



Written by:

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FORWARD

What can really be said about a project as big as *The Pride*? Plenty. And there is a wealth of knowledge surrounding its creation. For instance, this story began under the studies of Brian Tiemann, a fan of *The Lion King* from the very beginning. He wrote and nurtured the project from its beginnings up through May of 1996, when new chapters suddenly ceased. *The Pride* laid dormant for about a year until I picked up the work in February 1997. And while I went on to conclude the massive story here, Brian Tiemann's work can not go uncredited. A lot can be said about him and his dedication to the quality of this story. I can only hope that I have not only picked up, but finished the tale in his image.

In taking on this challenge I had a lot of help along the way. A major thank you (kiss the feet kind of recognition) goes out to David Morris. Many have thanked this man in their stories. Why? Because not only is he a great writer (the co-author of the *Chronicles of the Pridelands* Series) but he is also a great friend. I have to say if it wasn't for Dave pushing me on in the face of defeat and stubbornness, what is of *The Pride* would not exist today. To Dave Morris I must give a big heartfelt thank you.

There are two other people I wish to thank in helping with the creation of *The Pride*. The first is Lora Hunter, a dear friend of mine who I've known for years. She saw me through a lot of writers block and many other troubles. Lora may have heard my denials to see the *Lion King* movie in the theaters but the many talks we've had over the past few years have been invaluable - not only to this story but many other ideas as well. Her contribution to my life is unprofound and her friendship is special. I also wish to thank Jessica Gustafik (now Keila) for, at least, believing in my abilities as a writer. Even in the face of denial she told me I could do it. Thanks to these people *The Pride* is a reality - whole.

So, *The Pride* - What exactly is this story about? Well, it is about a lot of things. It is about leadership and responsibility. It's about facing your hardships. Heck, it is really about a lot of things. And in order to understand it all you'll just have to read it! I really thank you for your interest in *The Pride*. It has been a taxing time during these past few months while creating this story, and I hope I never go through something like this again. Just kidding. Again, thanks for reading this story and I hope it is what you expected.

Ricky Russo



Part One

The Pride

Chapter One

The moon rose, and as its crescent edged over the rocks at the entrance to the cavern its light poured in over the living contours of the stony interior. Rocks all around the cavern lit up in sharp relief, casting their dim shadows on the far wall; its gray light washed over the bodies of a dozen motionless forms. It nagged at the face of Taka, tormenting him as he twisted his head back and forth, his eyes pressed shut, until at last he succumbed and opened them. He turned his head toward the light, frowned, and rolled over onto his belly to hide his face from the white intruder.

Trying fitfully to sleep, for though there were only a few hours more of darkness remaining before the summer sun would rise and cast its oppressive rays upon all the lions in the cavern, Taka leaned involuntarily against a young lioness near him. She stirred in her sleep and muttered something, something which sounded unpleasant. She curled into a tighter ball and seemed to pull away from Taka.

The young, bony lion opened his eyes once more. This night there would be no sleep for him, as always. He grimaced at the lioness who had drawn away from him, turned his head away, and licked at his shoulder halfheartedly. The moon was rising high into the sky now, and it was framed in the open mouth of the cavern, beckoning. The sky was already turning a faint pink with the coming of morning.

Taka staggered to his feet and his stomach rumbled at him in protest. He shook himself, and bits of dry grass fell from his coat. He moved away from the sleeping pride and slid invisibly along the wall, making for the entranceway. The night's kill had been meager, and he had had little food-- Mufasa, as always, had eaten first and taken the best of the meat, and had then glowered at Taka as his own lionesses had taken their turns before his brother had even been allowed near the carcass.

Lowering his head to stifle an irrepressible growl of frustration, Taka reached the entrance to the cavern. As he paused, standing silhouetted in the moonlight, his shadow fell suddenly across Wamase, a young, curious lioness whose wide eyes now were fixed intently and alertly upon Taka. He felt her gaze and turned reluctantly.

"What is it?" he asked, a little shortly.

She gazed back at him in wonder. "I can't sleep," she told him innocently. "Where are you going? You sneak out all the time."

He had been holding his breath, and now he let it out in a sharp hiss of annoyance.

"I'm going out. I have to be by myself."

"But every morning," she persisted. She raised herself on a foreleg. "I want to know where you keep going. Do you get sleep somewhere else? You hardly ever sleep here."

Taka's eyes narrowed. "Wamase..."

"Don't you like it here? Why don't--"

He interrupted her with a sharp but breathy hiss through clenched teeth. "Quiet. They'll hear you."

Wamase's voice fell to a murmur. "They'll hear us," she corrected. "I want to know--"

"No," Taka broke in. "They'll hear you. I'm going." And without another word, he sank out of sight beyond the threshold of the cavern's mouth and was gone.

Wamase stared after him for several minutes, her big brown eyes fixed on the moon framed in the doorway. Finally she rested her head once again on her paws and closed her eyes. It was a long time before she was able to regain her lost sleep.

The sun had risen by the time Taka reached the edge of the water hole and bent down to drink. There was plenty of time yet to relax before the day's predictable groups of animals began to arrive and socialize; he could make himself comfortable. He closed his eyes and began to drink deeply of the cold water, oblivious for once to the world around him. Here in the cool hours of morning, before the birds had begun to chatter, before the sun had begun to blaze, before the animals had begun to gather, there was nothing to beware. His empty stomach still tormented him, but the water served to deaden the hunger. Taka drank, letting himself be absorbed in the calm of the morning.

It was only the sudden alarmed rising of a bird from the water's edge, its wingbeats making a rhythmic squeaking sound, its shadow flashing across his eyes, that roused Taka from his reverie. His head snapped up, and water dripped from his chin. He scanned the grasses at the edge of the pool for motion. He knew that nothing would likely happen for some minutes-- anything that would allow itself to be noticed so obviously would remain motionless for a good long period before judging it safe to proceed. Taka correspondingly lowered himself cautiously into the tall grasses and let himself freeze still, his coat blending with the morning shadows between the yellow grass, only his dark mane giving him away. He peered into the stillness on the opposite side of the pool where the bird had been. Nothing... yet...

Taka tried to judge the time he had waited by marking the sun's position against a tree overhanging the pool. Though it assaulted his eyes, he forced himself to stare at the sun until he found the shimmering edge of the disc and noted where it was in relation to the tree. It passed one branch, then another, and he decided he had waited long enough. His stomach rumbled, and Taka was growing hungrier and angrier by the minute. At last he raised his head abruptly above the grasses, hoping to startle whatever it was into movement. Nothing. He slunk backwards away from the pool's edge and let the grass obscure him from the view of anything on the opposite side. So far so good, he thought wryly. Of course it's miles away by now.

The sun continued its slow climb. Holding himself low to the ground, Taka inched around the pool, screening himself with the tall reeds that lined the water. He came to a dip in the ground, where a trickle of water ran in to feed the pool, and where a large standing stone marked the inlet. He used this to his advantage and peered slowly around it.

A gopher hole. There it was. A mound of bare earth, with a visible opening at the summit. Taka sighed. Of course. What was a gopher when he could wait and be rewarded with a zebra for his patience? Patience, after all, was something he had learned to cultivate. He rolled his eyes in disappointment and prepared to move away again.

But then it came: another movement. Taka's eyes snapped to attention again. One of the grasses on the far side of the gopher mound had tilted and was now vibrating. A smile grew on Taka's face, and he allowed himself to lick his lips and then bare his teeth. Inching around the stone, he lowered himself into the grass. His tail twitched involuntarily.

The anticipation... he could almost taste his prey. His adrenaline surged. He didn't care that he was compromising his personal pride by attacking such a small creature when a little bit of perseverance would yield him a zebra or a wildebeest. He was hungry, and this would serve the purpose.

Taka's tail thrashed, and as another grass stem bent aside, he leaped into action. Springing silently across the stream bed, he aimed directly for the top of the gopher mound with his forepaws, and landing squarely upon it he crushed the entrance inward and blocked the gopher's escape that way. Now the only thing the creature could do was swim, and any lion, no matter how much he might dislike the water, can outswim a rodent in a few powerful strokes. He let out a deep growl of warning and crashed through the screen of grasses, and there was his prey. The large, fat rodent squealed in alarm and bolted as he had anticipated toward the water. With another bound, Taka was upon it. He plunged into the water just behind the gopher, and his face driving into the surface threw deluges of water outward. His teeth struck quickly, snapping the rodent's back as it expired with another shriek. Taka let it float for a moment as he threw back his head and roared in satisfaction. Immediately he grabbed his quarry again and turned to shore, the blood running between his teeth. Now he would eat, and he would survive another day or two, regardless of what Mufasa could try to do. Taka was strong. He was self-reliant. He--

Trotting through the reeds brought Taka abruptly into a situation he was not prepared for in the least. There was a confused yelp, and a dark gray form thrashed about in front of him, trying to run but unsure of which direction to take. It slipped on the muddy bank and yipped in pain and alarm as it fell, then picked itself up again. It found a foothold and sprang away, but by this time Taka had thrown the gopher aside and pounced with a confident growl upon the creature. His claws were extended, and as he pinned it to the ground the gray animal squirmed in both pain and fear. It shivered and tried to cover its head with its paws, whining.

Taka gave a growl that was now more for show than in earnest, for he was now less hungry than he had been-- he had a meal waiting for him-- and was now simply curious and astonished.

"Who are you?" Taka demanded with a snarl. "What are you doing here?" For the creature could now be clearly identified as a hyena by its black spots, large ears, and pungent odor which made Taka wrinkle his nose.

The hyena merely gibbered. It seemed petrified with fear and remained motionless on the ground, its forelegs still flung over its face. Taka disgustedly stood back.

"Say something, you fool. Explain yourself."

The hyena gave no impression of even having heard Taka. It seemed resigned to its fate. What a pathetic creature, Taka thought, watching it whining incoherently on the ground. Smiling inwardly, he stood over the hyena.

He took on an imperious glare. "This is why you hyenas have always been a miserable kind," he growled contemptuously. "Even when you are stalking a lion's own prey you don't know when to turn away and let it go. You always wait until your very lives are in danger before you can be made to understand where you belong." He sighed and cast down his eyes. "Get out of here," he hissed.

The hyena uncovered its eyes and looked wildly at Taka. It squirmed and whined some more, then abruptly scrambled to its feet and dashed away northward through the grass. Terrified yips floated back on the wind.

Taka shook his head and smiled to himself. That was fun, he thought. Isn't it funny how those ridiculous creatures are always so afraid of everything? They can't lift a claw to help themselves, and yet they survive, year in, year out. How DO they do it? What hunting skills could they possibly possess?

The sun was now clear of the tree and beginning to beat down uncomfortably, and birds were streaming overhead on their way to the shelter of the water hole; Taka turned back to his limp prey that lay on the ground behind him, picked it up, and paced back to the shade of a tree that overlooked the pool. From here he could watch the crowd gather as he ate. He could keep track of their movements, noting their habits; every bit of knowledge was valuable to Taka, since he was destined, it seemed, to be ostracized from the pride, never allowed to eat of the other lions' kill again. He had always been the small brother, the one who had needed protection from his mother, the one who was always picked on and thrust aside. Mufasa was overstepping his bounds, now that their father Ahadi had died, and was now determined, it seemed, to be the ideal pride leader, ruling with a wise but heavy paw. Taka sighed. He would need his inner strength now. If he were to survive, he was going to have to become self-sufficient. Find and kill his own food, every day. Live away from Pride Rock. Form a new way of living.

But-- no lion could hunt alone. How could anyone expect him to survive? Taka scowled at a trio of gazelles that had just arrived at the water's edge, ignoring the lion on the rise above them that they obviously knew was there. They had nothing to fear, and he knew it. Taka growled at them, eliciting not even a twitch of an ear from the animals in front of him. The world seemed to turn its back on Taka, not taking the slightest notice of him, not even doing him the honor of acknowledging his existence.

Taka gritted his teeth in rage, then subsided. He lowered his head and went back to gnawing on the gopher's carcass and on his festering grudge.

The sun had reached its zenith when Taka finished his meal and had washed the blood from his muzzle. His appetite was now satiated, and his mind had cleared enough to allow him to think rationally about what he was going to do. Granted, it had always been hard, but Ahadi had only died five days ago, and now Mufasa was making life unbearable for Taka. Things would have to change. Taka would have to plan.

He scanned the horizon. There to the south was Pride Rock, the seat of the kingdom. The pride always left there when the herds moved to better feeding grounds, but always they returned. Taka's heart swelled. He had always dreamed of being the king, of being the one to stand at the tip of the rock and send his roar out over the land to proclaim his supremacy. He deserved that as much as any lion did. What right did Mufasa have to take that from him? And the only way his larger brother would give up his place would be if he died. Otherwise nothing would stop him.

Pride Rock now seemed to undergo a change as Taka watched it; to his eyes, it grew in height and darkened, and it began to occupy the entire sky. It loomed to the southward like a threatening monument. Taka could almost feel his brother's paws reaching out from it to cover the entire world. He shivered. What was happening to his home, to the den where he had spent his childhood, frolicking with the other cubs and tormenting the birds? What had happened to those years? It could not have been so long ago. And Mufasa: what had happened to him? Only last year he had been an adolescent like Taka, his littermate. He had still been chasing birds and playing in trees when Taka had been learning to hunt. Now-- King? No. Taka could not grasp such an idea. His big naive brother, Mufasa-- the King of the Pride Lands. It was not conceivable. It was not tolerable. Something would have to be done.

And now Pride Rock was a malevolent entity, something which Taka could never see as home again. It now represented what he had lost to fate, to his brother's fortune in having been born the stronger and grown the more popular. Now Mufasa had taken his father's place, and was preparing to claim the beautiful lioness Sarabi as his mate. Intolerable.

But what could he do?

He saw a few stray flecks of blood on his paw and cleaned them off. What more could he do? At least he had eaten. His belly was full for another day. He would live, if only to seethe as Mufasa drove him slowly from the pride and from his life. He was strong. He would survive.

And now the sun was sinking into the western sky. It was time to go back. Taka rose slowly and moved away from the tree, circling by the water hole as he went. As he passed by, he gave a vicious snarl toward a group of zebras standing at the water. They jolted and wove around each other nervously, making alarmed noises, causing a light cloud of dust to rise at their hooves. Taka smiled broadly at them and moved on. As the zebras watched him with peeved expressions, he moved toward the east before he circled back southward, and the setting sun shone through the dust, casting a golden light on Taka's back.

The Pride

Chapter Two

"Those cheetahs are still out there on the border, though they seem to have very little food at their disposal and are likely to move to a new location soon. And cheetahs in a group are an unusual occurrence anyway. We might do well to keep an eye on them. ...Mufasa?"

Mufasa sat lost in thought. He stared off eastward from the promontory, out over the expanse of savannah that was his kingdom.

"You still miss him, don't you, sire?" came the voice at his shoulder, now concerned. He turned his head slightly, enough to fix Zazu in the corner of his right eye.

He sighed. "Yes... I'm sure you know what it's like," his deep voice rumbled. "You're older than I am. But I've never had to face this before. I'm doing my best to manage without him, but... I'm not sure I can."

The large lion cast his gaze down to the ground. Zazu eyed him keenly. "Of course you can," he told Mufasa dismissively. "What would make you think such a thing?"

Mufasa raised his head again and looked outward from Pride Rock. He took a step toward the crest of the promontory, where he had stood just a few days previously to claim the kingship. "Look at them," he told the hornbill. "All lionesses. Not a single male among them but me. Something is wrong."

Zazu peered at them, agreeing with the observation but wondering why Mufasa was missing the obvious extra factor. "But there's Taka."

