

Passages

Images of the Pridelands

A Lion King Collection - Based on "The Pride"

SECOND EDITION



RICHARD G RUSSO

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FORWARD

Welcome to the collection *Passages: Images of the Pridelands*, a collection of short stories based on Walt Disney's *The Lion King*. This is a realization of a journey that began in 1997 with the release of a public rough draft to my very first Lion King short story ("The Morning Report") and it's a journey I am glad to finally fulfill. What you actually have here is the second edition of this collection, however, it is the definitive, or final version of the works within. Inside exists some of my most celebrated Lion King based short stories - "Sacred Homage", "Life's Little Circles" and "Ithabise: It is Time..." - in their final forms. This means that you are for the first time reading these stories as they were intended to be read. regardless of the public drafts.

But, not only does this work feature updated versions of past attempts, this release also ties up those few loose ideas that have been floating around for the past few years, as well as, some of the threads featured in *The Pride*, my Lion King based novel. With this collection I declare that this will be my final "new material" release within the Lion King universe, that I have finally closed this chapter of my life. Can I promise? No, not really. No sane author can. However, I regard *Passages* and its companion works *Unwinding Path--A Historical Collection*, *The Pride: Behind the Scenes*, and *The Pride: A Lion King Novel*, as the final chapter in a long and wonderous journey into the wonderful world of the Pridelands. Now, please, follow old Rafiki because he knows da way!

Rafiki, the wise old mandrill you have come to know and love, mulls over his works of art - the paintings within his Boabab tree. Each image he sees shows him a bit of history on these plains. Each image shows him a story. As he sits alone in his tree, he relives these stories and reminds himself just how it was during some of those trying times on the Pridelands.

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PROLOGUE

"Dad?"

"Hmm?" Mufasa uttered in answer to his sons hail.

"We're pals, right?"

"Right," the lion said with a gentle chuckle.

"And we'll always be together, right?"

"No, no. Dis is not the right place to start," said a mandril, sitting atop a rather large and imposing baobab tree.

Rafiki shook his furred head and dropped into his abode in order to mull over the images he painted on the walls once again.

Strewn across the many faces of his home, his baobab tree sported one magnificent painting after another. Most depicted daily life on the Pridelands, his home, while others chronicled the many adventures and major incidents of record faced by the pride of lions he watched over. Regardless of what event Rafiki drew upon his walls, each held a specific meaning to him -- a sort of sentimental value or journal of what his own two eyes had seen.

He was awed by them as much as anyone else who would see them, and not many would deep within his tree. Still, to be alive at such a time when prosperity and tyranny ran hand and hand on the plains of the Serengetti, it was a wonder sometimes the Pridelands survived at all.

"Take dis one for example," Rafiki pointed to it. "A marvelous example of around the time Mufasa became king."

The picture painted a gruesome sight of two huddled masses around a central figure. On the right side of the image were the lions of the pride: King Mufasa, Queen Sarabi and their subjects. The left hand side sported a group of cheetahs, led by Mng'ariza and his clan. The two, set to battle one another over the lush plains of the Pridelands, while in the middle sat Taka. Taka, or Scar as he was more well known, was the King's brother. Always an opportunist, he attempted to take rule away from Mufasa and crown himself king.

The image itself lends to a tale of heroics and bewilderment for its aftermath left scars that were long in healing -- the Pride under attack by a rogue Cheetah clan for no other reason than to gain control of the lands. Why, one would ask, but the answer is far more confusing than at first some realize. "And it comes down to one ting," Rafiki raised his voice to more than a whisper. "All they wanted was a land to hunt on."

The lands of the Cheetah were unsuitable due to a longing drought and Mng'ariza, the leader of a clan of cheetah's, chose the Pridelands as their new home. Only the grasses on the Pridelands were also quickly browning and the rivers that ran through were drying up. Even the Pridelands, the Cheetah's came to realize, had not escaped the wrath of nature. As for Mufasa, he was unable to cope with the demands of leadership following the death of his father, and his proclaimed mate hurting for attention.

"With his kingdom crashing around him, Mufasa did something I never thought possible in a thousand cycles of da moon," Rafiki said. "He gave up and ran away." Slipping out in the midst of moonlight, Mufasa left his pride vulnerable; alone.

That act alone was the worst flaw Rafiki had ever seen in the King's character, however, the damage was already done -- exiled from Pridelands, Scar as self-proclaimed monarch, and a mate scorned, Mufasa would spend many a moon trying to distill a sense of normality within himself and a sense of security for the entire cache of lionesses. Yet, despite what had happened, Mufasa was able to defend his lands and his lionesses.

Rafiki remembered that day well, and turned to another image: one of Khulo. "Ahh yes, Khulo. The Second to Mng'ariza." A twisted soul he was, unsure whether he should be usurping the lions or whether he should turn and let them be. This image depicted the final bow for the Cheetah as he turned away from Mufasa on the day of great bloodshed. Though, since the Cheetah encroachment and repence, the Pridelands had been under siege by the Hyenas more now than ever before.

"Thankfully though, the danger was forgotten and delight filled the air all because..."

Rafiki moved from the darker image to one made with care and heart. The next Rafiki's eyes fell upon was his portrait of Simba's coronation. Such a simple design it was: An outline of a cub's body with its mark - a line across his forehead. But the drawing served more than place yet another bookmark in history, it served as a marker of new prosperity.

Rafiki smiled upon it and grabbed up a piece of fruit from the branches within, and pondered...

CHAPTER ONE

"Life's Little Circles"

"Ingonyama nengw' enambala!"

The voice was so loud it ruffled the leaves, even in the outer branches, of a lowly baobab tree on a stretch of plains known as the Pridelands. But this was no ordinary Baobab tree, and the voice did not belong to any ordinary creature.

Settled within the cavity of this particular tree sat the red-nosed, brown-buttred shaman known throughout the land simply as Rafiki, and he was excitedly dawdling over one of his more recent works of art.

"Would you cut that out?" came another, higher pitched voice.

"Can't cut it out Zazu," said Rafiki, chuckling and painting with all of his appendages. "It'll grow right back!"

"Insufferable..."

A smile cracked upon his face as he looked beyond the drab comment by the blue hornbill. Rafiki, like those who came before him, was blessed with an artistic eye, and he spent every waking moment within the confines of his home drawing and painting on its many barren walls. Over time, a myriad of images snaked their way around the walls of his home, but none were as important as the one he attended to now.

"How can you stay focused? Oh, I'm a shaky mess..."

Rafiki looked up and caught a ray of sunlight bouncing off the leaves above; gleaming in the ray of sun as the image washed over him. He seemed to work with electricity about him not seen since ages past. There was something in the air this morn, something that was infectious to the monkey - a feeling of rebirth, renewal, and completeness.

"Do you think he'll signal soon?" The hornbill asked impatiently.

"When he is ready Zazu," said Rafiki, putting down a turtle shell with his left foot that held the crimson paint he had just been using to add color to his creation. "Dese tings take time." He grabbed another shell filled with a yellowish pigment and promptly began to apply it to his drawing.

Another of Rafiki's talents was his knowledge of the spirits of the land. Many a time that knowledge was put to use serving the king of a pride of lions that also called the Pridelands their home. Even now, down within the confines of his Baobab tree, he was serving that king. Like he and his ancestors had done for ages past.

"Yes well," said the bird, folding up his wings. "I have a morning schedule to keep, you know. I can't hang around here all day waiting for the presentation."

A toothily grin spread across the baboon's face as he continued to stroke his thumb and forefinger delicately across the developing image of line and color. "Ahhh... almost." It was *almost* finished.

"Are you going to just sit there and paint or are you going to get ready?"

"Ready?" Rafiki grunted up at the bird. "I *am* ready. I've been ready for this day a long time. This is a very important day for all of us."

Rafiki had no need to rehearse the ceremony from the confines of his home; he performed it countless times throughout his long life. It was a tradition that was passed down from generation to generation, just like painting the mark that would become the namesake for the young cub, as he was doing now.

"Too right," Zazu agreed. "Though I say, having a young Prince around again will make for a nice change of pace. Don't you agree?"

"Hmm," he said. "Et continues the Circle. What else mattahs?"

Zazu nodded, "Indeed. And that is of the most importance."

The baboon grunted.

"On second thought," he let on deadpan. "I just realized that my workload is about to double. So much for my--"

Rafiki let out a hearty shrill of delight.

"Go ahead -- laugh. You wouldn't be if you went through what I did when the infamous trio was cubs. Why, Mufasa, Scar and Sarabi had me flying around in circles! Talk about misfits, scandalous even. How I worked my wings to the meager bones that were in them... all for Ahadi, and for what? What I say! To do it all over again? No sir... not this bird."

"And what will you tell Mufasa when he asks why you weren't at the ceremony?" the baboon interjected as he continued to paint the outline of what would become the new prince's namesake.

Zazu opened his beak to sharply retort the baboon only to close it again. "You know, I hadn't thought of that," he said. "Suppose it'll be hard to break it to him," Zazu finished with a chuckle.

Rafiki rolled his eyes and laughed.

"He always takes great pride in pulling my tail feathers. It would do me good to return the favor. Ha!" Zazu hopped from limb to limb with glee. "Couldn't you see it? Picture this... Mufasa and I sitting on top of his kingdom going over the news of the day; The baboons are going ape, lets say, or the leopards being in a bit of a spot over something. And then... I let him have it."

"Yeah?"

"Oh his mighty jaws would drop and-- did you hear that?"

Rafiki stopped for a moment and took in a breath.

Zazu held his beak open while his left wing was held up to his small ear, straining to hear the call of the wild.

Could it be? Could it be the moment they've been waiting for?

Yes! There it was again -- a mighty rumble across the lands, a monstrous roar that could only belong to one king of beasts: Mufasa. The roar reverberated a sense of pride and joy, and a signal for all to take place and share in that bliss.

For both Rafiki and Zazu, it echoed a sense of relief. The signal the pair had been waiting for had finally been unleashed - it was time to kick start a celebration!

Zazu hopped up to a higher branch and looked out across the land after the thunderous roar from his master. He turned back a moment later and picked up the eye of his companion. "I guess we better get moving?"

The baboon lurched hardly unnoticed from his trance and nodded. He replied by grabbing up his fallen staff, upholstering a piece of fruit from it, and climbing up out of his tree. Zazu fluttered off leaving the baboon with his thoughts trained upon the swinging fruit on his staff and what they would come to represent shortly - life.

Life was the greatest aspect of a cycle that all creatures, great and small, heeded. Whether friend or foe, hunted or hunters, they were all bound together in a concept known as the Circle of Life. This model, in which every creature was aware, as their children and their children's children were taught, interconnected the hunter with the hunted and its wisdom, above all other aspects of life, became the most accepted and respected way of life in plains existence, no matter how young or old.

The Lions, crown of that cycle, were the protective, nurturing force that kept all animals, no matter how great and small, on the endless rounds. When Mufasa roared, they came. They came to pay homage to the ruler that protected them.

