



THE LION KING

a short story

"Sacred Homage"

By: Richard G. Russo

"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 mangy 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 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. It's 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 ghostly 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.

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