"That's exactly my point," Mufasa countered. "*Where* is Taka? He is missing again today, and that makes four times out of the last six days that he was not to be found when we woke at midday." He opened his mouth to say more, but fell silent.

The group of lionesses, still full from last night's wildebeest kill, was lounging on the flat sunny stones at the base of Pride Rock. Some gossiped and laughed among themselves. Surely the picture of happiness, Zazu thought. What could the King be worried about?

"And why are you concerned about... him?" he said with poorly hidden distaste.

Mufasa took several more steps toward the tip of the rock, and then yawned. He blinked several times. He had just awakened a few minutes ago, and the news that Taka was missing had come to him as no surprise, though it had added to his uneasiness.

He fixed his eyes on a tree below so as not to have to look at those of his majordomo. "I can't forget what my father told me about him," he said slowly and hesitantly. "That is always foremost in my mind. It all makes sense, and I know I have to obey what hundreds of generations of life have laid down as the law. But... how? He is my brother. ...And what," He looked down wistfully at the full dozen lionesses relaxing on the rocks. "What am I supposed to think about this situation? Did Ahadi foresee this? Did he understand what the responsibility was that he was laying upon me? He said nothing new about it toward the end of his life; yet I have to wonder whether if he had known he would have given me different advice."

Zazu gulped. Here was a problem he had not thought he would have to face. He knew what Mufasa was trying to tell him, but he did not know how to reply. What did he know about lion pride structure? He was a bird. It was only under special circumstances that he was the King's advisor at all and allowed to live at Pride Rock. And certainly Ahadi had told him nothing more than he had told Mufasa. How could he be reassuring? How could he say something intelligent? Yes, there were a lot of lionesses in the pride, but he didn't think it was too many for... for...

"I... do see your difficulty, sire," he said at last, after a long pause. "You wish you could let your brother have his share of the lionesses. You--" He broke off, not wishing to say something Mufasa could perceive as mocking. He retracted his head nervously into his body.

Mufasa turned to him, but in his eyes there was nothing but sadness and regret.

"Yes, that's it," he said. "I don't know how I can be doing what I'm doing now-- forcing him away from the kill, driving him away from my females. But it isn't just Ahadi's wishes: all the lionesses are repulsed by him. None will even let him near. If he were to find one that was accepting of him, though, and if I were still following my father's words, I would be bound to drive him off her. How can I do that? I can see why he's gone so often-- what is there left for him here? For all I know, he's gone to join another pride. But, Zazu," he began in a pained voice, "Where do I place the boundary? What can I allow him to do? Because he's my brother. Much of the time I'm tempted to ignore my father and let him have the half of the kingdom he's entitled to. What gives me the right to take away everything he could hope to live for?"

Mufasa fell silent, and Zazu could tell he was fighting himself mentally. He shuddered under Zazu's claws.

"Sire," Zazu ventured. "Another pride will take him in if he runs away. He won't be unhappy elsewhere. This is your pride now. This has always been how it works." He thought for a moment, then smiled. Perhaps it would help Mufasa to laugh for a change.

"Come on, Mufasa," he said teasingly. "I'd hardly think you'd be complaining." He gestured with a wing towards the lionesses. One stretched luxuriantly on a rock.

Mufasa looked startled for a moment, then a grin spread across his face, and then a deep rumbling laugh forced its way up from his throat.

"Oh, you're right, Zazu," he chuckled. "What am I worried about? Taka can take care of himself. Is that what you were looking worried about? You thought it might--" He laughed again. "Might be too much for me? Don't you worry about that, you old scoundrel. And--" his voice became hushed as he looked over the edge at the lionesses. "There's Sarabi. Let's see if I can surprise her." He turned and began to slink back down the promontory, the grin still lingering mischievously on his face. Zazu hopped from his shoulder, in good spirits, and flew into the interior of Pride Rock to review his thoughts.

The sun passed its zenith and the lionesses got to their feet, knowing that though the food supply from the previous night was not exhausted yet, still it was wise to scout the area for when it would be necessary to kill again. The pride was a large one, and in order to stay healthy it needed to make a major kill every two days or so. None grumbled, for with still full bellies and optimistic hearts it was not hard to imagine that game was plentiful and hunting would be good.

Sarabi smiled as she shook herself and crawled out from the dark recess behind a pile of leaning stones to join her fellows in the scouting. She trotted out and was quick to join in conversation with her friends. Not surprisingly, most of the chatter was about Mufasa.

"What a king!" was Kolo's comment. "He's the biggest male I've ever seen-- even bigger than Ahadi. I'll bet he's even going to hunt with us. Is he, Sarabi? Is he?"

Suddenly several pairs of eyes were on her. Some were winking. "Well," she began uneasily. "He is a bit tired, you know. He was awake all last night keeping an eye on Taka. He's still missing."

It was an effective means of turning aside the inquiry that she knew was coming. Immediately all voices began murmuring about Taka's whereabouts. And Sarabi was relieved, since she was now excused from talking about... him. She listened, and the lionesses' voices were turning from inquisitive tones to disparaging ones.

"Personally I wouldn't mind if he never came back. Such a skeleton! And so cold. I shiver every time he comes near me," said one. Others agreed with similar comments.

"No wonder he's so scrawny. Mufasa never lets him eat until the end."

"But his personality! He's so... so bitter. You never feel safe with him-- it always seems you're about to be clawed for no reason."

"Good thing we all sharpen our own claws then."

"But what about Mufasa? He protects us all, doesn't he? At least he should."

"Of course he does. He's always there for all of us. Not like that collection of frozen bones that runs away every night."

"Oh, listen to you. You make Taka sound so terrible. What if Mufasa can't... can't attend to all of us? We'll need him."

There were several cries of revulsion at this. "Disgusting! I wish he were dead. Then there'd never be any uncertainty," growled Ng'ara, a large dark lioness who was a role model for many others. Her comment drew a few cries of approval.

Sarabi sighed. She knew that here was her responsibility arising again. Much as it pained her, she would have to defend Taka, since he was the brother of her mate-to-be. Mufasa had made her promise not to shun Taka, nor to speak negatively about him to her fellow lionesses. She cleared her throat.

"That's enough," she declared with authority. She had stepped up on a small flat rock and was inclining her head with the grace of the queen that she would soon be. The noise immediately stopped, and all eyes were fixed on her.

"Taka is our pride-mate," she continued. "He is the brother of the King, and to commit treachery against the royal family is a serious crime. Now, you can talk, but you really shouldn't do any more. If I hear about it, Mufasa will hear about it, and then there will be trouble."

She sighed. "Mufasa is new at being King, but in just five days he has shown that he will be a wonderful one. He will be all the protection we will need. He is powerful and knows his responsibilities. And he loves his brother. So leave Taka alone, please."

Sarabi stepped down, out of breath. One or two lionesses began to speak to her, but she cut them off. "We need to hunt. Let's go."

She pushed through the other lionesses and made off toward the east, the direction the promontory of Pride Rock pointed. The others looked after her, some in surprise, some in discomfort, some in delighted anticipation for stories of Mufasa, and some in wounded anger. One by one, they all followed, hiding their feelings and turning their minds to the task at hand, which was to find food.

Sarabi strode forward resolutely. She was every bit the queen she was expected to become-- tall, regal, beautiful beyond normal measure. She swished her tail provocatively as she walked; she had developed this habit only recently, but now it was as much a part of her as her face. Somehow it did not seem out of place for a queen's demeanor; she carried herself well, and any lion could see why she had been chosen so early on to be Mufasa's mate. The others were indeed all jealous of her, each to her own degree.

As cubs, she and Mufasa had played by the streams and among the rocks, never straying too far from Pride Rock, just as Ahadi had warned them both. There had been three other cubs in the pride, two females aside from Taka, but Mufasa had shown no interest in either of them-- only Sarabi. She had sensed this and was constantly drawn to him, and Ahadi had decided early on that these two would be the next rulers of the pride.

But Mufasa had drawn away from her in the previous year or two, during his adolescence. He had spent long journeys, often lasting several days, with his father, learning the ways of hunting and of maintaining the herds in their proper numbers, of not wasting precious water or failing to clear away old bones from the den. He had learned to drive hyenas from the Pride Lands, and this Sarabi knew was his favorite pastime of all. He had found his claws and teeth last dry season, and whenever the opportunity arose to fight the spotted invaders, he had jumped on it.

Sarabi sighed. That was the time when he was supposed to be paying more attention to her. Ahadi had warned her of that, and yet it had seemed to be an empty warning. She had borne the good-natured ribbing of the other lionesses for months, never losing her temper or sense of humor. She knew it would improve sooner or later. Perhaps he was waiting until he was King to claim her as his mate.

And that had turned out to be the case. Mufasa had suddenly come to her only two days after Ahadi's death, and she had become, as tradition dictated, his Queen. Mufasa had yet to announce that fact to the pride, however. Some wondered whether he was shy, or was simply biding his time. Or maybe he just had more pressing things on his mind.

The sun ducked behind Pride Rock, and its long shadow overtook them rapidly as the lionesses entered the hunting grounds where the herds of zebra and antelope were most often seen. They fanned out over a wide area, melting in the dusk into the golden grasses of the savannah. Sarabi looked back to the great Rock and smiled. Who cared about Taka? The pride was healthy and complete enough without him. And she loathed him secretly, though she would

not say so to her pride-mates. Ever since he had been a cub he had been reclusive, ignoring his fellow cubs, absorbed in his own exploration of his world. Ahadi had been the only one who had seemed concerned, though not as much as his mate Akase, Taka's and Mufasa's mother. They had been diligent in protecting him from bullying and mocking, but it had all left a scar too deep to be healed. And now...

Sarabi watched as the last pair of lionesses made off to the southward, still talking excitedly to each other as they went. Discussing Taka, no doubt.

With a resigned sigh, Sarabi settled into the grass right where she was, on a slight rise in the center of the savannah. Business was more important, she told herself. Taka would wait. He could be safely ignored for the time being. He was, after all, weak and harmless. What threat could he pose to twelve strong, healthy lionesses, all with sharp claws and teeth? She shook herself and prepared for an evening of motionless waiting, like so many of the nights always were. Such was life. Such was the Circle.

The Pride

Chapter Three

Mufasa had returned to Pride Rock after a quick survey of the lands to the west. The sun had set and Zazu seemed to be absent, and when Mufasa entered the pride's large cavern the only thing that met his eyes was the remains of the previous night's kill-- a haunch and several ribs, both with a large amount of meat on them, that the lionesses had dragged back to the cavern. Since it was more than half eaten already, it had begun to be pushed toward the far wall, where old bones tended to collect until the pride decided to clear them out. The smell of meat was still strong and certainly fresh enough, and Mufasa approached the remains purposefully. He licked his lips and crouched next to the pile of bones, looked briefly around, and bit off a mouthful of meat.

Taka entered the cavern and saw only Mufasa's tail waving lightly behind the pride's food supply. His eyes widened, and as he turned he stifled a growl of anger that threatened to burst out involuntarily. Now Mufasa was cheating the rest of the pride too.

As he backed out of the cavern's mouth, however, his hind foot kicked a rock out of place, sending it clattering noisily down the trail. Mufasa's head snapped up.

"Taka!" he called. "Wait. Come back in here." He tried to brush some of the blood off his muzzle.

Taka paused, knowing that running or pretending not to have heard would be pointless.

Mufasa stepped around the carcass. "Taka," he said. "Where have you been? You keep sneaking away, and I'd like to know why." He came a few steps closer. "You're hungry, aren't you? Eat something. Have some wildebeest." His deep voice was full of concern that sounded sincere.

Taka's face was a stern mask as he stepped back through the archway to face his brother.

"How very kind of you," he replied acidly. He closed his eyes and brushed past Mufasa. "No, don't worry about me, brother. I've eaten."

Mufasa peered at him silently, turning his head to follow Taka as he stepped into the shadows at the back of the cavern.

Taka found a niche in the corner and slumped into it. "If you don't mind, Mufasa, I'm going to sleep now. I hope the others won't mind me here when they return."

Mufasa exhaled heavily. "Listen, Taka..." he began. He paused to find words and to watch Taka's reaction. There seemed to be none; the smaller lion was motionless at the far side of the cavern, turned away from him.

"Taka, there is no reason for you to run away from the pride. There is plenty of food for all of us."

A shudder seemed to run over Taka's dark form. "Yes, that's easy to see," his voice came. "Look how well-fed you are, after all."

Mufasa grimaced. He had never been good at putting his feelings into words, whereas Taka had always had the gift.

"It's not that I want you to starve, brother," he said slowly. "That is the last thing I want. That's why I want you to stay here with the pride, where you can be sure to get the food and shelter you need. You don't need to go elsewhere."

There was no response from the form in the corner. "Taka," he continued. "You do remember what Ahadi said, don't you?"

"Yes, I remember," Taka's voice came instantly. It was cold and grating. "'Mufasa! Let's go hunting today. I'll teach you how to track down hyenas this time.' 'Mufasa, one day you will be the mate of that beautiful lioness Sarabi.' 'Mufasa--'"

"Taka!"

"'Mufasa, you will be king one day, when I am gone. Your voice will echo over the Pride Lands like--'"

Mufasa growled deeply. It was almost a snarl. "That's enough, Taka. You need to learn to accept what fate has given you."

"Fate! Oh, yes, Mufasa. It's certainly me that needs to learn about fate. I've had so little experience with it, you know."

"The Circle of Life is what governs us, not me, Taka," Mufasa growled, glaring. His voice took on a slow, purposeful tone, almost as if he were reciting. "We are born and we die, some sooner than others. Destiny controls that. Some of us are destined to be nothing, to live a short and poor life, and others of us are destined to join the Kings of the past in the stars after our lifetimes are over." His voice became louder and quicker. "Some of us will have easy lives and be destined for happiness. Others will be given handicaps to bear and scars to live with. But you must realize that it is all written in the stars, in the grass, in the grains of sand all over the world what our destinies are. It is not our part to change that. We have no say--"

Taka interrupted, his voice furious. "Shut up," he snarled. He had turned his head to stare at Mufasa through narrow yellow eyes, and his teeth were bared, though he had not stood up. "If you could see past the end of your own nose you'd realize what nonsense you're talking. We have the power of our minds, Mufasa. Well, some of us do, anyway. We can change the course of time if only we so desire. We can make our lives wonderful, so much better than they could have been. All it takes is a little bit of vision, and it's tragic that you don't seem to have that. Now," he went on, gambling with his safety from harm, "If you're quite through with the poetry, I'd like to get some sleep. Why don't you go outside and wait for Sarabi to return? I'll bet she'll be glad to see you."

He turned his head back to the wall, trying to appear nonchalant, though his muscles were tensed with the feeling that Mufasa would lose his temper and attack his motionless form.

Mufasa, however, was under control, if barely. He seethed and glowered at Taka, then forced himself to turn away and leave the cavern without another word. He knew he was right. He knew it. Ahadi was no fool, and he had said those very words to Mufasa only recently, soberly and calmly. Mufasa believed in them. They made perfect sense as to how the world was

constructed. After all, the world had existed for countless generations, and no lion had ever thought to change the natural progression of the Circle as it guided life through the unnumbered years. Why should they change? How could a lion's thoughts and ideas change anything for the better? What could be better?

Mufasa stepped out onto the promontory. The stars were beginning to appear in the darkening sky, and he peered up into them sadly. Somewhere up there was Ahadi, watching over the Pride Lands with the same wisdom which he had used during life. Ahadi had told him so himself. And what reason was there to disbelieve him?