But there was one who heeded that call who perhaps had more of a connection to Mufasa than he would have liked -- Khulo, a cheetah from the outskirts of the Pridelands.

To him, Mufasa was a nemesis better left avoided. After he and a clan of his kind attacked and then took over the lands that belong to the Lion King, he was quite sure the likes of him were not welcome at the ceremony.

Khulo walked away from the massive lion thankful that he was still alive, then. He may not have been - Mufasa certainly could have ended his life if the lion so chose. But, Khulo sensed an enlightened mood within him; a new wisdom and he knew that his life would be spared, allowing him to walk away unscathed -- the Circle of Life prevailed.

He was the lucky one; he survived.

Unfortunately the members of his clan were not as lucky. It's leader, Mng'ariza died a quick death at the fangs of Mufasa's brother, Scar, and a takeover by his niece Kichasi, left Khulo powerless. His friends, who followed Kichasi into battle, met their fates undeservingly within the jaws of lionesses, as the rightful owners of Pride Rock fought to reclaim their lands. And even though they did side with Kichasi in her action, Khulo found room in his heart to forgive Tshatsi, Bhutai, Tambulo and also Chal, whom did not deserve the death that was bestowed upon them - they deserved much, much more for what they believed.

Kichasi, however, the despicable back stabbing female that thwarted his authority, did deserve every bit of pain and sorrow she received. Khulo would not mourn her passing. Not now, or ever. Just thinking about the name Kichasi sent venom running through his veins. He hated that name. Hated it. But like a dark shadow, he could not rid himself of the past. The Circle of Life would not allow it.

"Uncle?" a young, feminine voice called. "Uncle?"

"Oh, I'm sorry dear?" an older, masculine one, replied. "I must have wandered off there for a moment."

"Why are we to go to Pride Rock?"

"Because," Khulo began, "we must pay homage to the young lion prince. The thunderous roar you heard was to announce his coming. Now, we are all beckoned to see; to come and bask in the new life brought to the lion pride."

"A young lion prince?" the younger one inquired, her face contorted with disgust. "What do we care about a lion cub anyway?"

It was an honest question. Why would cheetah's care about lions? They did them no great service, so what had a lion done for cheetah kind in the past? Khulo knew though. The lions, like all creatures, were connected to the Great Circle that governed life. He understood its meaning, its wisdom and its purpose.

But at one time he had forgotten that purpose and he, like Kichasi, lost faith in that cycle. The outcome of that loss in faith was devastating and it was a lesson learned he would never forget for as long as he remained on these plains.

"I expected your response, Seko" Khulo chuckled. "You are young and unwise and I sense you do not yet comprehend how complex life and its cycles really are. Today, you have the chance to learn what our contributions are and what we take in return by accompanying me to Pride Rock. We may not have a great love for lions but they, like us, have a respect for life and it is that respect that binds us all. "

The young cheetah wrinkled up her little brown nose at her uncle, no doubt in confusion. "We are bonded to the Lions? How can lions hunt everyone and then have them all go for some kind of party?"

"Not bonded as in niece and uncle," said Khulo, "but let me just say that all the creatures that live here play by the same set of rules. Do you understand that?"

"I fink so, Unk," she replied, uneasily.

Khulo hated that name - *Unk*. He hated it more due to the fact that it wasn't a true association. Another reminder of times past he would just assume forget.

"The Circle of Life is that set of rules we all play by. It guides and governs over all of the creatures that inhabit the plains," he said effortlessly. "At Pride Rock you will be able to see the Circle of Life in action, and all the creatures that believe in it too."

"There will be others there too?"

"Yes Seko," said Khulo, a little more sternly than he would have liked. It was obvious to him, but he had to remember that not all comprehended the significance of the day. After all the cycles of the moon that had passed since Kichasi's passing, he still hadn't gotten used to the fact he was raising a young one again.

"How will all the creatures get along?"

The elder sighed, knowing the confusion that was gripping Seko's existence. Khulo remembered when he first learned of the Circle of Life and how it governed them all. He had the same reservations of his parents, as Seko had of him now, but had been that naive?

He questioned everything, but as he grew older Khulo became wiser in the ways of the plains and the wisdom of what he was taught became clear - one doesn't question the existence of the Circle, nor does one ignore what must be.

The Circle of Life did present paradoxes from time to time, as a law of nature, but it was for the greater good that everyone understood the concept or be doomed to a quick death. Death too was the way of the Circle, and Khulo knew death well.

"I don't wanna go," the young one protested, watching her uncle think.

"Why not?"

"I just don't wanna! I don't care about lions, or any of the others... unless," she paused, and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Are we gonna go to eat them?"

Khulo's eyes flashed angrily. "No!" he exclaimed, falling over his paws unable to believe the nonsense that just filled his ears.

"I can't believe you said that," said he.

But she did not care for lions or any other species of animal - other than the ones she could eat. And she certainly wouldn't pay respects to them. She was a cheetah and she hunted accordingly - spite the Circle of Life. This was quite apparent to Khulo and an unfortunate result of the upbringing she had.

"Your mother has unwisely taught you -- it is time you learned," he said quickly. "This is precisely why you're going to Pride Rock with me. Now, let's go."

"But, but..."

"Nonsense!" Khulo bellowed in anger. "You're going and that is final. Hurry up or we're going to be late!"

Why hadn't Kichasi taught her this? Was Kichasi that far gone to discredit the Circle of Life? And what values would the younger generation have if not blessed with the knowledge that the Great Circle housed?

Khulo had wanted to know but Kichasi, Seko's mother, had passed on cycles ago.

"I've not been witness to something like this before, and I'm not going to miss this opportunity on your account! Now get along!"

The warmth of the now brilliant sun washed across the plains, calling for life to ebb and flow across them. With this new day a new beginning dawned, a new existence, bringing with it all walks of life, who made the trek to Pride Rock with great delight and trepidation. For some the journey would be made to celebrate the greatest gift to all within the kingdom; to others the experience would be a chance to learn about life and all that governs it. For Khulo, it was just a long, long walk. Longer still with a nagging young one nipping at his heels. Still, it was an exhilarating experience for Khulo, his furred face lit up with awe and childish delight at the various forms of life coming together at the base of Pride Rock for one significant purpose.

The ground trembled with every step as a stampede of elephants swept by.

Melodies from a variety of fowl gushed, singing the praises of the newborn king.

Forests of moving trees towered over the scene, as the giraffes too joined the celebration.

Rhinos, gazelle, birds of all shapes and sizes, wildebeest, warthog, and hippos were also amongst those to celebrate this coming and it was an amazing sight to behold.

There was so much to take in that he was beside himself.

"How's it going Khulo," said one of the travelers, a spotted leopard.

The leopard's call interrupted his thoughts, but Khulo looked up with a smile anyway. "Good day," said he.

"Yeah, braving the storm?" said another, a rather large rhinoceros.

But Khulo continued to smile. "I've come to pay my respects to the Lion King as well. Besides," he continued, "I've never been to one; thought I'd try it."

"Not afraid of Mufasa, are you?" the leopard wanted to know.

"Of course not," he said. But he knew enough to be cautious. "It was unfortunate the way things ended, or began for that matter. We should have never attempted to take control of the Pridelands. The Circle became unbalanced... I think he understands that."

"You better hope so!"

Khulo let out a chuckle, "I think I know so." But, his attention was briefly turned to his young niece, who had sat down beside the trio looking in the opposite direction of Pride Rock. The cheetah shook his head and bent down to her. "Wow, isn't this great? Look-look over there!"

His outstretched paw pointed to a herd of ostriches.

"So..." Seko seceded.

"You don't find this exciting?" he said as if he couldn't understand how his niece could not be enjoying herself.

"No," said Seko sparingly. "Not really."

"Look around you. There and over there," he pointed, with his left paw. "All around us are countless races of birds, giraffes, meerkats, elephants, zebra, hippo, monkeys, leopards, warthogs, and of course cheetahs. What do you see?"

She looked up with big eyes, "Lunch?"

The young one shook its battered head a moment later because a paw rushed by and smacked into the back of it.

"No, Seko. Not lunch," he sighed. "I had hoped you'd see co-existing because that's what is happening here. All those who are at this place are at peace. They, like me, are not worried about hunting or becoming the hunted. At this moment under the promontory of Pride Rock they are bound by something greater -- the Circle of Life. Take another look now. Go on..."

Seko's eyes turned wide as she looked at the various animals around her. "I--I don't know," she said, hesitantly. "How can this be? How can so many species gather in a place without fear -- doesn't this go against our instincts?"

"Yes it does young one," said Khulo. "But the power of the Circle of Life and its fulfillment is a higher cause, which suppresses our natural instinct."

"You're not afraid?" Seko asked of the group.

"No, young'un," entered a voice from behind, "Because I know how the Circle works. And when I stand here before King Mufasa, I feel no fear; I sense no danger."

It belonged to the rhinoceros.

"Yes, but you're so large," Seko expounded animatedly.

Khulo was taken aback and immediately began to apologize to the rather sizable rhino, but it would not accept an apology.

Instead, the rhino smiled. "My dear cheetah, Lions and creatures like you are no great ally to us rhinos either. We sometimes fall prey to their whims, but the fact remains that we are all connected in a chain, a cycle that governs our lives. It goes back to the concept of the prey and hunter. Some of us are prey and some of us are hunters but at some point in our lives the hunters become the prey. And thus the Circle of Life continues."

"Besides," the rhino continued with a snort. "If you want to get fresh I'm sure my rather enormous size and this point-tipped horn will have something to say about it. They may be small but they can pack quite a wallop!"

Both Seko and Khulo let out a laugh.

"You see Seko," the elder cheetah began. "We will not attack those here today, nor will we be attacked because each of us has a respect for a higher cause. We've all played the great game of life - some have lost while others have won - but the point is we respect the game. Today, high above the promontory of what the lions call Pride Rock is yet another example of the Circle of Life being fulfilled."

"How so?"

"The lions are the reigning king of the plains my child," the rhino answered. "They are as much a part of what makes the Circle work as they are governed by it."

Seko, for her part though, looked even more confused.

"Child, the Circle of Life is the oldest, most understood and respected aspect of living on the Pridelands. One must respect the system and how it works in everyday life. Take your father here--"

"Uncle," Khulo corrected quickly.

"All right, Uncle," the rhino finished, but not before narrowing its eyes at the cheetah. "Each day we contribute to the circle in some fashion. Each day you as hunt and kill a gazelle, or some other bit of prey, you are contributing to it. And when you die, you will continue to contribute to the Circle, as your body becomes the nourishment that helps grow the grass. Countless others eat that grass and the cycle begins again. That is what the Circle is about -- Life, death and rebirth. It's the natural cycle."

"Its existence is all around us here," said Khulo in addition. "It must be accepted. Open your clouded vision and see the forces at work."

But then he gasped.

