, all it takes are a few flutters and squawks—no more than a dozen or so—to cinch the deal."

"Flutters and squawks?"

"You know..." Zazu flapped his wings quickly, shook his tail feathers and went, "Squ-WAWK! Squ-WAWK!"

Misha laughed. "So that's what woke me up this morning!"

"Heavens, no!" Zazu folded his wings indignantly. "Madam, I am more discrete with my private life than the neighborhood riffraff. Where I come from..."

Misha's ears snapped to attention. She froze in her tracks.

"What's up?" Zazu asked.

"Hssssh!"

There was a rumbling. The ground tremored expectantly. Seconds later, a group of antelope came bursting from the thicket and charging blindly toward them. Zazu had to fly hard and fast get out of the way. From the air, he could just see the lionesses that started the stampede. "This sort of thing doesn't go on in the morning. What are they trying to do?"

Misha and Tanabi ran to intercept one of the antelopes. She was so close to one that she could almost touch it, but her shoulder was hurt, and she was in pain. She was beginning to lose ground, and afraid of another injury. "Help me, gods! I need a miracle!"

Just then, claws and feathers came at the face of the antelope. Panicked, it tried to stop and go back the other way. Again, the hornbill flew right in its face. "Out of my way, fool!"

Misha's strong jaws closed around its throat. It was soon over.

Shortly after, the other lionesses arrived. "Well well, look who got her first kill!" Uzuri took some of the blood from the body on her paw and touched her own cheek, then Misha's. "Warn them a lioness is on the prowl!"

The lionesses roared, sending a flock of flamingos scattering in pink disarray. Elephants trumpeted in surprise and headed back toward the cover of the trees.

Zazu was walking unsteadily on the ground. "Oh gods, I think I'm going to be sick." There was a sound of hide being stripped from the abdomen. Zazu glanced for an instant at the open hole and turned quickly away. "Yes, I'm sick!"

"Zazu!" Tanabi ran over. "Zazu, you old son of a gun! Good work!"

"Good? You call that good?" He nearly wretched. "Never tell anyone I helped in this disgusting spectacle. I'll never admit to it. I always keep myself as far away from blood as possible!"

"He's trying to thank you," Misha said. "It was very noble of you, Zazu. In a way, it makes you a sort of... well..."

"Please don't say honorary lioness," Zazu replied, staring at her bloody cheek. "I don't look good in red."

"No, I meant hero."

"Hero? Me?" Zazu bowed with a flourish. "Pardon my manners—you're both quite welcome. It was the least I could do under the circumstances. All in a day's work, you know. And since you won't be needing a chaperone, I'll leave you alone. Be good, now."

Zazu flew away, but Tanabi and Misha were not alone by any means. The other lionesses stood about smiling, the sort of smile that made Tanabi feel shaved of all his fur. "Ladies, don't you have somewhere to go? Huh?? Well find someplace. Scat! Shoo!"

"Oooh, they want to be alone!" one of the lionesses said, coyly. It started a chorus of giggles.

"Talk about ingratitude," one of them chimed. "I don't have to hang around here and take this abuse. I'm leaving."

Misha watched them go slowly into the tall grass. "Tanabi, they helped us. Do you really think that was the right thing to do?"

"Yes, Honey Tree. And I'd do it again."

She nuzzled him. "Just checking."

The Harvest of the Plague

Rafiki shook his head sadly. Alas, there was nothing he could do for the mother or her cubs. But they would have the comfort of facing the unknown of death together. And so one by one they left the Circle of Life and joined the triumphant sweep of the Milky Way. Through an act of love they entered the world, and joined in love they left it. A distant clap of thunder lit the night sky and nature wept bitterly. 'All my fault,' Rafiki muttered. 'All my fault.' He shattered his magic staff and flung the pieces across the silent savanna. Time seemed to stand still as the fragments hurtled through the air and found their obscure resting place in the dry, silent grass. The plague had run its course.