Bathing himself disconsolately alone on the promontory, Mufasa went over the exchange in his mind that he had just had. He had resolved, early in the evening, to apologize to Taka for what he had been doing the past few days since Ahadi had died, to welcome him into the pride and give him fully half of the rights to food and other resources that the pride had to offer. He had, in fact, resolved to ignore his father's words and give way to the inner voice which constantly berated him for abandoning his brother.

But within a minute of talking to Taka after he returned, Mufasa had managed to arouse his brother's anger and sharp tongue, forcefully driving from Mufasa any desire to concede anything to him. He had lapsed immediately back into what Ahadi had taught him to think and to say, which was what he most deeply believed in and was the most confident of in speech. And Taka had laughed at him, dismissing the Circle of Life as poetic nonsense.

Taka had forfeited his second chance by being bitter. What more was there to do?

"Mufasa," his father said softly, his head craned over a rise. "They're right there. No, don't go any further."

Mufasa looked at Ahadi with as much pride as any son had ever had for his father. This lion knew everything. Just this morning they had left Pride Rock in search of a band of hyenas that had reportedly been seen poaching on the lions' land, and they had gone in a straight line from there to here, not stopping or doubling back or even veering from their straight path. And now they had reached their quarry. Ahadi must have known all along where the hyenas were, or else he was being guided by some unseen force.

He watched as his father sank into the grass, his tail twitching slightly. Mufasa did the same, a little behind Ahadi and to his right.

"How close are th--"

"Shh."

Mufasa's mane was just now beginning to fill out over his shoulders after having been just a few tufts of darker fur on his neck and upper back for many months. Yet now, as always when he was out with his father and doing the same things as he was, he tried to shake it into standing out further, to make it look like Ahadi's thick, light-brown mane. Not that he could see himself-- but he imagined, whenever he allowed himself to shake his mane out like this, that he looked just like his father.

As far as size went, he was already a match for Ahadi; he was just as tall and at least as muscular as his father, who had always been more tough and sinewy than massive. Ahadi made no secret of his fatherly pride for Mufasa; he bragged in front of all the lionesses about what a strong young lion his son had become, about what he had accomplished each day, jokingly about how soon it would be before he overtook his dad in hunting. In fact, when Mufasa had made his first major kill, a zebra in the hills south of Pride Rock, Ahadi had proclaimed a day of festival for the entire pride, where Mufasa was given the first pick of the meat from the kill and, afterwards, was taken to the point of Pride Rock to let out his first triumphant, symbolic roar. All the lionesses had roared enthusiastically back at him. He was a smooth, strong adolescent lion, the most magnificent anybody had seen for generations.

Ahadi was now moving slowly forward, almost imperceptibly. A glance over his shoulder told Mufasa to follow. Mufasa did so, crouching low to the ground, a little awkwardly. However powerful he was in body, he was more than a little unused to stealth; he always had been. The incident with Zazu had certainly shown that.

His voice was a whisper, barely above a breath. "Dad-- are they right over this rise?"

Ahadi made no reply, crouching motionless in front of him in a pouncing posture. The tension built; Mufasa shivered in anticipation. A bird called over the savannah. The wind suddenly rose, and a breeze ruffled the grass toward his nostrils, bringing the unmistakable pungent scent of hyenas. Mufasa's eyes opened wide.

At the same moment, Ahadi bounded over the rise with a snarl, and Mufasa followed with a powerful spring of his hind legs. As he rounded the top, his widening field of view showed not fewer than five large hyenas who had been stalking westward, toward Pride Rock, but were now spinning around in their tracks with surprised yips. Ahadi was on the leader in a flash. Mufasa sprang down the hillside toward the nearest one to him, a female, who unexpectedly met his charge with a furious growl and snapping jaws. He veered aside, surprised, and before he was able to recover his momentum the hyena had slashed at his hip with her foreclaws, drawing blood.

Mufasa spun with a roar of rage, his large paw outstretched, and pounded the hyena forcefully on the side of the head. She reeled and stumbled; when she had recovered her balance, Mufasa was entangled with another hyena, but she had drawn aside and was watching from a safe distance.

Ahadi, meanwhile, had knocked the first hyena unconscious and was facing a second, circling it warily as it snarled at him with bared teeth. Mufasa clamped his foreclaws down on the hyena he was fighting, roared at it from close range, and threw it with all his strength sideways. It hit Ahadi's opponent squarely on the side, causing both hyenas to fall awkwardly together onto the ground. Mufasa immediately took up the position opposite from his father, on the other side of the two thrashing creatures. A quick glance over his father's shoulder told him where the fifth hyena had gone: it had turned tail and was now nothing more than a dark speck in the yellow savannah grass. The female Mufasa had fought was also edging off, back the way it had come.

Ahadi saw this out of the corner of his eye. He put a heavy paw upon the two hyenas he had captive, causing them to stop struggling and to begin whimpering for mercy.

Mufasa watched silently as his father addressed them solemnly. "You seem to have the good sense to cooperate, so I'm going to be fair," he said in his clear, calm voice. "I'll give you the chance to run, as far as you can, and if you can outrun my son here, you can live. Is that a fair deal?"

Mufasa looked up at his father with a grin, over the vigorously nodding heads of the hyenas. Ahadi peered back at him mischievously.

The hyenas were now thoroughly defeated, whining and apologizing. "It'll never happen again. Never. We're outta here, and bam! We're gone. You'll never see us again."

Ahadi stood back. "They're all yours, Mufasa."

Grinning, Mufasa turned to the hyenas, inhaled deeply, and let out a deep theatrical roar that jolted the hyenas to their feet and into running for their lives. Mufasa sprang after them, watching as they joined the female in running back along the path they had come. He could have easily caught them, but he knew from his father's tone that he was meant only to drive them out of the Pride Lands, not to kill them; otherwise, why would Ahadi have given them the chance to run?

A glance over his shoulder told Mufasa that Ahadi had stayed with the hyena who had been knocked unconscious, and was waiting for it to wake before he gave it its own private send-off. Mufasa turned his head back to the three retreating hyenas racing away from him northeastward. His shoulder muscles rippled as he ran. He was tireless, and he laughed as he began to close the gap between himself and the hyenas; he laughed again when they began to yip terrifiedly and speed forward even faster. His feet flew on through the grass, and he roared for the sheer pleasure of the chase and the knowledge that he was the strongest and most feared and respected creature in all the Pride Lands.

"Hyenas travel in groups, you see," his father was telling him as they walked slowly back to Pride Rock. "That way they feel strong, like they have the power to take what they want without getting hurt for it. But get a hyena alone, or even two or three in a corner, and they'll beg for mercy. Without fail."

Mufasa stared at his father, drinking deeply of the wisdom Ahadi poured out to him as he did every day.

"Alone, a hyena can't survive. It can't hunt anything bigger than a rat or a bird. But give it some companions, and there's no telling what they might do. They can pull down a zebra or a wildebeest, or even a lion, if there are enough of them."

"This is one of the greatest mysteries of the world, Mufasa. When a group of hyenas gathers together and goes on the hunt, each individual animal loses its identity as a single being and becomes part of the whole, like in a swarm of bees or a flock of birds. The group makes the decisions; there is no leader. And once the group has begun to carry out a decision it has made, nothing can stop it." He stopped walking and stared off into space. "It is one of the most terrifying forces in the world."

Mufasa stopped when his father did, but Ahadi had already begun to move again. "It's a dangerous world, Mufasa, and you'll have to rule over it." He peered quizzically into his son's wide eyes. "Do you think you can handle it?"

"Well," Mufasa began, uncertainly. "I think I can, but I'd like to know whether I'll have any help. What about Taka? He's going to have to face the same danger too."

"Taka?" Ahadi looked distant for a moment. "Oh... right. No, Taka will not have the same concerns you will, Mufasa. Only the King has to worry about the condition of the borders. One lion can manage it alone, but someday you'll have your own cub to help you, and before that Sarabi will be there for you. Mufasa, your life will be full of lions who will always be ready to help in whatever you do."

This seemed to make sense to Mufasa. However, no matter how much he shook his head in frustration, he could not rid himself of the thought that Taka was somehow missing out on all the lessons he himself was learning. Was that right?

Mufasa made no reply to his father, and the two lions made their way back to Pride Rock in silence.

On the Promontory, Mufasa fixed his eye on a bright star that had just risen over the eastern horizon, directly in front of him. He could almost feel his father's presence. What would Ahadi have told him now? What place was Taka destined to fulfill? Was there room for Mufasa's brother in the Circle of Life?

Mufasa longed to ask his father these questions, to soothe his fears and doubts and to be told that there was an easy answer to the battling questions that were churning inside his mind. But Ahadi was gone, and all that was left were his words, which Mufasa repeated to himself each night as he drifted off to sleep.

"Every plant and animal has a place in the Circle of Life, Mufasa. As the King, you must realize that nothing is exempt from that, and while nothing has the right to live forever, nothing may be exterminated from the earth. You must balance life with death, and death with life. If that balance is broken, the lands will perish. All life has existed for as long as the sun has risen and set and the rains have come to water the land and feed the trees, and nothing has ever changed it. And nothing ever will."

The Pride

Chapter Four

The stars were bright in the sky by the time Sarabi returned leading the pride's lionesses back to Pride Rock. They were weary but excited, having been able to find a small wandering group of zebras resting several river valleys to the east. The lionesses had marked their position and watched them for several hours, foregoing food and water so as not to miss an important sign or to allow the zebras to take alarm and escape. Since their quarry had spent the entire day grazing, showing no intention to move on, Sarabi was optimistic-- they would probably make two kills from this find and eat comfortably for two more days at least.

She returned to the cavern's mouth, almost dancing with the anticipation of telling Mufasa the good news. She might even be able to convince the King to hunt with the rest of the pride, she thought with pleasure. The other lionesses had been asking her constantly about the prospect. Having Mufasa with them would give them a new driving force, another reason to do their very best in the hunt-- and it would probably result in a bigger kill for the pride. As good as the news was that she was bearing, she thought she would have no trouble convincing Mufasa--

Sarabi reached the cave's entrance and stopped in her tracks. Her sharp eyes had grown used to the dark by this time of night, and the moon had not risen, so she could see clearly into the interior of the cave and what it contained. There was Taka, asleep in a corner. Doubt and revulsion seized control of her. She could not force herself to continue.

Nine lionesses stood behind her expectantly. She twisted her eyes to look at them over her shoulder and shuddered. She could not find the courage to enter an empty cavern with nothing in it but... him.

Reluctantly she drew her head back to look back into the cavern and fix Taka's sleeping form in her gaze. She would have to go in, and quickly. She must not stand here any more, not with so many eyes on her. After all, Taka was royalty, and he must be treated with respect. To stand there in public and not to be able to convince herself to share a cavern with him-- that was dishonorable to both of them, and to cause dishonor to a royal lion was almost as terrible a crime as spilling royal blood. How could she hesitate, after what she had said that morning, warning the others not to shun Taka? What kind of a Queen was she?

The thought struck her like a shaft of light. The Queen. That was it. She quickly regained her composure and snapped her head back around in a sudden businesslike show of authority.

"Mufasa's not in here," she told the others, turning away from the cavern. "I'm going to go find him."

That was her excuse. Her duty was to find Mufasa and report their findings. Doing so would mean that she would forfeit her place at the remains of the food, but she was more than glad to do so if it meant she could avoid Taka's presence.

Sarabi saw with a glance that Mufasa was not on the promontory, and then turned quickly from the rest of the lionesses and began to climb the steep path which led up to the peak of Pride Rock. Two or three began to follow but soon stopped when they saw the route she was taking. There was simply no room at the peak for more than one or two lions, and besides, the food inside the cavern was waiting.

The trail wound around the southern face of the rock, climbing precipitously in places, often dangerously narrow. Sarabi stepped carefully along the ledges, but kept her eyes fixed on the trail ahead of her; she knew the path well. She and Mufasa had climbed it unnumbered times as cubs and as adolescents, and now she knew that her King had probably taken refuge in his favorite childhood haunt. What exactly could have caused him to retreat there she could not guess. She did, however, have the idea from Taka's presence alone in the cavern that Mufasa's brother might have somehow been involved in the cause.

The trail vanished into stark, bare rocks; Sarabi clambered over them, knowing especially well the end of the path, and emerged over the edge of the peak, scarcely winded. The peak was flat and narrow, with only the space for two or three lions to sit comfortably, and she did not have to look far to notice Mufasa lying motionless on his side, turned away from her. His side was rising and falling slowly, rhythmically.

Sarabi pulled herself over the edge and approached him. Before she could get to within touching distance, though, he stirred and started nervously to his feet with a slight gasp. His eyes fell upon Sarabi, his Queen, and almost instantly he recognized her and the light in his eyes changed from an alarmed one to one of recognition and relief. Before he could speak, she stepped close and pushed her head under his chin soothingly.

"Oh, Mufasa. You're troubled again. What's the matter?" she asked him in a concerned, sad voice. "Is it Taka again?"

The King was sitting propped on his forelegs, his hindquarters still sprawled flat on the bare rock of the peak. He turned his head away and stared out over the starlit plain, silent for a long time, not meeting Sarabi's worried gaze. She tilted her head and tried silently to make him look at her-- to make him feel her inquisitive brown eyes probing his mind, seeking for a way into his troubled, confused thoughts. Finally, Mufasa closed his eyes and cast his head down.

"Taka," he began, his deep voice resonating in the cool night air. "He shuts me out, and I can't understand why. We're littermates, he and I, nursed by the same mother, taught by the same father." He paused, only to sigh; he still kept his eyes away from Sarabi's.

"He has a right to be a part of the pride. It isn't my decision to cast him out." He staggered to his feet, still gazing out over the savannah. The stars revolved unmeasurably slowly above his head. "It is not the right of any lion to decide the fate of another! If Taka is weaker and smaller than I am, he should learn to live with the pride in a way that allows him to survive. If he is meant to live, he will live. If he is meant to die, he will die." At last he turned his head abruptly toward his mate's. "Nothing can change that!" he almost shouted, his teeth showing.

Sarabi drew her breath in sharply and stepped back, but immediately drew forward again.

"Mufasa. Listen to me," she said urgently. "Calm down. worrying will not do you any good. Now, tell me. Do you want Taka to be a part of the pride?" She met the wide anxious pupils of his eyes with her own large, brown, understanding ones.

Mufasa merely looked uncertainly back at her. His eyes wavered, but she did not release him from her gaze. "You are the king. You can make the decision. You have that right."

She broke eye contact and rubbed her shoulder against his, then pressed her nose into his thick mane. He shivered, though the night was not cold. "But you don't have to make that decision alone," she reminded him.

Sarafina was the first lioness to enter the cavern. She was young and fearless, her eyes bright with innocence but piercing with hunger, and the half-eaten wildebeest haunch lying deep inside the cavern but visible and within smelling range beckoned inexorably to her, and then to the rest of the lionesses. They all followed, and soon the eldest of the group had taken their places around the meal while the others waited patiently, and Taka, lying in the shadows behind them, was forgotten.

Conversation was necessary for the younger lionesses while their elders took their rightful turn. Sarafina sat impatiently behind a large motherly lioness whose body took up a great deal of room and seemed unlikely to move for some time. She sighed, took her eyes from the inviting carcass, and turned to her left. A step away sat Wamase, a dark golden creature whose aloof attitude had caused her to be one of the less well-known members of the pride, even shunned by some of the elders, though her features were attractive and she had already proven her worth as a born hunter. She and Sarafina had been born in the same season, and of the entire pride, nobody knew Wamase's inner mind better than Sarafina. Both were young, only a season or two out of adolescence, and both had the wide, gleaming eyes of youth, peering out innocently at the daunting size and complexity of the world and seeing it each day as though for the first time, gathering sights and sounds and smells that told each of them that the world was far too large and too full of wonders to be explored in one day or two or even a thousand. Wamase and Sarafina had shared their lives-- their games as cubs, their fantasies as adolescents, their dreams as adults. Yet Wamase still had secrets, things she would tell nobody, not even her closest cubhood friend. It was this that caused the rest of the pride to regard her as an anti-social and mysterious, and therefore to accept her for her skills in hunting, but not to give her the same love as the other lionesses received as they grew to maturity. She was an enigma, and of her innermost hopes and desires only she knew the truth.