"W-what is it?"

"Look," he said to Seko, "the presentation is about to begin."

Khulo caught the hobbling form of Rafiki padding closer and closer to where he and his niece stood. He couldn't help himself now as a smile as big as the gorge protruded across his features. Even to him the old mandrill still held a sort of mysticism that no one could explain, or had understood. And so, he watched as the baboon parted the creatures, left and right, as they attempted to crowd around to pay their respects.

"It's Rafiki," Khulo breathed out, as Rafiki's staff pounded inward about the dirt below coming to a rest before him.

"Shh, Mamela," chided the rhino.

"Listen now!" exclaimed the leopard, quietly.

Khulo held a brief eye on the stationary baboon before turning his head downward in a humble bow of respect. Respects, he thought, must be paid no matter how bad the blood was between Cheetah and Lion kind and if anyone knew how sour relations were between the two, it had to be Rafiki. But Khulo was startled to receive one of the baboon's elongated hands set upon his right shoulder.

"Good day, Khulo... my friend."

The sun cast a long shadow of the monkey and his staff, and while he made no attempt to look back up at the great one, he watched the shadows pay the same greeting to his niece to his left. Rafiki retracted and continued upon his way, the cheetah held his head low in admiration watching as the monkey's staff recanted, uprooting a bit of loose soil in the process.

And then he was gone.

"He... he," the young one stammered, as she looked up at her uncle. "He knew you!"

Khulo could only nod.

"Awesome," Seko let out, now taking in everything she could.

Khulo watched his young niece as she followed Rafiki meandering his way through the crowd, to the cliff base of Pride Rock. All along the way creatures both great and small bowed before him.

"I've never seen..."

Was there a spark of light in her? Did she finally comprehend all of what he had told her? Did she finally understand the Circle of Life?

"And you'll probably never see such a sight again," said Khulo, now able to speak.

"Unless you understand what is happening here. Do you?"

But the answer did not come.

Khulo's attention was brought to a fix as those around him, like every creature on the plains, became unbearably silent. His niece had muttered something, but her voice was immediately extinguished as she too caught the action from above.

"Why did everyone become so silent?"

"Because," the leopard answered, "They too are awaiting the celebration, to catch their first glimpse of the lion cub."

Rafiki had made it to the precipice and was tending to the young cub now.

How exciting and electrifying it had become; all the creatures great and small were waiting to be shown the young lion prince and Seko could be counted among them. Not that they were very patient animals. She had been nudged half a dozen times, but she paid it no never mind. The experience had been a memorable one thus far, she thought. Having taken witness to the animals line up and fumble in, one by one. Each was different in their own right but were all obligated to one ideal - that of the Circle of Life.

A moment later those who were restless were still no more as the plains erupted in coos and cheers as Rafiki held up the young cub.

As she watched, a heavenly light illuminated the lion cub, and one-by-one, those around her began to bow in reverence. A smile crept upon her then, finally coming to an understanding about the great wisdom of the Circle of Life.

Amongst the Elephants, Giraffes, Leopards, Meerkats, Zebra and all other walks of life - all were predators, or prey. But there was one thing that kept them together.

"Life's Little Circles are the ties that bind us," said Khulo taking to his niece. "And them."

INTERLUDE

"Hoo! He's right you know," said Rafiki, jumping down from a limb. "Life's little circles do make up one big cycle: the Circle of Life, and that circle binds us all. But you know, not everyone of my paintings depicts an important event."

"Take dis one for example," Rafiki pointed with his furred hand. "Features nothing more than a day in the life of Mufasa's estranged majordomo. I couldn't even tell you when this was drawn... but I believe it was during the reign of King Ahadi... yes, yes! Now I remember...."

A slight morning gust of wind blew across the feathery form of a sleeping body, arousing it from it's previously still form. The waft announced the birth of a new day; Dusk was born, yet the fiery sun had not yet made it's force fully known. Only a sliver of the fireball peeked above the horizon of the mountains. But even so, the light of a new day caused a stir amongst those in slumber and the wings of this particular creature parted to allow the small rays to gleam into its eyes.

"Oh dear heavens," said the bird, a hornbill, blinking out the radiant energy from the sun.

Zazu blinked once, then peeked out amongst his nighttime protection of feathers to send a greeting to the newborn day - a yawn. Smacking his beak together, Zazu righted himself and fluffed his feathers, shivering in the cool air of morn.

"The Morning Report," he called out in a raspy voice. "Right. Up and at'em then."

Whether he wanted to be or not, the hornbill was awake and standing with his tail feathers flapping in the breeze. He took a hefty breath in and let it out with an Aaaaaah. "Another wonderful day in the Pridelands," he offered then, and it was. The Pridelands were always beautiful in the morning, and quiet. The orange colors bounced off of everything - the rocks, the grass, even the animals - to create an ocean of peace that no creature could disturb. But Zazu knew differently, of course, he knew that once the forces of nature had awakened everyone, the lands would be bustling with activity. And it was Zazu's job as Majordomo to keep tabs on that activity. So, with a small lift of wind, the bird shot up from is rock-perch and soared into the skies, leaving his pride of lions behind, still in their slumber.

"You wouldn't know it in him," Rafiki said as his memory subsided, "but Zazu took care of a different pride's cubs for a time. Unfortunately, that pride succumbed to a terrible plight and Zazu, hoping that hardship didn't strike other plains lions, came upon King Ahadi and his pride. Ahadi seemed to be a good, strong, and fit male with cubs in tow, which meant that Zazu's services seemed well assured. And thus he got the job."

"Oh, and look at dis one," said Rafiki, stepping to the right. "Dis one here depicts the time when Mufasa, dear him, fell into one of the waterholes when he was a cub. Oh, I'll never forget the look on his face when he rose out of the water on the nose of a hippo!"

Rafiki had the pleasure of council with Ahadi and had seen Mufasa grow up in front of his eyes. Many of the same things Ahadi thought Mufasa would no doubt be passed to Simba, Mufasa's son, and so on and so forth, as tradition demanded. But, "they also had help," said the mandrill. "My council aside, Ahadi, and Mufasa after he, took friendship and shared many duties with a certain yellow beaked hornbill."

Zazu wasn't always the King's majordomo mind you. But he did become one of Ahadi's favorite advisors until, one time, however, something terrible happened that shook the foundation of the lion's trust. It almost ruined their relationship and for a time, it could have put Zazu out of a job."

"I remember that night," Rafiki muttered. "It was..."

Cold. The stars shone brightly above illuminating the Pridelands for its king: Ahadi, as he walked along a thin line between anger and relief. Rafiki had never seen him so emotionally confused in all the many years they'd known one another. Amongst Ahadi's outstretched stamina and fighting to control his breath, the thought of outrage crept into his being as he contemplated the events that could have transpired if he had not intervened when he did. The scenes were tragic and unthinkable yet they flowed through him like water over a riverbank. What would have happened if those cheetah's gotten a hold of the cubs? What would have happened to the pride if it's future progeny were swiped away? And with it, came his anger. A powerful emotion that he fought to keep in check as he recalled the events just a few moments ago. Ahadi stood fast and watched the shining stars above for strength; guidance. Ahadi looked up at the sparkling points of light above him and awed at their grandeur. No place else in his life had he ever seen such a sight -- the first time he saw the stars burned was a special time for him indeed. And the experience burned itself into his very existence.

"I don't think I've ever seen Ahadi so distressed before, and Zazu, as I said, nearly lost his post. Of course, it wasn't entirely his fault either. Cubs will be cubs, mind you, and they tend to want to do dangerous things even when you warn them not to. Between Mufasa, Sarabi and Taka ("the trio" to the pride), one never knew what mischief they'd get into. But, cubs tend to grow up... fall in love."

"Take dis one," the Mandrill pointed next to a portrait of Mufasa and Sarabi, older during a courtship ritual. "I don't think they knew I was hiding in de bushes... not one of my best traits I will say, but it was a very important time for the pride. For Simba was conceived under those stars that night and..." he let trail of. "He turned out to be someone quite special."

The mandrill shifted his gaze to an image of a lion striding to the top of a great rock. It was Simba. And he was about to reclaim the Pridelands from his evil uncle, Scar. "So troubled the lands were during Taka's reign, but Simba accepted his destiny and took his place amongst his pride. I can still recall in vivid detail the night Taka told the lionesses that both Mufasa and Simba had been killed. The circle can be broken," Rafiki sighed. "I just did not see et."

Rafiki wiped a small tear that had beaded up within his eye away with a paw and looked out through the top branches of his home. He was unable to see much through the densely populated foliage that surrounded him and kept him safe, but that didn't bother him. He knew that the Great Kings smiled down upon the lands that day -- the Day Simba became the rightful ruler of the Pridelands. And now, Rafiki closed his eyes and tried to experience the event through Simba's own eyes...

CHAPTER TWO

"Ithabise: It is Time..."

I was confronted with the greatest responsibility a lion could ever know.

A putrid aroma of sodden grass and burning flesh filled the inner-cavities of my snout as I contemplated words from a blue-feathered, banana-beaked hornbill servant that would ultimately and irrevocably seal my fate.

Your majesty.

Zazu bowed humbly out of dignity I knew, but I could not help but pause briefly at the power those words carried, and listen. The soil beneath my paws, still glowing with the remnants of flame, popped and sizzled as the deluge from the soot-darkened skies above continued to pour over the fire-stained earth of the Pridelands, an inferno set in motion by the Great Kings themselves.

Once, these lands had been holy, lush and fruitful; the lifeblood of herds, flocks and packs. But now the green grasses, tall trees and blue waters have been replaced with empty, dry beds, splintered stumps and brown bald patches. Even the soil cracked and withered, driving away those that had once called the Pridelands their home. But not everyone went astray. Some, like my family, were forced to stay behind and serve a fanatic in his madness to strip the lands of every last scrap of food, so he could continue to rule a land my father had once governed.

Unbeknownst to me, my devious Uncle wished to preside over the Pridelands well before I was born. It drove him mad, and it was madness that consumed him and all those who followed, but not before damage had been done - the lands devastated and the lionesses ill-treated.

I was to blame for it all. I let it happen. Me. Simba.

Yet it was the will of the Great Kings that I succeed the throne, to fight to reclaim that which Scar, my conniving Uncle, wrongfully possessed. As I stand the winner in battle between he and the hyena's, claimant of what was rightfully mine, I stay in doubt and uncertain. The call of the Great Kings worries and frightens me for what must logically come next is that I assume the throne and govern the Pridelands as my father and his father before him had done. I wonder though, am I ready to take on this responsibility they've laid before me? Am I ready to successfully carry on the lionesses' destinies, hopes and dreams? Can I return the Pridelands to its once former glory?

Watching them now, *my* lionesses, the rain dripping from my brow, I can only speculate if I am the mad one for returning to them. I do not know what to do, I am not the consummate leader and yet they stood watching me as I did them, waiting for... What? Their watchful eyes stared back and held a kind of pain and sorrow that they had felt for cycle upon cycle, and they stared back a truth I was not prepared for: the lionesses needed a leader and a lover.

How could I...

And yet, there was Rafiki, a creepy little monkey from the grasslands, waiting to usher in a new era, a new moment in time for he and the pride of lionesses that was once my home. He gestured up the precipice of Pride Rock, signaling that it was time for me to take the most sacred of walks.

Destiny called me to become the next king of the Pridelands, and I was ill prepared.

I came to rest in front of the mandrill, which moments ago fought for these lands right beside me, and reached out my paw to draw him in an embrace. I did not know what service the mandrill provided for my father in the past, but Mufasa had trusted him, perhaps with his life, and so I felt must I. He jumped ever so slightly at my touch, obviously not expecting the hug of a big bulky lion, but I felt I had to voice my appreciation for one of the only creatures who had thought enough to care about me when everyone else had given up.

Rafiki was the heart and soul of the Pridelands, the pulse of all life, and he understood what had to be done.

"It is time..."

Tears welled up profoundly as the mandrill released his grasp of me and mouthed the words that called forth my destiny. Yes, it was time to take on the greatest responsibility of my life, to face the fact that I had abandoned my homeland and put right what had gone terribly wrong. It was time for me to take my rightful place within the Circle of Life, where I knew I should be. Yes, it had become instantly clear what I must do...

SWALLOWING AS HARD AS I COULD, I TOOK THE FIRST STEP UNTO MY NEW LIFE

My life, in its twisted existence, has been nothing more than a lie. Everything I ever believed in, everything that I held sacred, was nothing more than a fairy tale conjured up by a fraud. It amazes me to think how ignorant I was then, how easily I was deceived by my own family member. Why couldn't I see past the lie?

"Run away Simba, and never return."

Naturally I did what I was told! I ran and never ever looked back. But once those words had been spoken my life was no longer mine, my path forever changed. My life was but a mere shell of what it was to be and to be so gullible as to think that it had been my fault for everything that had happened: The hyena's, my father's death, and the lionesses horrible nightmares. What I wouldn't give to be a cub again - naive and carefree - when life meant nothing more than running around all day, free to do it my way. Alas, look at what that carefree attitude has brought me: heartache, despair and a kingdom in ruins.

It wasn't all fun and games being a young prince mind you. I might have been fancy-free but I seldom got it my way, especially if my father had a say in it. Never a day went by that there wasn't a lesson about what it meant to be a king and, of course, the Circle of Life. It was all very interesting but all I wanted was to be with Nala. What I didn't know then was that he was preparing me for the rest of my days, training on the nuances to prepare me for the that time when I would be sovereign over the Pridelands. And I found I was grossly unprepared for that aspect.

"One of the most important aspects of being king is to know and respect the Circle of Life," he said to me. Something he was always saying.

"I know," I let out impatiently.

"You do?" he asked in mock surprise.

I didn't know, and for a moment I thought I would wither up and die.

My father, a massive hulk of fur and muscle, padded around me for just a moment, before sitting beside my right shoulder, he was waiting for more. He towered over me, but his shadow was not to be found.

"The Circle of Life is not just about life, my son. It's also about death, love and your everyday events. And it is imperative that you understand all that the Great Circle has to offer and how it all fits into the scheme of reality."

I wrinkled up my nose at the funny words he spoke, "How is that father?"

"Simba, The Circle is everything. It provides our food, our lives, and our home - everything. But these things come with pros and cons. The pros: life, a chance to flourish, and happiness. The cons: death, destruction, and despair. Yet, there must be a balance of both. Do you understand?"

"I-- I think so dad."

"Good. I think that's all for today my brave son. You're learning well and I daresay you'll make a fine king someday."

"You really think so?" I sprang up with a smile.

"I know so," said he and the two of us walked into the hillside.

I didn't know it then, but he was more right than I could ever know. The Circle of Life was not a concept to take lightly. It was a way of life that had to be completely understood or the delicate balance that existed between the hunters and the hunted could be tipped, or worse, collapse. If the worst case presented itself the Pridelands would suffer the greatest horror anyone could ever imagine. It was that reason my father made sure I was well versed in its knowledge - though limited as my cub mind could fathom.

Unfortunately my training in the Great Circle was never completed and once I had opted out on my own, the knowledge that I had learned about this way of life was all but forgotten and replaced with something new - *Hakuna Matata*.

LIGHTNING CROSSED THE SKY AS I CONTINUED TOWARD MY DESTINY

"Repeat after me..." the meerkat ordered... "A-ah-hem. *Hakuna Matata*."

All I could do was frown at the little guy because I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me, but over a short period of time, that understanding came and the meaning behind those words became crystal clear. A meerkat (named Timon) and a warthog (named Pumbaa) had taught me something new and it would be their philosophy of "no worries" that I would live. Through their philosophy I learned how to take care of myself and not worry about the past, present or future. I had become a new lion from that day forth and there was nobody to tell me any different for they taught me something that would forever change my outlook on life. With the introduction of two very simple little words, Timon not only provided the answers to my questions, but he also found a way to quell all my troubles.

From that first day forward I was no longer the Simba that everyone remembered, I was a new Simba, a Simba for me without a care in the world. I was free -- free from anger, free from hatred, and free from the monstrosity of all horrors - death.

Timon and Pumbaa were literally lifesavers though, sticking with me through thick and thin. "Whatever is important to you is important to us," Timon once said and he was right. It touched my young soul then and it did so now knowing they stood beside me to retake my kingdom. The lion that I am today would never have been able to survive without them. They helped me when I, myself, didn't want anyone's help. They were friends, tried and true and as friends they did not allow me to give up when I had just about given up on my life.

I went through a rough time for a while there, hoping beyond hope that everything that had happened really didn't. As if one day I would wake up and the terrors would be nothing but a dream and I would be able to see my father and mother again. But the knowledge that my father's death wasn't a dream only led me into despair. Luckily, I found Timon and Pumbaa or rather they found me!

You know, between the two of them they could wipe the entire savanna clean of bugs; they ate constantly! And though I did get used to eating grubs, worms, and beetles throughout my cubhood, I knew I needed much, much more. I needed meat and I knew just where to get it. There was one day... just like any other really, the three of us panted out into the hot savanna, looking for grubs.

"Come on buddy, back me up! A weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

But I did not fall into line as Timon's insufferable singing lent another good opportunity for me to hunt for the meat I so desperately needed. It wasn't as if my friends didn't know I needed flesh to survive, but I think it was more that they were reassured I wouldn't eat them. I mean, how could I? Being outcasts they've learned how to be suspicious of just about everyone; it wasn't everyday a lion befriended it's food. And that was probably the strangest thing, I never once thought about Timon and Pumbaa as food. Not even when my stomach was rumbling for attention, but eating my friends was out of the question. Of course, I'd think about eating the meerkat if he didn't stop singing!

Timon's voice, thankfully, began dissipating into the background combining with the song of the jungle birds, allowing me to concentrate on the task at hand. I settled down within the sparse bushes, hoping to see a fleeting gazelle or antelope prance out onto the field beyond me. The field was a perfect place for me to hunt; the grasses were almost as tall as I was high, but not enough to hide away the prey I sought. Before long everything around me became still and I pressed forward just slightly, hoping to catch a glimpse of what might be stirring. And just when I was about to pounce a thunderous growl resonated throughout the jungle and into my finely tuned ears. My senses jumped into overdrive as the roar, whomever it belonged to, was not familiar to me and I tensed straight away - danger was on the winds and it was near by. I listened... for the smallest sound... my ears twitching to and fro hoping to catch something.

"SHE'S GONNA EAT ME!!!"

And then it was apparent that Pumbaa, my flatulent friend, was in deep trouble. The blood in my veins pulsed as I returned to the spot where I had left the duo in their bit of song and saw the warthog stuck under a log that was covered in a strange green fungus. He was wiggling frantically hoping to jar himself loose - eyes wide as sunflowers. A roar escaped me as I leapt over him and into the fray. What awaited me was unknown, but nothing was more shocking than what I found on the other side of the overgrown root - a fully-grown lioness!

A million questions quelled my thoughts - who was she and what was she doing here - but regardless of whom she belonged the lioness invaded our territory and hungry or no, she had no business hunting on our land!

Immediately taking to Pumbaa's defense, I unsheathed my claws and struck the lioness

head on, the two of us rearing up on our hind legs, with a hideous snarl on both our faces. She growled and I returned, she howled in frustration hoping to sink her claws into my friend, and I fighting to make sure that did not happen. I knew I was no great fighter but it didn't take long to find out that neither was she. A paw to the face, another, and another - aha!

"Go for the jugular! The jugular!"

But that was the last thing I heard before being thrown over and pinned about by back. There was something about that, the force and stance, which drew up a memory of the past. A memory that I thought I had long forgotten. I looked up suddenly, my eyes wide in surprise. Could it be?

"Nala?"

MY MANE BECAME SODDEN AS I PUSHED ON WITH THOUGHTS OF MY LOVE, NALA

"Pinned ya!" Nala said, resting upon my shoulders.

Oh, what a lovely memory. We had just wrestled down a nearby hill on our way to an Elephant's Graveyard, this really cool place I heard about from my Uncle Scar. It was supposed to be a show of my strength and bravery, but it ended up being nothing but an embarrassment. For one thing, she pinned me on the way there!

"Hey, lemmie up!" I whined.

She was only happy to oblige and stood leaving me sulking for my wounded pride. She was quite proud of herself too, I could see, a small smirk on her face. I wanted to pounce that sneer right off her too for showing me up and decided to -- growling up playfully with a rush to tackle.

"Ha! Pinned ya again."

And much to my surprise I ended up in the exact same position.

You know, without Nala I was empty, and I felt myself succumbing to the emptiness more and more each day. The disappointments in my life only served to fuel it. I mean, *I was going to rule it all* and yet became a lonely lion doomed to the simple existence of Hakuna Matata. Many a night would pass and I'd be looking up at the starlit skies wondering if my destiny lied without a kingdom to maintained, doomed to roam the plains with a meerkat and a warthog, or, whether my destiny lied elsewhere.

Don't get me wrong, Timon and Pumbaa were great friends, but nothing matched a warm female body and I found that I wanted the company of a female, more than ever; I found that my thoughts would turn quite frequently to Nala, my cubhood playmate. Oh how proud Nala would be of me, fully-grown, fit and trim, with a full mane and everything! I was dignified now, not a scruffy cub. I was fully of pride and quite possibly could have made a find king.

I sometimes let my thoughts wonder about the what-ifs, picturing myself at Pride Rock looking down over its promontory and proclaiming to all those who would listen. Or, cuddling up with Nala, my mate, as we talked about our pride and the direction it would take in the new day. Alas, only in my dreams would I be able to take part in these things.