"Looking forward to the hunt, Wamase?" Sarafina asked her friend, smiling. Wamase had not been looking at her, but surely she would welcome some conversation. Besides, silence was somewhat abnormal; the older lionesses were now talking freely with each other as they ate, the initial phase of hunger-abatement having given way to social feeding.

Wamase's head turned to face her only after a moment or two. "Sorry-- what?" she asked, narrowing her eyes and tilting her head. Sarafina almost began to repeat what she'd said, and then Wamase seemed to become fully aware of her surroundings. "Oh. The hunt-- right. Yeah, it's going to be fun, isn't it?" She smiled in return, but the smile seemed to hide other feelings, to be slightly forced.

Sarafina chose to ignore her friend's preoccupation. "At least it'll be easy," she went on. "As long as those zebras don't run away tonight, they'll have nowhere to go once we're surrounding them. I wonder who'll get to bring the first one down?"

A thought occurred to her, and Sarafina brightened, her eyes widening visibly. "Do you suppose Mufasa will come with us? I'll bet that's what Sarabi is talking to him about right now. I hope she gets him to come." Her eyes began to wander. "Mufasa could take down three or four zebras in the same hunt," she continued, in a voice that seemed to be coming from a young adolescent lioness, one whose interest in males was just taking root.

Wamase peered back at her as she went on, speaking in rhapsodical terms about Mufasa and what a magnificent and kingly lion he was. This sounded just like the Sarafina she had known for years, the two adolescent lionesses sharing their admiration for Mufasa as he grew to his full size alongside them, shyly revealing to each other their secret fantasies about him and what a wonderful king and mate he would be to the Queen of his choice. Deep down, they had both always known about Sarabi's destiny to be his Queen, and for that they had always felt a slight jealousy and rivalry towards Sarabi; but that was always forgotten when Wamase and Sarafina spoke to each other in hushed giggles in a darkened corner of the cavern or in some hidden place that only the two of them knew about, telling each other what they dreamed could happen under the circumstances they would invent.

Yet as Wamase listened to Sarafina, offering what sounded like enthusiastic agreement whenever there came a pause in her friend's delighted ramblings, she was gradually becoming more and more certain that something had changed. Something was gone from their typical childlike conversation, and she was beginning to realize what it was. Much as she had always admired Mufasa, living in constant view of his developing form and stature and watching him learn the laws of the pride from his father, destined for a long and wonderful kingship, she could not help but feel inexplicable pangs of something different. She squinted carefully at Sarafina, who was now favorably describing Mufasa in comparison to all other males she had ever seen, almost oblivious of the fact that Wamase had ceased to add to the conversation. Yes, Mufasa was handsome and strong. She agreed with that. How could anyone not? He would be an ideal king and a fearsome hunter, and he would be as wonderful a mate as he would a king. But, for Wamase, there was still something missing.

Sarafina was still speaking, as if to the air in front of her. "I remember Ahadi's brother-- what was his name? Oh, I can't remember it, but you know what he was like. Sort of tall and lanky. He really looked like he could outrun a gazelle, but you remember what happened that day by the Gorge? We attacked a herd of springboks and he got left behind. Said he couldn't keep up with the rest of us."

The older lionesses had by this time left the wildebeest remains, and Wamase drew her friend to her place at their side by calmly nudging her toward them as she spoke. She began to eat, keeping an eye on Sarafina, who still seemed intent on discussing Mufasa.

"He couldn't do anything to help us in the hunt, so we were all glad when he left. Like Taka." She took a breath. "What good is he? He certainly can't help us. Why doesn't he go and join another pride? Mufasa can take care of us all, you know." She smirked and looked again at Wamase, expecting the usual affirmative giggle.

But Wamase was silent, looking at her with questioning eyes. She licked her lips, cleaning some stray blood from her muzzle, and spoke. "So what's so wrong with Taka? I think he'd be a great king, myself."

For the space of several heartbeats, Sarafina was unsure that she had heard her friend say such a thing. As she tried, suddenly at a loss for words, to decide what to say in reply, Wamase nonchalantly bent down and engrossed herself in the food once more.

Sarafina was incredulous. "You mean-- you... but, Wamase," she said in desperation, her voice dropping to a strained whisper. "Taka... he's so-- so--"

"Good evening, ladies," came a smooth, soft voice behind them. Without turning, both knew exactly who it was. It was a male voice, and they knew it well.

Taka circled around to the right of Sarafina, peering across toward Wamase. Sarafina followed him with her eyes, a thin growl barely suppressed in his throat, and so did not notice the look of wonderment and fascination on Wamase's face.

"I trust the hunt went well," he went on, his voice fluid and beguiling. He shook his mane slightly and sniffed at the carcass. "Of course it did. You lovely creatures could hardly help but be successful in all you do."

Wamase's voice came from nowhere. Sarafina turned her head sharply and disbelievingly to stare at her. "Oh, yes-- we found some zebras resting not far from here, and tomorrow we're going to kill two or three!" She sounded almost coquettish.

Taka lifted his head and turned his gleaming yellow eyes toward Sarafina, oddly ignoring Wamase. "And think how much you could do if only you had Mufasa's help!" He inhaled deeply, as though sighing in awe. "Why, no lion would ever go hungry with such a mighty king leading the hunt. How lucky you all are!" He bent down again and tore off a mouthful of meat with surprising vigor. Wamase took no notice and stood up. Sarafina's alarm grew, and she turned back and forth from Taka to Wamase frantically.

"Taka, why don't you ever hunt with us?" Wamase asked him, her head tilted to one side. "You'd be just as good a hunter as Mufasa, I know it." She began moving closer to him.

Sarafina gasped. "Wamase, no--" she hissed.

Wamase ignored her and brushed past, approaching Taka's hunched, narrow form. She sat down a pace or two away from him, her eyes fixed on the side of his head.. "You're always hiding in here," she said, in an innocent, childish voice. "I wish you wouldn't. You should be out hunting with us."

The older lionesses had moved outside the cavern now, and the rest of the young ones had sidled away from Taka and were now making for the exit. Only the two lionesses and Taka remained at the pile of bones, by now almost depleted of meat.

Taka raised his head and looked into Wamase's eyes; almost immediately she shyly dropped her gaze.

"My dear," he began, in a chiding, almost remonstrative tone. "What could I possibly lend to a hunt that's already got such talent as yours? You and the rest of the pride, I mean," he added quickly. "As for myself, I can catch my own food. I have no need of your kills in order to survive." As though to prove this point, he stepped back from the carcass and sat down to bathe his paws and muzzle. After a few moments, he looked up and leered at Sarafina, ignoring Wamase again.

Sarafina found her voice and moved up alongside Wamase. "Taka," she began, in a grating, forceful voice. "I don't know what you're thinking, but you stay away from me and Wamase..."

Taka's face dropped in what looked like shock. "Why-- whatever could you mean? All I ask is a little polite conversation." His head drooped and he shut his eyes, then turned and began to turn away from them and return to his corner of the cave. "In that case, I'll bid you ladies good evening."

Before Sarafina could stand in her way, Wamase had already jumped forward and run to Taka's side, though once she reached him she instinctively kept a distance of a pace or two. Sarafina stepped forward in consternation.

Taka began to walk faster, as though to leave the lioness behind. Yet Wamase seemed fascinated suddenly with Taka, and matched his pace with her own, following until the two reached the dark opposite wall of the cave.

"Leave me alone, Wamase," he growled.

"But Taka-- tell me what's wrong! I want to help you-- but I need to know what I can do!"

Taka's voice was a snarl. "I said, leave me alone!" He was standing against the wall and could go no further. Wamase did not move, and Taka's claws extended.

"Taka," she said, softly. "Just tell me what's the matter."

Sarafina saw the inevitable and acted quickly.

"Wamase, look out!" she cried. It was enough to distract Taka long enough for Sarafina to run past him, almost brushing his side, giving Wamase time to recover her senses and step backward out of his reach. Taka lashed out into empty air, and at the same time gasped in surprise.

"Come on, Wamase. Let's get out of here," she said urgently. Her friend seemed finally to understand the situation, and the two lionesses fled the cavern quickly.

Taka watched them leave. He sighed deeply, not because of disappointment or sadness, but because it had gone so well.

The Pride

Chapter Five

Mufasa descended from the point of Pride Rock, slowly, deliberately. His face was sternly set. He paced down the path with slow, measured steps, followed closely by Sarabi. The sun had just risen, and its warming rays had stirred the two lions into wakefulness long before the rest of the pride would begin to move about.

Watching the back of his head as she walked behind him, Sarabi brooded to herself. She felt stirrings inside her that seemed to speak directly into her mind, to command her that some action must be taken. She knew, as she followed the lion who had been her lifelong companion, that they were meant for each other and always had been. But-- when would he claim her? When would he make the announcement to the pride that he had taken her as his Queen, that they would forever be an inseparable pair? She knew that he had a great many things on his mind, but... her impatience was growing, and she was beginning to feel the pangs of need for security, for constant companionship, for love that could be open and public without her hiding half-truths and dissuading rumors. She was deeply in love with Mufasa-- she had been for many months, ever since she had begun to see him as a magnificent male rather than merely a friend and playmate. She knew that he felt the same about her; he had told her so many times-- but only in private. And, she thought with a frown, if he really meant it, why would he not say it publicly? Why would he not give the official announcement of marriage? When could she say, with no pretense or guessing, to her fellow lionesses, that he was her mate, and she was his? Why was he hesitating?

Yet-- that was not the only reason she was growing restless. It was not merely that she felt the urgent desire for love, and indeed for cubs of her own. There was more. There was another factor.

It was... him. Taka, with the yellow eyes that gleamed in the darkened cave. Every night that she spent in the main cavern of Pride Rock, she could feel those eyes upon her, glaring, boring into her soul. Even when she aggressively scanned the room, forsaking sleep for hours on end simply to dare Mufasa's brother to raise his head and to fix those narrow yellow eyes upon her-- even though she never saw them appear, she knew that she was somehow being watched, analyzed, probed. She had been sleeping at Mufasa's side for as long as she could remember, simply because she had always done so ever since cubhood; yet even then she felt unsafe. Just the knowledge that Taka was alive in the room was enough to make her shiver.

Taka seldom spoke to Sarabi; when he did, it was in short, uncommunicative bursts that revealed nothing to her, dealing with such subjects as the hunting conditions or the changes in the weather. Yet his voice revealed far less to her than did his eyes. Several times she had seen those gleaming eyes fixed on her body; she had turned to face them, and they had vanished immediately. She knew what they meant-- oh yes, she knew. And until the King laid formal claim to her, revealing to the entire pride without question that she was Mufasa's and Mufasa's alone, she would never feel entirely safe again.

All this passed through Sarabi's mind as she followed her betrothed's lightly waving tail down the rocky path around the edge of Pride Rock, and she put an end to the train of thought as they passed the entrance to the cavern. Sunlight was streaming into the northeast-facing cavern's mouth; both lions stopped to peer in and check over the many motionless forms inside. They could see nothing they were not expecting-- just the tawny backs of a huddled group of sleeping lionesses, interspersed with a few lifted paws of individuals who had rolled over onto their backs. Sarabi smiled-- her pride, she thought-- and looked briefly for that pair of yellow eyes that she had come to dread so deeply. She didn't know whether to attribute the fact that she saw none to Taka's being asleep or actually being absent from the cave. She shrugged and turned away. Either way, she was satisfied.

Mufasa was still letting his eyes roam protectively over the sleeping pride, as though checking off a series of requirements. She stepped to his side, rumbled deep in her throat, and nuzzled him lovingly on the neck. He turned to her, not appearing surprised, and licked her nose in return.

It was as they stood in the rising sun, suddenly standing motionless as they gazed into each other's wide eyes, in full view of the sleeping pride should any wake to see them, that a gaudy blue-colored form swooped from the air above them with an urgent squawk. Zazu, the King's majordomo, pulled up at the feet of both lions and fluttered to a halt. He bowed perfunctorily, extending his wings, and immediately launched into breathless talk.

"Sire," he began. "There is a problem. You know those zebras, the ones that Sarabi-- hello, your Highness-- the ones that Sarabi and the rest of the lionesses found yesterday? That group of cheetahs we've been watching has just been seen moving towards them! I think they're planning to take the target for themselves. If I were you, sire, I'd take notice. This could be serious."

Mufasa has still not taken his eyes from Sarabi's face. "Sire!" Zazu shouted indignantly. "Did you hear what I said? The Pride Lands are being poached upon! What are you going to do?" His voice was an angry raucous shout.

Sarabi gained her composure and bent down to the bird. "Shh!" she hissed at him. "Everybody's still asleep. Do you want to wake them all up?" She straightened, peered at Mufasa's beguiled face, and said, "Mufasa. This is serious. We must do something-- don't you agree?"

Shaking himself slightly, the King found his voice, and turned to Zazu, standing scowling at his right forepaw. "Zazu, thank you for telling me. The lionesses were preparing to hunt those zebras today, and if there are cheetahs hunting the same prey, there could be more danger here than we are ready for." He thought for a moment, then turned to Sarabi. "I'm coming on the hunt. I will help bring down the zebras if we see no competition, and if we do meet the cheetahs, I'll take care of them." He looked down at the hornbill again. "Don't worry, Zazu. We'll be fine. But if this continues, I will have to drive those troublemakers out of the land, and soon. We cannot have our hunting grounds trespassed upon."

Sarabi had instantly brightened when Mufasa mentioned that he would be coming along. She knew that his presence would spark the pride's energy and morale, guaranteeing them a hearty kill and ample food for the next few days. However, the smile froze on her lips at what Mufasa said next.

"When I go to drive them out, Taka will have to come with me." He took a breath. "It will be his chance to prove his worth to the pride and his right to stay with us. Besides," he said, in a lower tone, his eyes glancing from side to side huntedly, "I may need his help."

Sarabi stepped none too carefully among the reclining lioness bodies in the cavern, calling out their names in a loud voice. The sun was climbing into the sky and the air was heating up rapidly. If a move was to be made today, it would have to begin now.

"Wamase!" she shouted at the young lioness in the corner. "Wake up-- we need your help especially. The hunt today is going to be dangerous. And you too, Sarafina. Come on, wake up, you hippopotamus." She shot Sarafina a friendly grin as she began to blink the sleep from her eyes. Sarabi moved on quickly. "Kolo? Are you awake yet? Oh-- I'm sorry, Ng'ara, I didn't see you there. Well, you need to wake up too. Come on, everybody."

Once the pride had finished stretching and yawning, and most had gone on to grooming their fur and sharpening their claws, Sarabi described the situation, her face stern-- queenly, to any who would characterize it.

"We aren't the only ones who have set our sights on those zebras, my friends. We've had a report from Zazu this morning that the group of cheetahs that has given us trouble in the past-- yes, those ones, Kolo-- those cheetahs are moving into our territory, and they seem to be making for the same valley we had planned to go to today. It is Zazu's guess that they are searching for large prey, and when they find our zebras, we will have to fight them for it."