Never again would I see my mother, my mate, or my kingdom again. The thoughts and memories of her entangled within my soul to the point where depression had a firm grip. I'd awake everyday knowing it had all been a bad dream and Nala would be right by my side to comfort me, but when I'd open my eyes they were filled with views of the jungle instead of her lovely green eyes.

Time passed, but as if by some miracle, or some long forgotten prayer that had been spoken about long ago and answered, she was returned to me. Appearing out of the depths of the forest, Nala had wandered away from Pride Rock and somehow found me out here. I was shocked beyond belief and it wasn't from the shoulder slam she gave me either, it was a face and body I thought I'd never see again - oh, what to do, what to say?

"It's me... Simba!"

It took a moment for my confession to register but when it did a whirlwind of emotion flushed to the surface, and I became lost in it all. That realization opened a new world for me, a world without loneliness and grief. For the first time I had hope. There was someone who understood me, who knew me. Someone I could count on, to love.

"I've missed you so much," her feminine voice called to me.

In that moment we were lost within each other, our nuzzling quickening and our purrs growing louder and louder. There, in that very moment, my life was complete, the missing link connected, and our love became one in unison with our hearts. Nala was in my paws now and I knew that my best friend had become something else to me - I loved her, wanted her, and there wasn't going to be anything to stop me from taking her.

"I can't marry her, it would be so weird!"

Amazing how an outlook changes, how a careless thought can turn against you. I chided myself for thinking such a thing. How could I ever? The thought ran through me as we cuddled... her, here, now, with me, fur against fur and temperatures rising; there was no doubt about my love for Nala, then, now, or ever. And clearly she felt the same about me. Romping, laughing and playing as we were, I immediately came to the conclusion that I never wanted this day to end - EVER! Minute by minute we were getting father and farther away from Timon and Pumbaa and for the first time, I did not care. We tumbled down a hillside and fell into each other's paws. I found myself on top of her, getting the best of my cubhood playmate for the very first time.

"Pinned ya..."

The roar of a nearby waterfall filled the air, but there was something else there too: an excitement, a need, a want, and a desire.

MY HEART RACED AS I LOWERED ANOTHER PAW TOWARD MY FUTURE

I glanced into her eyes, my chest heaved to the strength of my beating heart, finding them as she stole a look through my capturing paws. With every passing breath, her pupils dilated, her chest rising and falling with anticipation. She looked up at me with a passion I've never before seen; a passion of a warm-blooded female in heat ready to take the wanton love of her mate. And then she did something else I didn't expect, she lifted herself from my embrace and ever-so-gently and wafted a kiss across my cheek.

I quivered at her warm caressing tongue, gooseflesh creeping up my spine. I could feel my heart beat faster and faster as it became aroused to the rush of adrenaline flow. I became flushed with excitement and my thoughts clouded with images of wild abandonment. Nala was truly breathtaking and I wanted her. I wanted her for all to see, I wanted her right in the patch of leaves, and I wanted her amongst the Great Kings themselves. Oh, with all that I was, I *needed* her.

Nala sensed my wants, needs and carnal desires; gently returning to her silhouette amongst the foliage allowing her own lust to take over, passion blazing brightly in her eyes, flesh teasing. I bent down to take her then, a burning within me that was so overpowering I could do nothing else. There was no better life I could think of, no better place I would rather have been. And I was completely lost to it.

"Oh... I love you Simba," she said, her words carrying on the cool breezes of the forest.

"I've missed you so," said I, only able to must a whisper, as my attention was elsewhere: my tail had meandered around hers.

Pushing it aside, I penetrated the depths of her passion and found myself completely surrounded by warmth, love, and contentedness. I gasped audibly -- the first, entirely overwhelming thrust, shuttered a cry of joy and pleasure from her. We were one now, truly; I held perfectly still relishing the feeling of our union, cherishing the moment for the future.

Nala began to tremble slightly, as the sensations no doubt washing over me were also cascading within her. Her body began to respond to our coupling, tugging at me from within. There was no stopping the energy between us now... we were so close. With each internal massage I became bathed in her love, our hearts cried out for release.

I found that moments later I could no longer hold back the passion that quelled deep within me. The sensation sprang upon me so quickly that I almost withdrew from her in fright, but an Ingram of knowledge buried deep within prevented that withdrawal. And so, with one last powerful thrust ever deeper, my heart bled for her and a thunderous roar joined the quietness of the forest.

Then two.

Together, they became the guttural cries of two souls lost in a sea of passion, a song of sowing seeds, a melody of life planted firmly within the fertile valley of the future.

And then it was quiet.

Nala and I continued to stay within each other's grasp, as we cuddled away the torrent of passion. My body tingled with excitement from the individual hairs on my mane to the tiniest on the tuft of my tail. The roar of that waterfall in the backdrop was the only other sound, besides our beating hearts and heaving breasts. It was such a wonderful time that I wished could live on forever. Warmth emanated from Nala's soft furry body and soon a slight purr joined the rush of water. My blood began to boil with pleasure as I found her touch even more arousing.

Unbelievable.

"That was wonderful Simba," she purred to me. "Oh so wonderful. Who could ever imagine?"

"Was I your first?"

"Uh-huh..." she whispered. "Was I yours?"

"Yes," I allowed. I licked her on the top of her head then, her ears twitching at the subtle stimulation, and slowly allowing my tongue to skip down her beautiful nose. I didn't speak again for a long time, how long I do not know, but it seemed like an eternity.

"To have found you," I said to her. "I couldn't be happier."

"I'm so glad we found each other," she began. "But, I don't understand how you got out here in the first place."

It was a long story. And our blissful event soon began to turn to a new direction, one that was not as easy to face. Nala had a lot of questions for me, about my past, my present and about my future. Questions I was not prepared to answer. There was too much pain inside and I wasn't ready to let it all out yet, not to her.

Relentless she was in her inquiry, telling me all about Scar and how he let the hyenas roam the Pridelands, how he destroyed everything, and how much the lionesses needed help. But I refused to hear it. It wasn't for *me* to worry about. It wasn't *my* kingdom after all. Hey! She left! I didn't force her to leave! She wasn't forced to leave like I was! How dare she tell me what to do!

"But you have a responsibility Simba, to me, to the other lionesses... to your mother!"

Oh, but she didn't know. I had no more responsibilities. I was relieved of those problems by Scar, the moment my father died, the moment he killed my father, the moment he took control over the destinies of all those on the Pridelands.

"I'm not the Simba you remember," I said sternly.

I've changed.

Just go away! Leave me alone! I don't want you here, can't you see that! Go back where you came from and leave me here in my hell! I don't need you!

"You don't need me..."

"Simba, we *need* you!" Nala exclaimed.

"Stop - now you're starting to sound like my father..."

"Good, at least one of us does..."

AN ANGRY THUNDEROS DRONE OF A THUNDERCLAP SNAPPED

Oh, my father. The mere mention of his name brings death, despair, life and happiness to my thoughts. As my dad, he was my pal - my friend. We were the best of friends, always to be there for each other, only fate decided that was not to be.

"Simba!" Mufasa sternly called of his son, the sound of his voice echoing in the night air.

Hearing my name thundering through the night sky, I looked up from below the grasses in which I had hidden and began a slow walk towards my father.

I had done a terrible thing. Nala and I went out to the Elephant Graveyard and were attacked by hyenas. We mightn't have been killed if it weren't for his rescue. To say he was beyond angry would have been an understatement. I was about to be punished. I knew that.

"Simba, I'm very disappointed in you," he said, turning to me.

"I know," I responded sadly, not able to meet my father's gaze.

"You could have been killed!" Mufasa exclaimed. "You deliberately disobeyed me. And what's worse, you put Nala in danger!"

"I was just trying to be brave like you."

"I'm only brave when I have to be," the lion turned. "Simba, being brave doesn't mean you go looking for trouble."

"But you're not scared of anything!"

"I was today," Mufasa let out.

I asked disbelievingly, "You were?"

"Yes," said he, bending down to reach the gaze of his young, and very frightened son - me. "I thought I might lose you."

"Oh," I breathed. "I guess even kings get scared, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

Even the best of Lion Kings become frightened at the prospect of losing their offspring, I gathered.

"Dad?" I asked of my father, as I wallowed about his thick and full mane.

"Hmm?" Mufasa uttered as though his train of thought was broken.

His gaze was unbearable, especially in the light of what I had just done. Unable to avoid his glance, I continued. "We're pals right?"

"Right," the lion said with a gentle chuckle.

"And we'll always be together, right?"

"WRONG!" flashed an evil image of Zazu.

For a father and son so in tune with one another, we were destined to be torn apart. We couldn't be together always, as Mufasa had proclaimed, all because of my actions.

Gods! Why did I go into the gorge, why!?

I knew I shouldn't have gone there alone -- at all -- but I trusted uncle Scar. I trusted him and I knew I shouldn't! There was nothing for me there and to go off with my uncle was dense! I should have seen right through his "marvelous surprise" routine... but I didn't. And look at the consequences of that stupidity -- my whole life taken from me.

Watching the small pebbles shake on the floor of the big gorge was cool; did my little roar cause all those stones to move like that? Little did I know that it wasn't my pathetic little mew, but a stampeding herd of wildebeest falling over the crest of the canyon walls that caused them to jump to and fro.

I stood fast, the blood draining from my face as I was overpowered by the image of a waterfall of huge beasts racing right toward me. I was so stricken with stillness that I couldn't even think of what to do. Should I stay? Should I go? Should I run?

Yes, RUN!

I just knew I wouldn't be able to wrestle away from this doom. I knew I would never see my father again, or anyone for that matter.

Death by entrapment - I would die.

Yet, out of the ashes of darkness came the one who could save me - my hero, my father. He gobbled me up into his outstretched mouth and carried me to the safety of an outcropping. He braved the onslaught of the herd, the pain of hooves crashing around him, and his own misgivings just to rescue me - Me, Simba, his son, his progeny.

Mufasa set me down ever so gently, and I smiled up at him as he done so, relieved and safe. Once again I had cheated death and my father was there, once again, to save me. As I heaved in and out, I began to realize that what my father had been telling me all along was right - I couldn't go off looking for danger, I couldn't go off expecting that everything will be all right. I didn't understand this as I stepped into his shadow, his overbearing paw, during our nightfall conversation, but I did now. My mind opened to a whole new wavelength of thought.

The deliver of such knowledge would be my father, and I would now allow him the chance to do so.

But then...

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad," I screamed in horror, as his massive body fell backwards, becoming entangled with the marching wildebeest.

I stood fast upon the rock-ledge; the shock of the roaring beats overpowering me into stillness. My father was nowhere to be found, as he was pulled under their hooves and below my line of sight. Dust kicked up everywhere -- he was completely engulfed in the chaos on the canyon floor and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I searched for him, to and fro, hoping beyond hope that I would catch a glimpse of him through the reds, greens, yellows and browns of the smoky cinders that the stampede left behind. Panic was an emotion of luxury, which I had quite a bit of, as second after second slipped by with no sight of him.

I'm never going to see him again and there was so much I wanted to say.

But then, alike a shot of a flame, something launched out from the devilish swirl below, punctuating the air with a loud, purposeful roar. It was Mufasa, my father, and he hadn't yet given up the fight!

The relief I felt was sudden and powerful, and I welcomed it. My father had risen from the ashes and fastened himself firmly to the nearby cliff-face. A moment later, he began to climb up the walls with great gusto, struggling with all his might to return to safety. I turned from him in order to reach the outcropping he was reaching for, but as I turned back around to see him he was gone.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo," I roared violently, unable to do anything else.

And then I watched helplessly as my father plummeted from the tops of the gorge walls, back down to the rocky and hard ground of the Pridelands Gorge. I sat petrified I watched my father and friend ripped from my side and become swallowed by death.

After that moment I never found comfort in the stars again. My father said he'd always be there for me, waiting in the stars, watching over me. But he wasn't... wasn't meant to be. A miserable fool, one who could not understand the meaning of what it meant to be king, took him. I didn't know it then, but I do now. It meant you could not be self-centered, but that you were all working toward a greater goal, a greater good. A concept Scar could not fathom. Instead of facing up to that concept he had me run - run far away, and never return. I heeded his words, and ran, believing I took my father's life. That it was my fault Mufasa was dead. I believed him... and so I ran away from the sadness and responsibility.

I ran away from what I should have done -- stood and fought for my father and what was rightfully mine.

I ran. Yes, I ran away like a cowardly lion, whimpering into the desert to places unknown. I ran right into the arms of Timon and Pumbaa, two totally different, but wanting creatures -- Outcasts, like me. They showed me there was more to life, but could they truly understand my past and what I had done? We didn't talk about it, which was the rule for outcasts; yet, there were times when a piece of my past would make itself known.

"Someone once told me that the great kings of the past are up there... watching over us."

It was a glorious evening. The three of us had just come from a very successful hunt, Timon and Pumbaa on Grubs, and myself a lost and fleeting gazelle.

The stars were out that night, and Pumbaa and Timon were enamored with their shininess. Pumbaa had called them balls of gas burning brightly billions of miles away, but Timon rebuffed that excuse. He offered one of his own, of course, saying the sparkling dots were nothing more than every-day fireflies that got stuck up in 'that big-bluish black thing'.

He didn't approve of my reasoning either.

"You mean there are a bunch of royal dead guys watching us?"

I told him just that, but he snubbed me just as he did Pumbaa, and burst out into a hysterical fit of laughter. The laughter wounded me, and only served to crush my faith and the sacred memory of my father. It also proved one other thing: they couldn't be trusted with the secrets of my past. But what was more, I was really hurt by the outburst, who wouldn't be? Everything I held sacred was being poked fun at -- laughed at -- as if it didn't matter at all. I was wounded with feelings I couldn't express to them, or to anyone. Timon could not understand and now they would never know who I really was and what I walked away from.

And who was I really?

"You said you'd always be there for me!" I mustered up a yell to the heavenly bodies above, but no one was listening. And it was my fault once again. Relieving frustrations helped, but the problem was staring me right in the face - I had lost sight of my fathers' star. It was there, surely, but where? My father was an idol to everyone under his dominion. Surely he was to be remembered. If his son did not, did anyone?

I remember the night he came to me like a storm in the sky. There I kneeled, broken down in tears never getting the chance to make right what I made wrong. He knew I had failed... and I had certainly failed him. The disappointment was thick in the air, and yet I could do nothing. No one knew who I was anymore... no one cared.

"Well, I know who you are. You're Mufasa's boy!"

That voice! That shrill of a voice -- where had I heard it before?

I looked up, drawing in a breath, hoping against hope it would be someone from my past, someone I could cling onto, someone real. But, whomever it was had vanished. That creepy little monkey vanished! Where did he go? Or, more importantly, how did this strange creature know me? And yet there was something strangely familiar about him as well; the memory burned like a ranging fire. Thus I ran off in hopes to find this creature, to ask him the questions that burned in my soul -- who am I now?

When I finally caught up with the mandrill, his words of wisdom gave me more to think about. He spoke of united, of prides and kingdoms. There was a kingdom waiting for me, he stressed, one that needed me very badly. I listened to his words of thought with limited interested, caring for naught. He thought he knew me, but what he knew was the past. But did he know my future? I didn't think so... but he hammered his point. Literally.

Could I return? Would I be able to save my family, my pride? Would it hurt to at least try? It was amazing that I had to talk myself into it. What if Scar really was the horrible ruler as Nala suggested? If that were so, wouldn't I be responsible if I didn't do anything about it? Through all my reservations this mandrill never once gave up. He pushed his wisdom upon me whether I wanted to hear it or not. He, through Nala's persistence, helped me realize exactly who I was and who I could be.

I will never forget Rafiki for that service. Ever.

"Remember who you are... You are my son and the one true king. Remember who you are... Remember who you are..."

I AM READY TO TAKE MY PLACE AS ANOTHER PAW IS SET

The tip is so near and yet I still do not know if I can go through with taking my place amongst the Great Kings of the past, to become sovereign of the Pridelands. What if I failed? What if I caused more misery and destruction than Scar? Oh, I don't think I could bear it.

Would Nala be disappointed if I back down? *And my mother, what would she think?*

What must she think of me now, having come back after all this time. To have her know that it was I who was responsible for father's death. How it was I who let Scar get the best of me. It'll take her some time to get over his death, especially now. The lies, the betrayal, everything has been cast into doubt.

I shouldn't have come back.

My mother, though not entirely happy, seemed to put her losses behind her, so she alone could continue on. That is the will of a strong lioness, and a Queen. My mother is the true hero here, not I, not Nala, nor anyone. Sarabi withstood the test of horrors that Scar brought before her. She even outlasted him, the most demoned of torturers, and yet I still feel sadness and sorrow from her.

My mother, the fighter -- the survivor.

Even the other young lionesses looked up at me with a sake of pride. How could I back down from them? How could I refuse to lead them into a new prosperous future? The answer is I cannot. They've suffered enough and now it is my turn to do right by them, to put away my self-interests for the sake of the pride.

My pride.

You know, I hadn't realized that until just now. I'm not going to be under the shadow of anyone else, nor be able to rely on anyone else. These lionesses are depending upon me, Simba, rightful king of the Pridelands.

Yes I can do this. I will do this!

"Remember..."

Yes father, I will!

A gasp escaped from me as the clouds above began to part for a sacred message from above. *I do remember!* I am the rightful king of the Pridelands, not Scar. No longer will your name be cursed and blown off across the winds, Mufasa. No longer will your memory be banished from all who loved you.

I remember!

No, from this day hence I will carry on the traditions you set down. I will be the king you were never able to be! I will be there for my Pride and family, no matter what comes between us. These lands will be made holy again and be returned to their once lucious splendor. You will see! You will see! I must do this! I will do this! I will it to be!

RROOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!

And thy be done.

CHAPTER THREE

"Sacred Homage"

"Le lizwe... lea halalela."

These lands are holy. Everyone knew this sacred truth, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope -- the Pridelands were blessed lands. But for a lion, sitting atop a colossal outcropping of rocks, the hallowed grounds he once called home didn't appear divine, his native land looked devastated and it shocked him.

The smoldering still lingered on as the massive lion breathed in the smoke filled air and snarled at its pungent odor. Proud and true, his rigid stature did not betray the distress boiling up within at what he saw of his homeland, a land ravished by flame and wanton. So much death and destruction were called upon the Pridelands during his absence, and he wondered, as he watched from atop the promontory, whether it would return to the splendor it once enjoyed; Would the plains be fruitful? Would the waters flow uninhibited? And though fires had raged across the lands, taking with them the essence of life, Simba hoped that the life would soon return and his pride could again settle.

Yet, it wasn't of life Simba was pondering; it was death. Not only the death of his kingdom, but the death of his father. The one who held the Pridelands in great reserve above all others. It was hard to imagine the lush grasslands he once knew now; the banks of the rivers lay empty and trees of once visited forests laid in ruin. Even the gorge, off in the distance, looked charred from the reign of Scar, the King's dastardly uncle.

"Good evening Sire," the hornbill Zazu called as he fluttered in, settling at the paws of the lion in a most dignified and proper manor. But Simba never once looked down at him, continuing to stare off into the moonlit sky. Undaunted, Zazu folded up his wings and nestled beside his king. "Sire?"

The lion's eyes darted down just then, catching a glimpse of the hornbill. "What is it Zazu?" he said plainly, hoping the bird wasn't after yet another solution to a problem he could not handle. It was bad enough, after all, to return home and face the worst possible memory - his father's death, but to find out he was lured into the biggest lie of all was something Simba could hardly justify. It was a lie that shaped his adolescence and played up his doubts. How was he expected to command Pride Rock when all he wanted was to be at his father's side?

"Uuuh," the bird fumbled, not expecting the stern remark. "Did I come at a bad time?"

The lion's grim features and blank stare did not change, however. It appeared the young lion king definitely had a lot on his mind. "If you'd like me to come back at a later time--"

"No," Simba interrupted quickly, "please stay."

"As you wish," Zazu returned. He fluttered up and sat upon the lion's shoulder.

If anyone hadn't known any better, they would have thought Mufasa had returned from the dead, the way the hornbill was perched there. But, it just seemed natural for Zazu to be upon Simba's shoulder, like it was always meant to be.

"Zazu," Simba called, breaking the silence. The hornbill responded by pointing his yellow beak at him. "What was the kingdom like after... I, um--"

"When you were sent away?" the hornbill finished for him.

"Yeah," Simba replied, deadpan.

Zazu's feathers shook and his head recoiled smartly. "Sire," the hornbill began uneasily, "it was dreadful. Once the horrible news of your fathers' passing... and yours... was delivered the pride was lost without a leader and its future. Your fathers' brother assumed the throne, as you know, and began a frightful alliance with the hyenas. Between those mangey beasts and Scar's overzealous domination over the lionesses, the Pridelands simply became unbalanced."

"The tapestry began to unweave itself... the Circle of Life had been broken."

"Precicely," Zazu stated. "It was harsh, evil and destructive, but no one blames *you* for what happened." He could tell the guilt of his father's death, the destruction of his kingdom, and his absence from the Pridelands weighed heavily upon him. "You were part of an elaborate scheme by the king's brother. A pawn if you will. Scar is the one to blame not yourself."

"But I--"

"But nothing," Zazu forcefully barked. "The pride now knows exactly what happened because of *you*. We all know that Mufasa's death was no accident. You being alive proves that and only strengthens the bond between you and the lionesses... and me."

The bird hopped down from Simba's shoulder and rest his wing upon the large lion's paws. "We don't *blame* you for anything Simba. Not now or for what happened in the past."

"You don't?" Simba looked down at Zazu. "How can you be so forgiving when I can not?"