As she had expected, there were a few cries of dismay at this news. Some lionesses, however, looked almost eager for the challenge. Wamase in particular seemed to have brightened, and was looking at Sarafina with what looked like delight. Sarabi's eyes turned to peer at Mufasa, who had gone to the tip of the promontory to survey the land. She smiled inwardly.

"Still, I have good news for all of us. I know you'll be pleased to hear it." She looked from one suddenly expectant face to another, and took a breath. "Mufasa will be coming with us."

Sarabi sat down on her haunches, smiling, and listened as the gasps of pleasure that she had expected began to ripple across the group, and every head turned to face another. Suddenly she was surrounded by a sea of excitedly chattering voices. She heard one clear voice-- Sarafina's-- shouting, "I told you so!"

At that moment, Mufasa stepped slowly into view. He had come down from the promontory when he heard Sarabi mention his name, and now he stood next to Sarabi with a stony expression, looking appraisingly over each of the lionesses in turn. Suddenly hushed, they stared back at him in awe and admiration.

Mufasa spoke, his voice glancing off the rocks and echoing to their ears an instant later. "Today will be nothing to take lightly," he boomed. "We will need the utmost strength of every one of us here in order to accomplish what we are setting out to do. We must feed ourselves, and so we must not come back to Pride Rock until we have killed enough food to last us for several days."

"That is why I am coming on the hunt today. I do not doubt the strength or speed of any of you here, but still we cannot take chances. Every muscle among us must be used in protecting our hunting rights from these invaders, and mine will be counted among yours, or else I am no king."

He took a step to the side, turned, and faced eastward out under the climbing sun, in the direction they would be taking. "I hope you are all well enough rested," he said, "because we are starting immediately." He then inhaled deeply, set his face, and roared in a deep throaty voice that echoed off all the rocks around them and seemed to shiver the entire Pride Lands to the ground. All seemed silent afterwards, and no birds could be seen in the air for a few moments. Nobody moved. Then, once the air had settled again, Mufasa turned back to face the lionesses, a slight smile of what looked like eagerness on his face. Sarabi sat on a flat stone just above her fellows, gazing adoringly at him.

"There," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Now at least they know what they've gotten themselves into. Now, we go."

He turned away from them and stepped purposefully down from the flat space in front of the cavern's entrance where they had gathered. Sarabi followed immediately behind, and then the mass of lionesses fell into place behind Ng'ara. Sarafina hung back, because her friend Wamase had seemed to hesitate, and was now bringing up the rear, her head tilting oddly back over her shoulder every few moments.

"Wamase," she said quietly, concerned. "What's wrong?"

Yet she knew what was on Wamase's mind, though Sarafina could not accept it. Taka had not appeared.

Wamase made no reply.

Two lanky, thin cheetahs trotted on light feet back over the rise ahead and returned to the group, only slightly winded. They were undernourished and weak; otherwise the scouting mission would have cost their faculties nothing.

"We're in luck, Mng'ariza," the larger one said excitedly as he ran up to the group's leader, the only noticeably muscular cheetah of the group.

Mng'ariza turned his bright, piercing eyes on the one who had spoken. "Oh?" he asked. "What did you find? Food, I hope; I'm famished. And so are we all, I'm sure," he added quickly.

Khulo, the one who had spoken, nodded, swallowing as he tried to regain his breath. "The zebras we were tracking last night are nearby. They're over two more rises, this one," he said, indicating with his head the grassy ridge they had just climbed over, "And another one, further off. The zebras are within smelling range, once you're over this ridgetop. With luck, we should reach them by midday. Then we will eat well."

"I'm hungry, but I can still hunt and fight," the smaller one growled aggressively. "We won't be wandering much longer. I'd just like to see anyone try to stop us from taking what we want."

Mng'ariza turned his eyes on the smaller messenger, her abdomen heaving with what seemed to be a mixture of breathlessness and eagerness for action. It was Kichasi, the cub of his own brother, now grown to her full size and arrogant, feisty temper. She was always hungry for the chance to use her claws and teeth; yet that always seemed to be the way with young ones. Mng'ariza sighed as he looked into her face with its sharply defined features.

"I'm glad you're so confident, Kichasi, but don't overreach yourself. This is lion country, my friends," he said in a low voice, and then decided that the entire group should know this. He turned to face the other four cheetahs as well as the two scouts.

"We are in the territory of lions, everybody," he said, his thin but commanding voice attracting the attention of all. "I know that many of you are eager to fight as well as to hunt, but the chance is too good that we will not be the only ones hunting these particular zebras. We are on the lions' land, and they will protect it from us, violently if necessary. How many of you have ever fought a lion before?"

There was silence. A few cheetahs fidgeted, but none spoke.

"Well, I have," Mng'ariza continued. "It was five seasons ago, and I faced two hungry lions at the edge of their hunting grounds. We fought fiercely, and I drove them both off. Yes, they gave me some wounds that I have never forgotten, but I was able to deal with them. Unfortunately, however, we are only seven, and if they are hunting, they will be out in full force - and that means nearly twice our number. I think we may have a chance to show our superiority, but we should not go without taking warning." He looked probingly into the eyes of each of his group; most looked away.

He stood back, drawing himself up. "All right then," he said imperiously. "We are ready, or as much so as we'll ever be. If we are going to beat those lions to the kill, we need to move, and quickly. How many of you can run as far as the next ridge that Khulo and Kichasi have spoken of?"

There were several weak cheers of excitement and confirmation, and Mng'ariza smiled as they all heaved themselves to their feet to follow him. He was confident that they would eat tonight.

Yet, as he broke into an easy lope and his six followers matched his pace behind him, he reviewed what he had said. Certainly he had not revealed the whole truth to his comrades.

The two lions he had met were youngsters-- mere adolescents-- one a male, with the bare beginnings of a mane on the nape of his neck, and the other a smaller lioness, barely more than an overgrown cub. But their claws had been sharp, and he had quickly found out that the games lion cubs play with each other are not for mere sport. He had entered the skirmish overconfident, sure that he would be able to drive them away and establish his presence on the borders of the Pride Lands, but in just a few moments after the first claws had flashed he had found himself fighting for his life. He had dealt a few telling blows to both opponents, but had received so many in return that he had been forced to turn tail and run to a safe distance before turning to see that the lions were not giving chase, and had indeed turned back the way they had come, making for the monolithic landmark of Pride Rock on the horizon.

Sarabi was in the lead, her nose in the air. All the pride was moving at a walk, looking expectantly at their leader for a signal that they were moving in the right direction.

Suddenly she turned, excitedly. "They're here!"

Mufasa leaped forward to his mate's side. His adrenaline was surging, and the thrill of the hunt was reasserting itself in his veins. The pride broke into a run, knowing that over the next ridge they saw ahead of them would be unusually favorable quarry: four or five zebras, grazing in open grassland, with no cover or protection from either vegetation or a large herd. Mufasa rumbled in anticipation as he ran.

The ground rose, causing the lions to shift more strength to their hind legs as they climbed; soon they had come to the long, rounded top of the rolling ridgetop behind which they knew they would see what they had come to find. They slowed to a crawl and ducked instinctively into the tall grass as the valley floor came into view ahead of them, opening before them like the sun appearing from behind a cloud. At first they could see nothing; their first concern was to stay hidden and to move into the valley in a position where they would be downwind of the zebras. Fortunately, they were lucky on that count; they could smell their prey clearly on the wind, so they knew without having to look that they had reached their destination.

Mufasa looked sidelong at Sarabi, who had slunk to his side in her eagerness. She met his glance and smiled-- she knew that with that glance he had given her the duty to scan the valley floor and determine whether they could begin advancing yet towards the unsuspecting zebras. This was a serious assignment, given always by the leader of the hunt to the one the leader determined was the most able and skillful. Sarabi felt pride surge through her at this signal of trust and respect her mate had given her.

On Mufasa's other side was now Wamase, whose anticipation was now so great that she could not hold back behind the leaders but was determined to be in the forefront of the hunt. Mufasa eyed her carefully. Was she too eager? But no-- Wamase was young, but she was also one of the pride's most deadly and effective hunters, and Mufasa had no reason to warn her back.

He turned his head back to his other side to look at Sarabi. She had carefully raised her head and was turning it slowly from one side of the valley to the other, her nostrils in the air as she sampled the smells that wafted to her. Suddenly she froze, her eyes fixed on a distant point on her horizon.

"Well?" Mufasa hissed from below.

Sarabi still did not move a muscle. "I see them," she murmured. "They're grazing. They're almost directly upwind, straight ahead of us."

She paused for a moment, then spoke a little louder to Mufasa. "We can begin to move in. Send out hunters to the sides, but don't let them approach faster than the ones who go straight ahead; we're directly downwind from them, so our best strategy is to make the initial run straight towards them. Send out Ng'ara and Sarafina to the left, and--"

"Sarabi," came an unexpected voice to Mufasa's right. He snapped his head around to see its source.

Wamase had raised her head and had fixed her eyes on a point to the right of where Sarabi had been looking. Her eager expression had gone, and in its place was one of consternation-- even fear.

"Wamase!" hissed Mufasa and Sarabi in unison. "Get down!"

"Sarabi, the cheetahs are here. Look." She tilted her head almost imperceptibly. Sarabi's eyes followed hers, and she gasped when she saw it: at a safe distance but not so far that she could not make out the distinctive features was a cheetah's head, protruding from the grasses, its eyes fixed immovably on the three zebras which were immediately visible ahead of it and the lions. Looking harder, she could make out another-- and then another and another. Three in all. And in grass this tall, three cheetahs that were visible meant...

She sank quickly to the ground, motioning Wamase to do the same. She looked at Mufasa, wide-eyed. "I can see three cheetahs surrounding the zebras. They're not moving. How many do you think are here?" She paused. "I think we're in for a desperate fight," she said, unable to keep the fear from her voice.

Mufasa had already been thinking quickly as soon as he had heard Wamase's voice. He knew what his own responsibility was, and he knew what the lionesses would have to do. He turned to Wamase, the closest lioness to him besides Sarabi.

"Wamase, listen to me. You're coming with me to help drive off the cheetahs. Bring with you two or three of the strongest, fastest lionesses you know. The rest will take on the zebras, and we must protect them. Do you understand?"

Wamase nodded, her mouth slightly open, the whites of her eyes showing. She stared back at Mufasa for a moment as though paralyzed, then abruptly turned and slunk back to the rest of the pride. This would be the first time she would face a foe who had claws and teeth as sharp as hers; she had a right to be frightened.

Turning back to Sarabi, Mufasa first nuzzled her cheek, then said, "Sarabi, you're in charge of the hunt. I will keep you safe from the cheetahs-- I, and Wamase, and the ones she chooses. You'll be safe, and I know you can bring down our prey better than any lioness the world has ever known." He looked into her eyes. "I don't want you to get hurt," he ended helplessly.

She narrowed her eyes at him and smiled, then licked him reassuringly. "I'll be fine," she told him. "We'll get those zebras. You go and give those cheetahs what-for." She drew back and tilted her head at him enigmatically, then turned and crawled back under cover of the grass to the others.

Mufasa breathed deeply. Here we go, he thought grimly, and moved back to the rest of the pride to steel himself and those who would come with him.

"Khulo, Kichasi," Mng'ariza called softly. The two padded up to him. "We are at right angles to the wind, so we will need to circle around to our left to make the best approach to the zebras." He motioned with his head. "You two will lead the approach, and I will follow. I have briefed the others. They'll move to the right and catch them if they bolt towards us up the valley, since that's the only way the zebras can go.

He sat back. "We are the only ones in the valley, unless my nose and eyes have ceased to work. Now, if we hurry, we can have a zebra and be fed for days."

Khulo shifted uneasily. "Mng'ariza," he said nervously. "If we make a kill, the lions will find us, or they'll find the carcass and steal it. There's no way we can both kill and eat before the lions get here."

"Nonsense. The rest of the zebras will have bolted and their scent will draw the lions to their new location," Mng'ariza replied expansively. "We have nothing to worry about. Now, go. I will follow you several lengths behind."

Mufasa and Wamase crept forward silently, not looking at each other nor at anything but the rustling grass ahead of them that parted easily as they pressed through it and closed behind them leaving almost no trace of their passing. Kolo and Malaika were close behind, noses almost at the leaders' tails. All four had grimly set faces and strode as purposefully as their stealthy postures would allow them, and their claws were ready at the tips of the sheaths.

A pungent smell suddenly hit all four lions, causing them to stop in their tracks and draw in their breath sharply. Mufasa knew the smell; he and Sarabi had once met it, wandering out to the edge of the Pride Lands in one of their youthful adventures. The consequences had been striking; Ahadi had been both furious at their foolishness and overwhelmingly relieved at their safety. And now, the smell instantly reminded Mufasa of long-forgotten pain and anger, the twinge of wounds that had healed long ago but whose scars still remained in his memory. His eyes darkened, and a growl urged its way out of his throat.

The sound was enough, Mufasa knew instantly, to betray them, and with a full-throated roar he sprang forward, claws outstretched. All three lionesses followed him immediately with snarls. He surged up out of the grass, and directly in front of him-- he had judged the distance impeccably-- stood two utterly flabbergasted cheetahs. Mufasa descended, and all the cheetahs could do was lay their ears back and sink to the ground as the bulky lion crashed down upon them.

The larger cheetah shot out from under his paws with a shriek a moment later, red claw marks down his side. The smaller one, however, had not been so easy to scare, and she was now bristling ferociously at Wamase with sharp teeth exposed, snarling viciously. Wamase, nearly twice her weight, was inclined to laugh; yet she knew instinctively that the danger was real and to deal with it lightly would be a mistake.

Malaika had swung around to the left to cut off the escape of the first cheetah and now had it cornered against a pair of large thick bushes. Mufasa stood between the two, Kolo growling at his side. "Enough!" he shouted. "What are you doing here? What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he demanded of the female. He received only a snarl in reply.

Mufasa persisted, urgently. "How many are you?"

Mng'ariza had run at his full speed forward when he heard the first roar and almost immediately afterward the first cry of pain from one of his people. With a deep-throated snarl he burst out of the grasses and found himself running full in the face of the largest lion he had ever seen or even heard of; yet undaunted, he hurled himself forward, claws slashing.

The lion met his charge with nothing but wide-open eyes and a gaping mouth. Mng'ariza wasted no time in taking advantage of this unpreparedness, raking his claws savagely across the lion's cheek and then dashing back to a safe distance, where he stood and bared his teeth, hackles raised. The lion staggered backwards, a gasp of pain escaping from his throat.

"Now, your Majesty," he spat, "The sides are even. We are a match for you. Either back away peacefully from the prey we have rightfully claimed before you arrived, or face our claws. Don't underestimate our strength."

Kichasi had immediately gone to Mng'ariza's side and resumed baring her teeth, attempting to copy her uncle's aggressive demeanor; Khulo, however, had turned his head and was merely staring at Mng'ariza in disbelief.

He whispered urgently to his leader, "What are you doing? We'll be torn to pieces! Have you lost your mind?"

Mng'ariza ignored Khulo and fixed his eyes on the huge lion who had recovered his posture and was now glowering at him from nearly twice his height, muzzle dripping streaks of blood. He felt a sudden misgiving, and his heart faltered, though his face did not show it.

The lion spoke, in a deep voice that seemed to make the earth tremble, though it was not especially loud. "I don't know who you are or why you are here in the Pride Lands, but if you do not turn and go back the way you came, never to come back here again, I will kill you right now. You are trespassing on our land and poaching on the herds that we depend upon for survival. You have a place elsewhere. Go back and stay there." His soft but profound voice conveyed far more anger and venom than Mng'ariza had expected, and his mind reeled.