"We can because we believe in you. Scar's anger and plight ruined the Pridelands but you now have the opportunity to reverse that devastation and bring about a change. You are the one to weave together a new tapestry for the pridelands and give us back our future. Don't you see?"

"But If I hadn't been in the gorge..." Simba let his voice trail.

"Simba..."

The gorge; the resting place of his late father. Simba had not returned to the beautiful rock cliffs of the cut earth since his return. The image of his falling father was too great for him to overcome; fresh even after all the time that has passed since. Finding Mufasa's body lifeless on the valley floor still burned in the young lion's mind. They weren't memories to him any longer -- they *were* him. They were what he became.

But how he cried for help that day -- *Heeeeeeeelp! Somebody... anybody... Why won't somebody help!*

"I just miss him Zazu; I know I can't change the past. But, for the longest time I wrestled with my fears and memories of what had happened. *I* was the one who was responsible. *I* killed him. To return after all this time and discover it wasn't my fault--How would you feel?" That had done it. The guilt, the hate, and the emotion were poring from him now and he fought hard to keep in; but he could no longer. Simba had been strong to keep these emotions tucked away inside, not even allowing Nala -- his mate -- to know his true inner feelings. He trembled now, out of sadness and anger -- "How would you feel if your whole life was shattered by a member of your family, someone you knew and trusted!"

The massive lion turned away from Zazu hoping that he couldn't see the tear trickle down his furred face, catching just on his whiskers. He could feel the helping wing of the hornbill weigh on his forepaw and for a moment it seemed very comforting: an image that would surely get a laugh from any passers by. But even Simba didn't care at that moment.

"Simba," The hornbill interrupted after a stretch of silence. "One of my duties to the king of the Pridelands is to help chart him in the right course. This, as you may guess, is not the first time I've had to console a King on such matters. In fact, I was in this very same position with your father when he gained the kingship from Ahadi after he passed on."

Zazu paused as memories poured in from every corner of his mind.

"It had been day, instead of night but the scene was just the same. I remember Mufasa stared out over the expansive lands that were his trying to wrestle with the fact that he was not ready to be king. His lands were in turmoil, his brother plotting, and a band of Cheetah's were on the prowl. All of these weighed against the fact that all Mufasa wanted was to be with his father, as you do now."

The hornbill fell silent for a moment, catching his breath.

"Pardon me for saying so, but you should go make peace with Mufasa's death... at the gorge. It's the only--"

The lion blinked up though teary filled eyes, "I can't go back there Zazu. How can I face that place again? Why are you pushing me to do this?"

"Oh Sire," Zazu sighed. "Because I made the mistake of dismissing Mufasa's inner struggle and it nearly ended up costing the pride dearly. I failed him at a time he needed help and I am not about to make the same mistake twice. I would think you would be appreciative of such guidance!"

But Simba turned away; making poor excuses.

The hornbill fluttered in the air eye level with the lion for the first time since their conversation had began. "Simba, you faced your fears to return to your kingdom, now face them again to calm your inner turmoil. Go make peace with your father's death; embrace it, and confront your fears at the gorge. It is the only way." And he flew off.

Simba watched the bird go through wide eyes. Zazu hadn't been that abrupt with him since he was a cub. But was he right, wasn't he? Sighing, Simba turned and took to eyeing the skies above -- filled with smoke and ash; leftovers from the fights and rainstorm that followed. "He's right, I can't go on like this. I have to face the demons within myself before I can be an effective ruler." And without further reservations, he picked himself up and made his way to the damnable gorge where his life and the lives of all the members of the Pride were forever changed.

"Where's Simba?" Nala mumbled out loud to no one in particular. She had tried to sleep in the hours that had painstakingly passed since the great battle, but a sharp stabbing pain in her rear flank kept her restless. Wincing as she rose, the lioness caressed her wounds with her tongue, blinking through the intense pain.

Luckily this was all she had to contend with. The other lionesses bore the brunt of the effects of the great battle with injuries that would undoubtedly take days or weeks to heal completely. There were some wounds, however, that would take a lifetime to forget. And no matter how much one licked to clean them away, those kinds of wounds lingered. The misuse-- the physical and mental hardships the lionesses faced under Scar's reign were overwhelming. If it

weren't for her childhood friend's return... her mate Simba... who knew what might have happened to the pride. Now, though, the lionesses Nala saw were joyfully sleeping knowing that when the sun would arise and they next awoke, their lives would be considerably better.

Simba, her beloved, wasn't spared the scars of battle either. With burn marks on his nose to claw wounds from the one-on-one battle with Scar, he probably was the worst of them all. She'd like to comfort him, cuddle with him, but Simba was no longer at her side and that troubled her.

With much effort Nala rose to her paws, padded around, and peered through the smoke ridden lands to search for her love. She found Sarabi, catnapping at the mouth of the cavern where all lionesses of the pride slept. Even she was contending with the blow Scar had given her earlier that day; clawed in the nose, backpawed across the rocks... but thankfully she too was doing well.

"Sarabi, have you seen him?"

She stirred at the sound of her name, blinking through the tiredness. Sarabi found Nala's worried brow and sighed, "No dear, I'm afraid I haven't," she said slowly. "Is he not--?"

"Not here," she said fastly. "And I'm worried." Nala frowned and sat uneasily on her haunches looking out across the devastated plains.

Her thoughts were instantly interrupted by a fluttering bird, which had just made himself aware. "You won't find him here," Zazu announced quickly. "He was on the path to the gorge last I saw him."

"The gorge?" Nala looked up at the hornbill in confusion. "Why would he go there? At this hour? What is so important that he had to go right--" And then it struck her -- his father's death? Mufasa had died there how could she forget?

"He had some inner searching to do Nala..." Zazu replied plainly.

Inner searching? She asked herself, confused about the hornbill's comment. "What is that supposed to mean?" but she found no answer to her question; the hornbill had disappeared.

Discontent, Nala looked around at her fellow lionesses in slumber and sighed knowing she would find no answers there. Deciding to go find her beloved herself, Nala bid Sarabi farewell and padded her way off the promontory and out onto the charred grasses of her homelands. With the grasses crunching and chomping beneath her massive paws, she thought about Mufasa's death for the first time in a long while and the impact caused because of it. Mufasa's death was just as hard on her and her pride of lionesses, but what she did not know was how hard it was on Simba himself. He didn't talk about it with her nor did he even approach the subject. But now, Nala decided, she would force the issue once she found her mate.

Simba had made the journey to the gorge an effortless one, in spite of the pangs of guilt and queasiness deep inside him. Though he had known that he would have to revisit and confront the memories of his father's demise, the harsh words from Zazu made it clear that it would have to be sooner instead of later. Simba preferred it to be later, but for the sake of himself and his Pride, any unchallenged demons within him had to be dealt with before he could move on, or so Simba decided. If he hadn't, no one would have thought less of him, but the failure it would represent would cast a shadowed doubt about his confidence and ability to rule the Pridelands. That was something Simba could not afford in what would face he and his pride of lionesses in the days and weeks ahead. And so he alone had to face his past once again in a final test of his resolve.

Yet Simba did not make the journey to the gorge alone. Off in the secluded distance, another joined him - a small gangly creature colored with blues, whites, blacks and reds, supported only by a wooden walking stick. Watching Simba intently this one was, the form settled on a rocky cliff and set himself away out of view. The watcher was in the perfect position to see and hear everything that would occur. And with his eyes opened wide, he watched as Simba descended the cliffs above to the valley floor, ever so gently taking a step further to a green and flourishing tree set in the middle of the barren landscape of the gorge's floor.

"His final resting spot," Simba muttered to himself aloud hoping to deafen the silence surrounding him. He had come upon a lone tree in the barren wilderness of the dusty, dirty stone floor of the prideland's gorge. It was the only patch of vegetation as far as the eye could see amidst the walls of this tomb - Mufasa's tomb. The lion let out a sigh of despair at the sight before him; the realm of death surrounding him. For here amidst the life of a growing acacias tree begat a scene of death. Memories flashed before Simba; each one more powerful than the first. His body wrecked with spastic convulsions so powerful that his paws gave way, and he rest upon the knuckles of his knees for support. Shock and sadness soon poured over him like a blood stained river as the entire sequence leading up to his father's death played and played again.

He had just been berated by Scar, his uncle, for getting into a little scrap with the hyenas. It embarrassed Simba that he of all the pride had known about the scuffle; thinking that only his father, Nala and Zazu knew about that. Knowing that the entire pride might know seemed to have wounded his sense of brevity he found earlier.

"Little roar," he shrugged off. "Puh!" Simba roared... and roared again at a lizard passing him by. It wasn't until his third roar that he really heard his potential; his roar bounced off the walls of the gorge! Simba smiled in delight; he really showed them.

But the echoing of his roar had eeriness to it as something else quickly joined the sound - a rumbling. It grew in volume and intensity as the moments went by, becoming so terrible that the rumbling shook everything - including the small stones at his feet. *What's happening?* Simba thought, looking first at the rocks then turning to focus his eyes skyward. As he did so the blood drained from his face, becoming horrid with fear. At that moment he knew what was happening; a lesson his father had taught him was returning:

WILDEBEEEST -- it was a stampede!

In a flurry of fur and paws, Simba scrambled to outrun the ruckus of the wildebeest herd but he could not. They hunted him like quarry but no matter what he did Simba could not hide from them. He clung to a broken tree for dear life; Zazu came down to check on him; cried out for his father; Mufasa was on his way; flung into the air; caught by his father -- *awright!*

Mufasa set him on a nearby ledge out of the stomping hooves of the spooked herd. But horror soon struck as his father was swept up by the stampeding herd and taken downstream and away from him. Simba cried out for his father but could no longer see him and thus he set out for higher ground. He searched and searched the fleeing animals from his newly found elevated perch hoping for any sign of his father, but there was only unsettled dust and streaks of grey as the herd of wildebeest moved on. Then, like a shot of lighting out of the darkness, the colossal lion Mufasa thundered out from under the hooves of the beasts that had brought him down and fastened himself to the cliff base before his young son. He fought to place every claw into the boorish, impenetrable rock face, finding an uneven and unsteady footing. Soon, with his four paws pressed against the rock-face, the lion king began a slow journey up the walls of the gorge. But Mufasa's effort wasn't enough and soon young Simba fought to witness his dad struggle against the rock and ultimately lose his grip.

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

All Simba could do was watch helplessly as his father fell to his death -- again. The echoes of his cries of pain and anguish woke him from his stupor and once again Simba found himself at the bottom of the gorge overlooking the death site of his late-father, only no longer the cubbish form he once was. The memory once again tucked away into the inner recesses of Simba's mind, and he found himself sobbing on the dirt floor of the gorge - alone - staring at the acacia, a light breeze nipping at its branches.