He was, however, a prouder cheetah than that. He would never back off, especially in front of his fellows who held him in such high esteem. He growled back at Mufasa, a shrill menacing sound. And as he stared through narrowed eyes up at the massive lion, he recognized him. He knew why the lion had reacted the way he had. A wide grin developed on his face.

"I know you," he said, his voice now soft and smooth, matching the lion's own voice for venom. "All that time ago. I assume you thought you'd never see me again, didn't you?" He advanced a step. "You couldn't kill me then, and you cannot touch me now." His growl resumed, and his tail lashed. Both of his followers were now at his side, having slipped away from their captors and taken shelter in the security of the group.

The lion stepped forward to match Mng'ariza's movement, but it was the dark lioness at his side that spoke. "You fool," she breathed angrily. "Look what you've done. Instead of letting at least one of our groups eat tonight, you have doomed us both to starving. Look!" She motioned with her head back over Mng'ariza's shoulder. "The zebras are bolting! We've lost our chance."

Without thinking, Mng'ariza turned, startled, and tried to see whether his prey had indeed gone. But just as he almost immediately realized the trick, he felt a crushing blow fall upon his ribs; searing pain followed the dull impact as he spun off his feet and crashed limply into a rigid stand of grasses and shrubs. Nothing followed-- the killing blow that he awaited never fell-- but he had no strength to stand or to do anything more than gingerly opening his eyes and watching helplessly as the huge lion and the three lionesses, roaring and snarling, dealt cuffs to Khulo and Kichasi, driving them quickly to flight back out of his line of vision and soon out of earshot. Soon he was alone in the grass except for the one lioness who had stayed behind to watch him.

He raised his head weakly, then scowled and forced his limbs to move. Pain shot through his body, and he knew that the lion-- of course it was the lion who had struck him-- had broken at least one of his ribs. No matter. He must not let that hold him. Panting, ignoring the pain, he ground his eyes shut and staggered to his feet, where he swayed and tried to regain his composure. The world spun around his head.

When he was at last able to open his eyes, the first thing he saw was the same lioness standing quietly before him, looking at him with wide, inquisitive eyes. He glared back balefully.

"What are you still doing here?" he rasped, his voice low and weak but significantly fierce. "I can still fight, you know, and I will."

The lioness merely stared back, not saying a word.

Mng'ariza tried to inhale, but drawing air into his lungs caused excruciating pain in his left side. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "Get out or I'll kill you! I'm not dead yet!" He advanced, an awkward caricature of his former self, yet a menacing figure. He hissed through his teeth; the lioness backed away and then fled.

Sarabi stood over the fallen body of a zebra, gazing proudly around herself. Three lionesses sat at the carcass; at a distance she could see three more gathered around a second body in the grass. In another direction, she saw four cheetahs' heads staring uneasily but vengefully at her. Let them, she thought. The hunt belonged to the lions.

The Pride

Chapter Six

The sky was rapidly darkening as Taka reached the ridgetop. He peered out over the rolling earth, the breeze tossing his mane lightly, and tried to fix his eyes upon something that would tell him his destination. He had come to trust nothing but his eyes and ears.

He had skulked out of sight when the pride had gone to the hunt; he had no desire to take part only to be spurned from the kill once again once it was brought down. But now, with all remnants of food gone from the cavern at Pride Rock, he was feeling the pangs of hunger-- and much more than hunger. His emptiness was not one that could be filled by food alone.

"Taka," his mother said quietly. "What's wrong? You seem so... so worried about something. Can't I help?"

Taka sat facing away from Akase with shoulders hunched, his tail wrapped around his forelegs with its tip twitching in frustration. His eyes, already narrowed, squeezed shut as though to lock his thoughts inside. "Nothing, Mother. I'm all right." He paused, as that did not seem to satisfy the unspoken question. "I'm just... thinking."

Akase propped herself up on her forelegs and stared anxiously at her son's narrow back, the dark fringes only just having begun to appear along the crest of his neck.

"Look, Taka, I'm your mother. If there's something wrong, I want you to tell me. It's not good to keep things shut away inside." She stood up and moved slowly to his side, then thrust her head forward to peer around Taka's unmoving shoulder and into his face.

He opened his eyes slightly and turned almost imperceptibly to face her, but quickly closed them again.

"No. It's nothing. Leave me alone."

His mother persisted, though Taka showed no sign of wavering. He continued to deny that anything was wrong; yet she was his mother, and she knew her son better than any lion in the pride. She knew when he was feeling troubled and when he was happy-- though she felt happiness in him progressively less and less as time went on. Now was another of the times when only she could tell that he was fighting an inner battle. Any other lion would be risking Taka's anger by trying as she was to pry his secrets out; yet Akase, as his mother and the only lion to whom Taka would listen, was the exception.

Moving around to his other side and nuzzling lovingly at his cheek, she at last extracted from him a helpless sigh and a faltering voice.

"It's Mufasa, Mother," he said weakly, in a childish plaintive tone that only his mother had ever heard. "What makes him so much better than me? Why does he get all the fun and all the glory?" He opened his eyes and turned to face Akase. "I'm his brother. I'm just as royal as he is. Why am I always the one... to..." He broke off.

His mother looked at him in concern, then stepped close to him and rubbed her forehead against Taka's. "I know... I know exactly how you feel."

Taka looked at her, surprised. "You do?"

Akase nodded slowly. "Taka, I'm your mother, but I'm also Mufasa's. He was born first. You were littermates, you and he, but fate chose to make Mufasa the elder." Her eyes grew sad. "The Circle of Life has power over everything, and nothing can go against it-- but it also isn't fair."

"Mother?" Taka asked, suddenly inquisitive and slightly shocked. "You mean... you mean this is the way it's supposed to be?"

His mother looked at the ground. Her voice was a whisper, almost inaudible.

"I didn't make the laws, and neither did your father. But he believes in them with all his heart, no matter who they can hurt. Even his own son." She swallowed, as though choking back tears. Then she pulled her head back up to his scared face and forced a smile.

"Don't worry," she said. "Mufasa might be getting all the attention from your father, but both Ahadi and I love you very much, and neither of us want to see you hurt. Mufasa is just... ready right now to learn what he needs to know to be King, and Ahadi is spending time teaching him those things. He's going to be King just because he is older than you-- that's the only reason. You would have made just as good a King, if only fate had turned that way." She took a breath. "He will take Sarabi as his Queen, and then all the responsibilities and hardships of leading a pride and ruling a kingdom will be upon his back. You shouldn't envy him for what he will have to face as King."

Taka narrowed his eyes a bit suspiciously. His mother appeared to be making up excuses to satisfy him. But then he relaxed; he repeated Akase's last words to himself, and they seemed to make sense.

"So what about now? Will things get better?"

Akase knew better than to tell the truth. What hope was there for a small, weak rival to a powerful king of a struggling pride? If her mate had his way, Taka would be forced from the pride to join a new one or to die alone in the wilderness. She knew what fate was inherent for those who were born to a life of struggle and hardship in the shadow of another. She had seen it happen.

"Of course they will!" she told him brightly. "Why, just look at yourself. You've grown to almost your full size already, and soon you'll be ready to claim a mate for yourself. You're certainly entitled to your share of happiness." She smiled at him, though behind her gleaming eyes was emptiness-- she knew that what she was saying would likely be untrue, though she could hardly admit that to her son.

Ahadi's way was that of the Circle. He spoke every day about what meaning the Circle held for the life of the pride and of its lions. From what his father had told him, and what he had decided himself, the destiny of the pride was to be ruled by Mufasa and Mufasa alone, and every lioness in it would belong to the King. Taka would have no place. He would be driven out, either to find a new life elsewhere or to die. She suppressed a sigh and continued the reassuring smile.

"You know, Taka," she said mysteriously. "You should be watching that Wamase. I think she just might have her eye on you." Akase turned away, glanced at Taka sidelong, and began to slip away and vanish into the shadows of the cavern.

Taka stared after her, his words dying in his throat. Wamase? His head turned, as though involuntarily looking for her. That dark lioness... her fur matched his in color, and she was as silent as was he. As he thought about the young graceful lioness, he suddenly realized that he knew more about her than he had known. Yes-- he knew her. Had he been watching her? If he had, he hadn't realized it-- or else he hadn't let himself realize it. He stared out into the night sky outside the cavern's entrance as images of Wamase ran through his mind unbidden.

There she was: a sleek graceful lioness, pacing slowly past him in his mind, her dark eyes turning to meet his, a smile floating ghostlike across her lips; now she was sliding smoothly past him, her body almost at his nostrils. Their surroundings faded into a dreamlike haze as suddenly his whole mind was focused on this vision in front of him. As though moving through water, he sniffed eagerly at the dark fur of her back as it slipped past him, and as his mind created scents for him to choose between and to interpret, he began involuntarily to step forward and to reach out to groom the tantalizing fur...

His muzzle met nothing but air, and Taka opened his eyes with a start. His mind rapidly reassembled the world around him. As he turned his head frantically from side to side, searching for anybody else who might have seen him and caught his mind in the act of allowing him an indulgent thought, he shuddered, resolving never to let such a thing happen again. He saw no one in the cavern but his mother, now lying on her side across the floor, facing away from him. Relief flowed over him, but resolve was now strong. So that such a thing would never happen again, he vowed never again to allow himself to think of Wamase. Never again.

But how would he manage that? Wamase. Just the name, running in a whisper through his mind, brought back the images to his eyes even though he was now glaring determinedly at the rocks, trying to anchor himself firmly in reality. What was coming over him? He shook his head from side to side and trotted briskly out of the cavern.

After night had fallen, standing on a bare rock at the base of a tree some distance from Pride Rock, Taka spoke aloud to himself, berating and scolding his weakness.

"I am not in love," he muttered. "I am not! I could never be. Love is for the weak. I am not weak. Wamase. Wamase." He spoke the name, almost savagely, over and over to himself, noticing with satisfaction that its impact on him grew less with each repetition. He smiled and sat down, turning to face the nearby Pride Rock, standing silhouetted against a quarter moon.

He fixed his eyes on the bright crescent above him, forcing them to open wide and let in every drop of painful yet beautiful light that poured down upon him. He stood, his breath nearly stopping, his heartbeat pounding-- in anticipation? Fear? Triumph? He could not tell-- and let the ghostly white image burn itself into his mind. His eyes began to smart and then to throb, but he persistently kept them open with almost fierce determination. After standing stubbornly like this for some time, he slowly allowed air to seep back between his teeth and fill his lungs, and then squeezed his eyes shut.

The intensity of the feeling that struck him, of the excruciating light suddenly being cut off from his eyes, caused him to gasp and stagger briefly. A strangled sound burst from him, and a nearby gopher that had been sitting outside its hole watching him interestedly gave an alarmed squeak and darted for shelter. Taka shook himself, still not opening his eyes, and stared directly forward. The throbbing white image of the crescent moon floated before him. He chuckled grimly as he focused his mind on that image, letting it impress itself on his very existence and consciousness. From now on, he thought, he would be free. He had discovered his answer.

Wamase would no longer trouble his mind. He opened his eyes and turned them toward the entrance to Pride Rock, where he knew Sarabi slept. A smile widened across his muzzle and he laughed in both relief and amusement. Sarabi! The betrothed of his brother. The one lioness who was known unequivocally to be safe from any male's covetousness but Mufasa's. Taka sprang to his feet and ran about for a few steps at the brilliance of the solution. Sarabi! Her very unattainability was the answer. Taka would watch her from a distance, take in her every move, study her ways of breathing and sleeping and thinking. He would train himself to yearn for Sarabi, for the lioness who would grow to be the Queen. And whenever an image of Wamase rose unbidden to his mind, he would block it out with the living and solid Sarabi.

She would inhabit his mind. Her form and movements would burn themselves into his brain, allowing him to forget Wamase, to turn away from all the reminders that he was no more than the small inferior brother who would never achieve anything more than a common lioness and a rival's place at the kill. His low, gravelly laugh rolled from his throat once more as he closed his eyes. The crescent shape that pulsed against his eyelids was fading rapidly and would soon be gone. Yet its lesson had been learned, and Taka knew what he would have to do. Turning his forepaws to face Pride Rock, he set off for the cavern he knew as home, where his mother Akase, the young and dark Wamase, and most importantly the high and queenly lioness Sarabi waited.

The wind picked up and rustled through Taka's thick dark mane. Not moving, he continued to stare unblinking into the east, the direction the hunt had taken. Oh, what he would have given to have gone on that hunt-- but no. All was as it should be. He was standing at a distance from the pride's kill like any scavenger, his eyes and mind bent both toward the lions and the prey. He growled slightly.

"I could have helped," he muttered to himself. "I could have brought down a zebra. I am a strong male. It is not right that the lionesses should be obligated to do all the hunting. The danger and the responsibility are too great."

He paced forward now, purpose shining in his yellow eyes. He pictured his brother sitting idly at the edge of the field as the lionesses pulled down the great beasts one by one, their sides heaving in the agony of fatigue, dodging deadly kicks and falls while Mufasa looked on. He broke suddenly into a run.

Wamase.

Taka almost stumbled as his eyes closed involuntarily. As he opened them with effort, his mind reeled at the thought of Wamase, and immediately replaced it with the image and scent of Sarabi.

"Sarabi," he growled as he ran, new strength in his muscles. "He is unworthy of you..."

Taka sped into the night. Tall grasses rustled as he passed, then closed together behind him as though nothing more had been there than the wind.

The Pride

Chapter Seven

"Mufasa, I don't like this," quavered Sarabi as she sat beside him next to the carcass of one of the fallen zebras. "They're still out there. They haven't given up."

The King sat motionless, already peering with a determined frown out into the unyielding darkness. He made no sign of having heard Sarabi, but she knew that his mind was resolving the same troubles as hers was. She could see beyond his forehead and his eyes and look directly into his inner thoughts. She knew her mate. She understood how his mind worked.

Sarabi sighed and lowered her head to nose at the fresh meat. She had already gorged herself on it and was no longer hungry. Her nose passed disinterestedly over the body, wrinkling slightly as it took in the now-familiar scents.

"It isn't over, Sarabi," Mufasa's deep voice echoed, though softly. "They will be back. And when they return, they will be more determined than ever."

He finally turned to face her. "Today they were as cautious as we were-- the zebras were still alive and could have bolted if they weren't careful," he said, thinking aloud. "When the light of morning comes, they will not be so shy. They now have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

Sarabi took a step forward and leaned against him reassuringly, though Mufasa's shoulder seemed slightly cold and unresponsive.

He looked gravely at her, then turned away. "And we have everything to lose."

Both lions scanned the darkness that surrounded them. Only the warm night breeze moved; yet both knew that to sleep would be a risk not worth taking. Mufasa finally softened and moved to press himself against Sarabi. It would be a long night.

Running with a determined pace through the tall grasses, Taka set his teeth and prepared himself for a confrontation which would come bitterly to him.

Only he could know that the reason for which he was rushing to rejoin the hunt was that he could not bear to think of Sarabi unprotected and at risk while she fought to bring down her prey. Revealing such a motive would spur Mufasa to cast him out of the pride on the spot. No... he needed a story, one which would be believable. But that meant...

Taka shuddered as he ran. "Apologize... beg for forgiveness... no!" He shook himself, keeping his feet and balance, and ground his teeth together. He panted slightly as his feet pounded the ground; he fought off the creeping weariness.

He would never sink to such a level, to justify his place in the pride by nothing more than an emotional appeal. He was far more intelligent than that, he knew. He could come up with a better plan. Besides, how could he ever face his reflection again, knowing that his weaknesses went beyond his yearning for Sarabi?