Above him those breezes began to wash away the evils of the smoke-filled plains, allowing the stars above to shine down upon the lands. Full illumination from the most round of moons seen in cycles past dominated the skies. The silverish light poured onto the crevice floor enlightening everything it touched. Its light caught the attention of the young lion king as it danced upon him so. And then, he gasped as he looked up and saw what was before him: The perfect illumination to a most perfect setting; the tree basking in the moonlight.

The acacia was perfect in its position. Completely untouched by Scar's reign and the aftermath that followed. For the first time since he returned to the Pridelands, Simba allowed himself an authentic smile. But this was not a smile born from glee or happiness; it was a smile that came from the knowledge that not even Scar could ruin the resting place of his father. He reveled in the fact that Scar's handiwork did not rob the pride of what he wanted most of all: to be rid of Mufasa.

The now grown-up Simba stood finally, getting to his paws, through tripping over them in his attempt to recover from his painful memories. It amazed even he to know that his faculties were so traumatized by them, even now. His impenetrable gaze bore into the hefty trunk of the acacias tree and beyond as they fixed upon the cliff base from which Mufasa fell -- or rather the basin from which Scar had thrown him. And there, with the images still fresh in his mind, with all his rage and wanton, Simba summoned up all that was within him and let out a mighty roar, a tumultuous roar that boomed across the gorge. With it, Simba released all the emotion and pent up anger over the passing of Mufasa, his childhood nightmares and the battles with Scar both physically and mentally.

But his roar, it seemed, caused an imbalance and the light breeze that had been teasing him all evening had turned evil, quick and abrupt. No longer was it the nice puff of wind he so enjoyed, it became a gale-force power determined to be reckoned with whipping his mane straight back away from his face.

"*Simba...*" it growled back at him, roaring and echoing off the walls of the cliff. "*My Son.*"

"It can't be," Simba said aloud at first, unsure if he had heard his name. Of course he hadn't. It was just an odd gust of wind; or was it? Inwardly he feared that he had heard his name. For that could only mean -- He'd seen this kind of odd behavior before in the winds not long ago. The howling of the winds begat an absolute awesome phenomenon that brought forth an apparition in the heavens: his father. Shaky, Simba turned skyward and braced for the image he knew he'd find. But there was no apparition to be found amongst the stars. And still the winds howled.

"*Simba...*" the voice boomed, carried on the gusts of the breezes disturbed by the guilt-laden roar of a lion.

He turned quickly, away from the heavens, toward the place of his father's death wondering if his voice were somehow coming from the grave, from that very spot. And yet there was no apparition to be found there either. And still the winds howled.

"Simba..." the ghastly sound echoed again sending a roar of wind along with it.

The lion shook his head against the winds trying to clear his eyes of his mane, which had been drawn over them. He couldn't see anything against the strong current, and that frightened him. "I can't," Simba exclaimed. "I can't..." He couldn't face his father again. Not now... not when he was trying to come to terms with his destiny!

"Simba..."

"GO AWAY!"

"Grieve not my son, for I have left the flesh to join the Great Kings. But I shall always be with you - in your heart; in your soul; in your life. Remember this and you will find the strength to fulfill your destiny... fulfill the Circle of Life."

The lion shook his head against the winds trying to clear his eyes of his mane, which had been drawn over them. He couldn't see anything against the strong current, and that frightened him. "I can't," Simba exclaimed. "I don't have what it takes--"

"You can!" Mufasa bellowed, triggering another thunderous gust of wind. *"The strength within is abundant. You must look inside yourself and trust those around you. There you shall find the necessary courage and knowledge to lead."*

"I don't know if I can--" he began to say, but the ever-pulsating gusts made it all but impossible for the young lion as he fought to keep his balance against the onslaught. His eyes stung with the tears and heartfelt emotions that were balled up inside, waiting for release all these years.

"Simba..."

It was a glorious release; he knew he hadn't caused the death of his father, but that knowledge did nothing to change the fact that Mufasa was not here with him, nor was he going to be in the near future. He would not have the advantage of a father teaching his son how to be the king to a vast pride of lions. Oh, how he wish he could seek the guidance he so needed from his father... "Daaaad!" Simba called after him, but the words were ripped from his throat and sent skyward. And yet the winds continued.

"Simba..."

And now that he received that sign he couldn't bear to let him go. As true as Mufasa's words were, he still wasn't sure how he'd live without him; how he'd rule it all. He fought against the winds to listen to another word from his father, before the stars above consumed him and he once again returned to the Great Kings of the Past. And yet the winds continued.

"Simba..."

The lion threw his head down against the winds to protect him from their onslaught. He was about to let out yet another mighty roar when... the winds died, allowing him to get a firm grasp of the stony ground below. Unsure of what to expect next, he turned and refocused his gaze upon the acacias tree he came to visit. It stood, just as it had before, not a leaf out of place. How could that be? "What a minute..." he said. Had he imagined it? Was it all in his head?

"Simba?"

Oh my gosh, he thought. *It called to me-the tree called my name!* If he ignored it, would it do so again? It did, and he jumped back at the sound of his name; it appeared his ordeal was not quite yet over.

No matter, regardless of what was coming he was definitely going to be prepared for it. Simba steeled himself and took a step closer to the Acacias tree and spoke, "Come into the light..."

The stars once again shone brightly into the crevice, washing over the features of the intruder like water over river-rock, bringing them sharply into view. Simba was unable to tell what had appeared but it looked quizzingly something lionish. The form took a step closer to him allowing more of its features to come out of the shadows. Simba saw an insistent pinkish muzzle, a roundish furred head, a set of perked-up ears and two beautiful eyes that he couldn't help but gaze intently into. It could only be--

"Nala?"

"Yeah?" the lioness chuckled; it was obvious from his wrinkled up brow that he was not expecting to see her there.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Does it matter," she shot back inquisitively.

"I guess not," he sighed; sat back upon his haunches he returned his gaze at the moonlit tree.

"Zazu told me you were here" -- "Did Zazu tell you I was here?"

They both chuckled, but Simba offered his paw out to her signaling for her to continue.

"Yes my love," she said. "He did. You're not angry are you?"

"No," he breathed out. "Not really. I'm sure he didn't understand I wanted to be alone."

"Perhaps..."

A chill breeze whipped through Simba's mane; teasing its disjointed form as he heard the words from the lioness he loved. He cherished Nala so much and was thankful that she was by his side, but he did not want her to see him like this -- in pain. "I'm sorry I've been so distant my love," he began. "It wasn't my intention. It's just that..."

"You're in pain Simba, I understand that, but you don't have to face it alone."

Simba sighed and looked at her differently. "I didn't want to burden you with my past, Nala," he said. "It was harsh thinking that I had killed my father. Coming back to face it was hard enough but I've realized that no matter how or by whom he was killed, I still miss him. It hurts you know... but after tiptoeing around it, I needed to come down here to make further amends. Do you know the significance of this spot Nala?"

She looked the Acacias over and nodded. "I do. This is where all the pain began."

"What would you know of my pain," he shot back harshly. "Do you know how hard it is to forget that all my life I thought I killed my father only to find out that my uncle did it to gain power, then used that power to manipulate me and to orchestrate the destruction of the Pridelands?"

"Oh Simba," she sighed heavily. "We lionesses had to go through a lot of pain and suffering ourselves you know."

"I know..."

"No, I don't think you do Simba."

He looked up in surprise... and anger?

"Do you realize the amount of abuse we took from Scar, both physically and mentally? He ruined our home, crushed all hope and spat at the very name of his brother. You don't realize just how much we longed for Mufasa. He was our guiding force and loving Master. Not even Sarabi was spared the humiliation. And then me..." she faltered. "Me."

"What happened to you," he asked quickly.

"You were dead..." she whispered. "How I cried for days after Scar had told us you and your father perished. I didn't realize it then... but I loved you. I may not have faced the pain of losing a father that day Simba, but I did lose a friend... and a future lover. All in the same day."

The gorge fell silent. Simba wept silently for his behavior; how could he be so presumptuous to think that he was the only one who suffered. And twice in one day, he was shocked and felt shame. "I'm sorry Nala."

"For what," she asked, lifting her gaze to his.

"For being so selfish. I never realized how much anguish you lionesses went through, how much you really needed me. And how I'm still far-off in the jungle, inattentive to your needs. I don't know how I can ever lead you, how I can ever rebuild the Pridelands, but most importantly, how I can be a good mate to you."

Nala smiled and cuddled up close to him, placing her body against his. His muscles tensed just a bit at the touch of her fur, but he did love her and enjoyed her company so much.

"I don't know either my love. But we will take those steps together."

On her last breath, she nuzzled up under her mate's muzzle and let out a slight purr. "I love you Simba, I always have and together we will make these lands thrive again. You'll see."

His breathing became ragged; his blood burning with desire. She was a good, loving mate. Simba didn't deserve her... but he loved her so. He nuzzled under her chin and purred in acceptance, losing himself in the moment.

Rafiki the baboon looked on with a gentle smile of approval as the two lions became lost in one another; his eyes as big as the moon above. He had been watching Simba throughout his journey this eve, hoping the young king would be able to pull his emotions together and take his place on the Great Circle. He was assured now that the Pride was to live on and with Nala as his Queen and mate, life would once again return to these plains, he was sure of it. Rafiki continued to watch them for only a moment more, just long enough to see them succumb to one another.

And as the light from the cosmos shone down on a lone tree in the Pridelands gorge, he smiled. "Mufasa will always be with us. He lives in us all... and in you, Simba." He blinked his eyes shut and disappeared, leaving only the light from one bright star above pulsating on the now lonely tree.

EPILOGUE

Rafiki opened his eyes and found himself within the confines of his home once again; safe, secure and warm. The monkey looked about him and let out a great big grin as his eyes found the very image he sought -- of Simba and an old, broken down tree. It was probably one of the most important historical pieces he drew, one imagined, for the event itself helped the young lion king reconcile most of the demons that so troubled him. Solitude laid within the gorge that evening and Rafiki wanted to capture the occasion permanently.

"Ahh, the memories..."

Before him were the stories of a pride of lions: their heartaches and their triumphs. He was honored to be a part of the narrative - a witness to a great society that flourished all around him, and because of him. A friend to Ahadi, a mentor to Mufasa and a father figure to Simba, Rafiki had been through more than most and had seen all. His was a kind of wisdom that transcended the Great Kings of the Past, at least he thought so. His was the kind of wisdom that was trusted.

"Many a lion king intrusted themselves to me," the Mandrill said as he looked around his inner sanctum. "And in turn, I them." His eyes fell upon an empty place in which to pain, and Rafiki hobbled to it. "I look forward to chronicling Simba's pride for many more years to come. But, I do not think I'll ever be able to surpass one of its greatest traditional stories... one that is passed from father to son -- the Legacy of the Great Kings. Its teachings are wise; better than even I could advise!"

"Look at the stars," a lion proclaimed. "The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars."

"Really?"

"Yes," Mufasa acknowledged to Simba, eyes wide in awe. "So whenever you feel alone, just remember that those kings will always be there to guide you... and so will I."

The End