And Wamase...

No. Sarabi.

Taka forced his brain to labor, to orchestrate an alibi. How could he keep his honor and still show that he needed to be a part of the pride? He knew, himself, that he had to be near Sarabi, if only to gaze upon her from a distance. He growled deeply in his throat in frustration and ran on.

There it was-- one ridge ahead. Or two. Taka knew the spot was somewhere nearby; he could feel the presence of other creatures nearby, and he could smell blood and battered flesh. As he ran up the lightly sloping side of a long, low ridge he analyzed the smells that the breeze brought to him over the grasses. Yes, it was unmistakable. The pride had killed and was just over the ridge. Either that, or--

Taka rose above the grass as he ran, the hill beginning to level off and then to slope down beneath him, his legs following the contour of the hillside while his body hurtled forward in the same direction. His head rose high enough to make out what looked like a dull yellow mass in the vegetation several lengths ahead of him; the crescent moon and the stars gave only barely enough light for him to see the object briefly before he sank back into the grass, still running forward. And before he had time to slow down or to react, he had crashed into a small clearing in the savannah grasses, a circular patch which had been worn flat by restless feet. Taka skidded to a halt on the mat of grasses as his senses were assaulted from all directions at once.

The cheetah backed away from Taka, hissing sharply and fiercely, gathering its feet together and raising its hackles. Gasping in surprise, Taka dug in his claws and came to a stop a few steps away and looked over the stranger in wonder, his eyes widening in silence as the cheetah hissed and snarled at him menacingly.

It was a male, larger than any cheetah Taka had ever seen; yet it was standing awkwardly, its feet propping its body up at an odd angle. He could see the cheetah was badly hurt but willing to go to any length to show that it could still defend itself.

Taka found his voice with some difficulty, but soon heard it grow stronger as he began to speak. "Who are you?" he asked, forcing his voice into a contemptuous sneer by the third word. "Don't tell me you are poaching on the Pride Lands too."

The cheetah stopped hissing and glared back at Taka coldly. "Your boundaries are meaningless when they block the weak from surviving," it scoffed in a grating voice. "So that you know I am not ashamed to be here or for you to know my intentions, my name is Mng'ariza. And that name will not be an uncommon one in your conversations soon," he spat as an afterthought.

Taka forced himself, with effort, not to smile. "Indeed," he replied. "Mng'ariza, the cheetah who was too naive to die." He made a few assumptions about the cheetah's condition and stepped forward.

"Look at me," he growled deeply. "You are trespassing on the lands of the King. You have evidently attacked the King's pride, and yet you remain defiant. I don't need to hear any excuses; the things you've done are cause for punishment by death."

Mng'ariza stared back at him incredulously, then cackled. "Excuses!" he shouted, his voice rising to a piercing screech. "I have no excuses to give! I am guilty of defending my clan and of trying to keep myself alive in the only way I know how. Kill me if you must!" The cheetah advanced, his frame suddenly seeming to be whole and strong. "But remember this," he continued, his nose wrinkling in close proximity to Taka's muzzle. "Kill me, and you lose whatever chance you ever had of reclaiming your lands and driving out my cheetahs. Without your knowing their destination, my clan will rule over the Pride Lands, and you will be the ones driven out-- not us. Leave me alone, and for ransom," he continued, turning his head and looking at Taka out of the corner of his eyes, the traces of a toothy smile on his lips. "I will tell you where we can be found."

Taka stared back silently. This was a situation he had never imagined. Here was a cheetah who was willing to risk his life to find food for his family and group, and yet now he was just as willing to bargain the lives of that same group in order to save his own life. He looked over the cheetah's body again. Innumerable scratches covered his nose and shoulders, and one large blackened bruise over his ribs betrayed his helplessness. Obviously his ribs were broken. He could not fight. Yet his brazen courage in the face of certain doom gnawed at Taka's mind, as did his opponent's sense of priorities. A slow smile spread across Taka's face and split into a grin, his white teeth showing. He began to chuckle.

"And I thought I considered myself an opportunist," he said in amusement, the chuckle breaking into a laugh. "You're brave, I'll give you that. But," he continued, suddenly sobering, "What word can you give me that you will tell me the truth? Trust, you well know, is a dangerous thing." His smile widened, though this time it was a broad, mirthless leer of intimidation. Taka's foreclaws, always partly extended, reached out of their sheaths and pressed into the ground.

Mng'ariza narrowed his eyes at Taka. "You drive a hard bargain, lion," he growled-- a high-pitched, warning sound. "Yet you perhaps don't realize that I'm the one making the rules here. My claws are just as sharp as yours, and I am smaller and quicker. I may have a broken rib, but I can still run." He took a deep breath. "It's your choice. Take my advice or leave it. I strongly suggest you take it."

It was an empty threat and both knew it. Taka ignored the chance to ridicule the cheetah, though, and drew himself up to his full height. The breeze awoke once again and blew his mane across his cheek as he frowned down upon his opponent.

"Very well," Taka decided after a moment's thought. "You will live. I will let you go free and destroy your clan instead. Now-- tell me where I can find them." He smiled.

The cheetah blinked up at him, then shook his head as though to clear it. He thought for a moment, then raised his head to peer into Taka's face. "The baobab tree due north of here."

Without hesitation, and without changing expression, Taka lashed out with a large forepaw and swatted Mng'ariza on the shoulder, sending him sprawling on the matted grass, gasping for air.

"Don't lie to me," Taka growled. He was playing out a gamble he had just designed-- it was a risky one, but his feelings were strong that it was warranted.

Mng'ariza shuddered and gasped for breath as he lay on the ground. Looking up, he saw Taka standing sternly over him, and his eyes suddenly glazed over in fear.

"Northeast," he said, trembling, his voice wavering nervously. "Northeast, in a deep dry riverbed. A morning's journey from here. My pack is retreating for it now, if they are not fighting your pride." His head fell back onto the grass as his chest rose and fell rapidly.

Suddenly Mng'ariza lurched forward and scrambled to his feet, grimacing in pain. "You will not be disappointed, your Highness," he growled.

"I'm not--" Taka began, and then stopped, his eyes suddenly burning.

Mng'ariza sidled away from Taka, then turned and began to trot awkwardly out of the bare clearing. Taka watched him limp slowly off through the grasses, northward, and then shrugged, shook his mane violently, and began to lope forward again toward the lightening sky of the east.

* * *

"Sarabi, wake up," Mufasa said softly but urgently. "Sarabi." He rubbed his nose under her ear.

His mate sighed softly, her eyes still closed, and rolled over.

Mufasa looked upward quickly, then turned his attention back down to Sarabi. "The sun is rising. Wake up! We must be ready."

His insistent nosing at her finally caused Sarabi to stir and open her eyes. At first, she simply lay on her side, smiling up at Mufasa as he crouched over her. Then realization flowed over her of what the situation meant. The sun had risen, and with it, so had the danger. Her face hardened and she scrambled to her feet.

"Do you see anything?" she asked her mate nervously. "Have they come yet?"

Mufasa was scanning the horizon and shaking his head slowly. "No... not yet. But I feel them nearby." He sighed. "Their attack will come soon. And we will have no warning of it. They can move fast, silently-- they can make themselves completely unseen if they have the need. And they do." He paused, his eyes still fixed on the horizon to the eastward, where the cheetahs had fled the night before. "Raise the guard."

Kichasi paced back and forth, snarling to herself in frustration. Khulo sat nearby with his tail twitching nervously around his forepaws, raw scratches on his left side.

"We must attack. Now. The time is right. They have our meat, and they killed our leader. We have to avenge Mng'ariza. We must avenge him..."

Khulo looked at her huntedly. "Do you honestly think we can defeat an entire pride of lions? Look at us... we're both wounded. There are only six of us. And we're all hungry."

"We must avenge him!" Kichasi hissed at him.

"Kichasi!" Khulo shouted. "You're being unreasonable. Revenge isn't a good enough reason to risk our own lives. I think we should get out of here and hunt somewhere else, while we have the strength to do it."

"Running is for the weak, Khulo," she said.

"Revenge is for the stupid."

Kichasi pretended not to have heard him, and continued to mutter to herself as she walked back and forth, lashing herself with her tail.

The cheetahs were demoralized. With Mng'ariza gone-- dead, for all they knew-- they had no leader, no commands to follow. They were hungry, so hungry they could barely walk; yet they did not know whether to attack the lions and steal what they could of the prey, or to run for the gorge while they still could, there to seek another, less dangerous hunting ground before their strength gave out.

Khulo was no leader. That he himself knew. All his decisions seemed to him to be weak-minded and cowardly; yet he made no decision lightly, and he always felt deep down that he knew what was best and wisest for the clan. He was the one who had spoken against entering the Pride Lands in search of food; he had warned Mng'ariza against tracking the zebras which were so obviously being followed by the King's own pride. Now Mng'ariza was gone, and who could he blame? Himself, he thought. He claimed responsibility for all things that went wrong, whether it was reasonable to do so or not.

Kichasi, on the other hand-- Khulo watched her as she growled to herself. She had inspiration and drive. Some of the others called it foolishness, but Khulo saw it as the fire of will that a leader needed. She could lead the cheetahs fearlessly into battle, take what they needed, and get them all to safety in a matter of heartbeats. He admired her. If anyone could show them the way to survival, she could.

Yet... he still knew, deep inside, that it was better to run now. These circumstances were desperate. Their only hope was to cut their losses, choose a new leader, and seek food elsewhere. Kichasi would hear none of it-- indeed, she seemed oblivious to any suggestions other than ones insisting on action and revenge for the fallen Mng'ariza. Khulo sighed.

Kichasi finally stopped pacing, and her eyes were clear as she eyed her fellows as they lay panting in the grass.

"We have to go, now," she growled. "Anybody who wants to eat, come with me."

* * *

Sarafina woke with Wamase's nose pressing at her shoulder and her excited voice in her ear.

"Sarafina! Wake up! We're going to get to fight-- did you hear? The cheetahs haven't left. We're supposed to be on guard."

With a groan, Sarafina opened an eye and turned it on Wamase. "Oh, leave me alone," she growled, her voice croaking blearily. "It's too early for this. Go bother someone else."

Wamase merely grew more enthusiastic in her attempts to wake her friend. She danced around Sarafina, batting lightly at her face and shoulders, exhorting her to wakefulness with cublike taunts. "Come on, get up. You're lazier than a hippo. You'll be bird food if you lie there any more."

Finally Sarafina opened both eyes, reached out with a large paw, and brought it to rest on Wamase's nose. She grinned up at her, then giggled. "Fine... fine. I'm up. Just leave me alone and I won't bite your tail off."

Wamase bounced around happily, eyes traveling rapidly between different points on the horizon and her sluggishly moving friend as she struggled to her feet. She was obviously looking forward to the fight, as she did toward every hunt-- with undisguised eagerness. And she had a right to be. She had accomplished far more than her age presumed; it was Wamase, in fact, who had administered the fatal bite to the zebra she and Sarafina had fed from before falling asleep next to it, leaning against it as its body's heat faded. Her claws were long and sharp. Her legs were strong. Her mind was one that focused on the hardest, most perilous parts of life, and relished them. Rather than aspiring to an easy life of being provided for by a strong male, Sarafina was now seeing more and more that Wamase lived for the thrill of action and little more. She lived rapidly and dangerously-- and that was the way she wanted it.

Sarafina stood, swaying slightly, and smiled back at Wamase as her friend ran in gleeful circles around her. Her smile became fixed and her eyebrows narrowed, however, when she recalled what she had noticed in her over the past few days. At this moment she was boisterous and energetic, the same as she had always been as a cub and an adolescent lioness; yet late at night and after meals especially, she had begun to show parts of herself that Sarafina had never seen before, and indeed had never expected. She had become introverted and mysterious, her smile conveying less to Sarafina's mind than it ever had-- and her eyes seemed to stray more and more often... to Taka.

Sarafina forced herself to walk to the top of a slight rise nearby, facing away from Wamase as she thought.

"Taka," she breathed to herself. Was it possible? Surely it couldn't be... how could any lioness be attracted to Taka? For Sarafina, he epitomized all that was distasteful in life; he was dour and dark, bony and small, and his claws were always extended partway. It gave him a menacing appearance. He seemed to be perpetually angry at something she could not see. It was this-- that appearance of bitterness and resentment toward the world in general-- that especially made Sarafina shudder when she thought of him. What could have made him like that?

Sure, he was darkly handsome-- his sharp bony features gave him a sophisticated and dignified aspect that Mufasa lacked, and he had a way of swaying and slinking when he walked that made Sarafina...

"No!" she said aloud. She looked around briefly, but nobody was nearby-- even Wamase had moved off to wake another pair of nearby lionesses. "No," she said quietly again, to herself. Taka was hateful to her. She could not imagine another lioness actually... actually attracted to him. Yet...

She turned to look at Wamase. She certainly seemed to have no such hesitations about the King's brother, about staring fascinatedly at him as he lay asleep in the cavern at Pride Rock. What was going through her mind? Sarafina wondered, though she thought she could guess the answer. She could not admit the answer to herself-- she would not-- but it was there all the same.

The sun had now risen fully above the hills in the east, and its warming rays had sent new life into her limbs. Sarafina shook herself, then turned from the hilltop and trotted back down to where the zebra's carcass lay and Wamase was standing, eager for the action of the day to begin.

As she stepped down from the rise, the grass just beyond where she had been standing stirred and parted.

The Pride

Chapter Eight

"Mufasa!" called Taka as he topped the last rise. He smelled lions on the wind-- lions, and zebras, and the scent of the kill.

The sun was sending its warming rays through the air, clashing with the cool moisture of the night and stirring crisp breezes which brushed the tall grasses aside as Taka passed through them. He was moving at an intermittent run now, every few moments slowing to a walk to rest his sore legs. He had been running all night.

The ground had been level for several paces and was now beginning to slope downward. Taka craned his head to try to see further ahead over the grass, but he was moving through a patch of tall cane and impenetrable bushes that hid the world from his view as effectively as it kept him hidden from other searching eyes.

Laying his ears back as the wind whistled acrosss them, Taka pushed his way rapidly through the vegetation. "Mufasa!" he shouted again, urgently, almost desperately, into the empty air.

Then there was a crash and a snarl, off to his left through the grass. He jerked his head in the direction of the sound, and as if to show him the scene, the wind drew apart the grasses in a strong, sweeping gust, giving him a momentary glimpse of what lay beyond. A gleam of golden hide, a shaggy spotted pelt, a flash of claws and of teeth along with desperate yowls of rage and of pain.

Kolo and Malaika faced each other over the lithe, crouched body of Kichasi. The cheetah was almost untouched and her face held an impassioned, overpowering glare as she turned it on one lioness and then the other, her white teeth showing and gleaming in the early sunlight; yet her sides heaved with exertion unlike any she had ever experienced. The two lionesses hung back, uncertainly, exchanging glances with each other of disconcerted frustration. Each had received prominent claw marks, the blood seeping from their wounds. They slowly paced around the cheetah, sidling carefully away, trampling the grasses down into a flat clear arena.

Malaika narrowed her eyes. This was a cheetah, she thought grimly to herself. Half her size. She should be dead by now.

"This will end now," she growled, then tensed her body and sprang forward with a snarl, foreclaws striking savagely at the small form in front of her. Yet immediately she felt a stabbing pain in her shoulder, and her paws struck nothing. She fell heavily to the ground and stumbled.

"Malaika!" Kolo shouted, turning toward her. Kichasi had fallen upon her back, snapping at her neck as the lioness tried to fight her off. As Kolo lunged to help her comrade, a second cheetah-- a larger one-- leaped out of the grass and struck her in the side, then dodged away, taunting her with sharp defiant yowls..

The lionesses roared in pain almost simultaneously. Another roar echoed theirs, growing rapidly louder, and suddenly a third cheetah burst into the clearing, its eyes showing white and its mouth hanging open as it bolted in terror from something behind it. Only two lengths behind ran Mufasa. The King bounded into the midst of the battle, halted, and looked swiftly around to assess the situation, then made an immediate decision to let the terrified cheetah he had been chasing escape into the brush. He roared again, angrily, and dealt Kichasi a crushing blow, sending her reeling off of Malaika's back with a squeal of surprise and pain.

"Stay where you are," Mufasa thundered as he spun to face the second cheetah, who was now edging backward into the grasses, trembling. "Don't move! We are more than a match for you."

He calmed slightly, still breathing hard, his tail still thrashing side to side as he spoke. "There need be no more bloodshed if you will agree to simple terms," he rumbled evenly. "Leave. Immediately."

The sudden anguished shriek of a cheetah in pain, somewhere nearby in the grass, caused all five heads to turn.

"Is there no end to you pathetic bandits sniveling in the grass?" Taka snarled fiercely, contemptuously, at the white-eyed, exhausted cheetah that had blundered into him. His opponent cowered before him, trembling. "Your leader had even less pride than you do." A smile played across Taka's lips, and he laughed grimly. "I suppose the older a cheetah gets, the less able he is to lead. Perhaps you should follow your newborn cubs to the hunt instead."

Taka stepped closer; his voice lowered suddenly to a menacing rumble. "You have attacked our pride," he told the cheetah, "And for that you will die."

Khulo's eyes immediately focused back on reality. His breathing abruptly slowed and his mind cleared.

He scrambled to a sitting position and stared levelly at Taka. "I will die?" he said softly, as though posing the intriguing question to himself, as though Taka were not there. "I will die? How interesting. I find it strange that you would waste your time with me, when there are so many other things you could be doing, things much more useful to your pride."

Taka moved closer, his teeth showing. Khulo continued, the slightest bit of urgency entering his voice. "Guard the carcasses-- my fellows are already stealing the meat. Or you could help the King-- the last I saw him, he was fighting several others of my clan."

Narrowing his eyes, Taka bent down to glare at the cheetah. "Clan?" he asked, trying to make his voice sounding more accusatory than bewildered.

"There are seven of us," Khulo countered evenly. "Seven?" Taka took a menacing step forward. "What would cause seven cheetahs to travel together? You are solitary creatures. You have no need to form packs."

Khulo smiled. "Desperate times, lion," he rumbled. "These are desperate measures we are taking. When there is not enough food to sustain your group, you move to follow the food where it has gone."

He paused. "Obviously you don't realize that, or you wouldn't be here now."
Taka stared at the cheetah silently.

"The herds have left," went on Khulo. "And if you had left as well, you would have food and so would we. We would feed off of the Pride Lands in your absence, as we did last year and the year before, and you would remain among the herds you eat. This year has been different. You lions never left, and the food source has dwindled until we have been forced to use your lands even before you were gone-- if indeed you were ever going to leave at all."

Taka opened his mouth to speak, but a deep, urgent voice to his left froze him.
"Taka!" Mufasa shouted as he pushed through the grasses and came to an abrupt halt a few paces from his brother.

"What-- what are you doing here?"

Taka turned. "I am here to hunt, brother," he replied with no trace of malevolence. "I came to hunt, and to fight if need be. It seems it was not a bad decision."

Mufasa peered suspiciously at his brother, but seemed to be in too much haste to consider the details. Taka was assistance, much-needed assistance. Mufasa nodded slowly to himself, then again, more briskly, to Taka.

"I will take care of this cheetah, Taka," he said quickly. "Go and find Sarabi and make sure she is all right."

Taka's eyes would have given him away to Mufasa with the burning yellow gleam that shone in them at the mention of Sarabi's name, but his brother had turned from him. Taka stepped back a pace and nodded. "Yes... of course," he said gruffly; then he turned and trotted purposefully into the grasses.

"I'm telling you," Khulo told Mufasa, his anger and frustration getting the better of his fear, "You're making a big mistake, staying here so late. You have depleted our own food sources, and our only choice is to seek our prey elsewhere. I told that other lion, and he didn't believe me either."

Mufasa merely glared down at the cheetah, his mouth a tight stern line, his golden eyes narrowed stonily as the sun rose behind him, silhouetting him to Khulo's view, surrounding him with a pale light. Kulo's voice caught in his throat. Silence fell.

When Mufasa spoke, it was in a deep rumble that seemed to make the ground tremble.

"You may live on one condition, cheetah," he told Khulo softly but with inexorable menace. "If you can outrun me."

There it was. Taka could smell it. The scent of freshly killed zebra, just upwind of him. He pushed through the grasses.

Why had Mufasa left the kill? He was now far behind Taka, standing presumably where Taka had left him, standing over the cowering cheetah. Why was he so far from the kill? Did he value his pride's hard work so little?

Then he realized something, just as a new scent struck him on a sudden sharp breeze that made the grasses in front of him lean over as though to make way for him as he passed. The lionesses.

Still running, his feet pounding the grass, ignoring the pain of the sharp stones that he stepped on from time to time, Taka scanned the wind. Yes, they were all there. He recognized scent after scent. Ng'ara. Isha. Sarafina. Wamase.

Anger surged over him. Mufasa had left the lionesses alone with the kill, unprotected while he hunted cheetahs at the other end of the valley. He had neglected his own pride in a useless and foolish stunt. He growled as a tough and unbending shrub smacked his face as he passed.

What would have caused his brother to chase cheetahs, unprovoked, so far from the very kill he had come to protect? The cheetah who called himself Mng'ariza had been wounded as only a survivor of an encounter with a pride of lions could be; but if he and his clan had been so soundly defeated they would certainly have been far from the kill by now, not threatening to attack again, even retreating from the region. How like Mufasa. Such a lion was unfit to be King. He was unfit to be allowed on a hunt.

The sun had risen high into the morning sky and beat down on Taka's dark mane, heating it until it smothered him with unwelcome warmth. He growled and shook himself angrily, trying to coax some cool air into it, to cool his steaming head. He ran on.

Taka's mind resolved as he neared the source of the smell. Mufasa was away, and Taka was here. The lionesses were obviously frightened; their protection had left them alone. And...

The second cheetah's voice ran through his mind. "Guard the carcasses-- my fellows are already stealing the meat."

Fear surged up to compete with the anger in Taka's mind. With Mufasa away, the lionesses might be in mortal danger. His feet pounded the ground harder. Though his muscles complained bitterly toward him, Taka ignored the pain and forced himself to speed forward even faster. Then another thought, another scent in his mind: Sarabi.

With a fierce roar, Taka sprang over the last rise.

"Wamase! Look out!" Sarafina shrieked as the large dark form bounded into view, snarling. Wamase froze, then bolted aside, the whites of her eyes showing. Taka landed near where she had been sitting and bathing, and he came to a halt on a mound of earth several lengths away from the kill.

Sarafina backed off two steps, slowly. Recognition of her pride-mate struck her, but her fear did not leave her. In fact, she felt an even deeper misgiving. An enemy she could have attacked in self-defense. But Taka...

The dark lion was standing breathlessly but defiantly on the rise, the wind whipping through his mane. He seemed controlled but ready to attack; only his eyes betrayed his confusion.

Sarafina watched him with an open mouth. She glanced from side to side and noticed several other lionesses, their eyes also fixed on Taka. All were backing slowly away from him, moving behind the zebra's carcass as though to use it to shield themselves from him. Obviously what was going through Sarafina's mind was common to them all: What was he doing? Had he gone mad? Was he about to attack one of them? Why was he here?

Wamase was the closest to him, and she had regained her composure. "Taka... Taka, calm down. What's going on?"

At a loss, the lion forced his bewildered mind to focus on the creature in front of him, though his confusion and his fatigue stood in the way of his voice.

"Wamase... you're not... you're not in danger? Where are the cheetahs?"

The lionesses' confusion only grew. Some growled involuntarily at the caricature of a lion they saw before them: limbs trembling, chest heaving, standing proudly and tall but with emptiness in his voice.

"There aren't any," Wamase said softly. She alone stood unmoving, confidently facing Taka now that she recognized him. "Some attacked earlier today, but Mufasa has taken--"

"Mufasa!" Taka snarled. All the loyalty he had vowed with the first light that morning to give anew to his brother had vanished, and all he knew now was his responsibility to the pride. Mufasa was neglecting his pride's needs. Only he, Taka, could take his place. Only he could defend the pride when it was standing with a new kill, open to attack from all sides from hyenas, cheetahs, jackals, or any scavengers. Mufasa's name sent shivers of fury down Taka's spine.

"Mufasa is no king!" he spat. "He abandoned you. You are defenseless!" Taka glared furiously from one lioness' face to another, a wild light in his eyes. "I will defend you in his absence!"

Ng'ara looked slowly to the side, and her eyes met Isha's for a moment. She turned back to Taka and met his wild yellow glare. "Taka, we are in no danger. The kill is safe, and so are we. And Mufasa--"

A roar of fury from Taka threw her into silence.

"Mufasa is gone! He will never return to you again!" he snarled, shaking. "If you mention that name again..."

With these last few words several lionesses turned and bolted. Seeing them, Ng'ara backed off, putting the zebra's carcass between herself and her King's brother. Her hard eyes broke into fear, and she turned and ran.

Wamase watched Ng'ara's inner battle with growing nervousness. Torn between her loyalty to the pride and her fascination with Taka, she hesitated; then, turning back to Taka, she noticed him staggering toward her. "Wamase," he called to her, weakly, with a strange light in his eye, an unfamiliar gravelly quality to his voice.

Darkness fell across Wamase's face, and suddenly her mind released her. With a yelp of alarm she sprang away from Taka with a powerful sweep of her hind legs and ran after the retreating Ng'ara.

Red mist swirled before Taka's eyes as he lurched down from the rise, crying out to the retreating Wamase. Before he could control himself, fatigue and frustration at the lionesses' inexplicable reaction to his arrival had gotten the better of him, and the vision of Wamase before his eyes had awakened his desires from so long ago. Past all the control he had built up over time, all the willpower he had learned to muster, all the strength he had coaxed out of himself to block Wamase from his mind, came the old specter that had haunted his thoughts for all his mature life.

Agonized stirrings awoke within him. Gritting his teeth helped to clear the miasma from his vision, but now his senses were assaulted from more directions, inward as well as surrounding him. Wamase... he longed for her. His feet involuntarily stepped forward as though to follow her, to chase her down...

Taka groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. How could this be happening? He was too strong for this. Sarabi... Sarabi. Let Mufasa's own future mate occupy his mind. He panted, his shoulders heaving, his tail thrashing. As his mind labored to replace Wamase once more with Sarabi the unattainable, beautiful Queen-to-be, a new yet familiar scent wafted to him on the wind.

Sarabi lowered her nose to the water, sniffed it, and dipped her tongue below the surface. The small ripples this caused were almost immediately lost in the troubled surface of the water. The wind was now gusting constantly, causing the grasses around the edge of the small watering hole to tremble and lean fitfully. Her eyes scanned the opposite shore as she lapped at the cool water, soothing her mouth which had tasted too much hot blood lately. She had eaten well, and now she was ready to rest. Mufasa would return soon. It had been a good hunt.

She drank deeply, soothing her parched throat. The wind whistled over her ears, and a small flock of water birds lifted from the water as they simultaneously took alarm at something. Sarabi lifted her ears.

Turning each ear independently, she found nothing in the air but the usual insect noises, the strong wind and the lapping of the water. Yet she sensed a presence somewhere nearby. She smiled inwardly. Mufasa was back so soon...

At last her ears caught the rustle and snap of a large form approaching her silently from behind, pushing through the tall grasses. She held her head still. Why not pretend he was stealthy enough to be able to sneak up on her? Sarabi suppressed a giggle at the thought. He was so clumsy; yet he deserved to believe such a thing. It was harmless. She tensed her body, her heart racing. She would pretend to be surprised.

The air behind her changed as she sensed a lion, treading heavily and slowly, appearing from the grasses behind her. Still she would not move. There-- Mufasa was sniffing at her flank. The movement of air was easily felt; she could not pretend any longer. Well enough-- the suspense was unbearable.

Sarabi turned her head, a forced expression of shock on her face. "Mufasa! I didn't expect you back so--"

She froze. Taka. There he was, standing at her flank, the burning light in his eyes that she had come to recognize. In Taka's yellow eyes it was a menacing, malignant gleam.

"Taka!" she cried, and sprang to her feet, the tenseness in her muscles instantly giving way to the readiness to fight or to run.

Taka breathed hard; he looked up and met her eyes. "Mufasa is far away," he said, his voice grating. "He's off chasing cheetahs. Leaving you undefended." He meant to suggest defense from predators, but it was an unfortunate choice of words.

Sarabi gasped, then with difficulty forced some authority into her voice. She growled warningly. "What do you want? Why are you even here?" Her fear and anger were mingled with curiosity.

"Your scent is hard to mistake, Sarabi," he leered, his eyes smoldering as he eyed her. "It's your time, and he's neglecting you."

"What?" Sarabi shouted at him. She stepped back a pace. What she had feared the most was coming true.

"He has not claimed you," Taka panted, closing the distance between them with a step. "He is King, but you are not the Queen, yet. And he's ignoring you when you need attention."

Sarabi's fear was rapidly giving way to fury. Mufasa HAD claimed her. It was not official yet, but she was his mate, and his alone. She bared her teeth. And for Taka to insult Mufasa's integrity as King...

"Taka, get away from me..."

Taka turned to her flank again, ignoring her warnings. Time slowed to a crawl.

Sarabi whipped around, turning to face the other lion, her hind paw slipping into the water. Her foreclaws flashed out. Taka closed the gap again, stepping into the water, a low growl rolling from his throat, his eyes on fire, his mane tossing in the strong wind. Sarabi gave a roar of fury, reared up on her hind legs, twisted, and struck with a massive paw at Taka's face.

The sun glinted off her claw as it caught the skin above Taka's eye and ripped downward across it. Immediately Taka froze, collapsed to his forepaws, and let out a shrieking roar of pain that echoed over the grass and set Sarabi's mind reeling. Then the lion shuddered to a hunched, agonized posture stood motionless, trembling in the water, and Sarabi leaped away to a safe distance. She suddenly grew still, gaping, holding up the paw with which she had struck, looking down at it with wide eyes.

Taka stood in the water, breathing deeply, his eyes both squeezed shut. He had turned his left side from her, and she could not see the eye she had clawed.

"Taka... I'm sorry..."

To draw royal blood was a crime punishable by death. Taka was royalty. And until Mufasa claimed her she was not. Even after she was the Queen, the laws would still apply to her. She began to tremble.

The dark lion stirred from his reverie and pulled up his head to stare directly at Sarabi. He opened one eye, but the other remained painfully closed, blood dripping from a long raw wound. Taka winced and shuddered in pain.

"You.... you blinded me!"

Sarabi backed away. "I... didn't mean to hurt you."

Taka gritted his teeth. "Get out of here... leave now before I kill you."

Sarabi backed away, turned, and ran blindly into the grass.

The Pride

Chapter Nine

"Back," Khulo gasped as he crashed into the clearing. He had long ago realized that the huge lion who had been pursuing him had fallen back and was gone, but his fear continued to drive him on. "Get back. We need to get out of here."

Four cheetahs stared back at him, uncertain and surprised. Kichasi, bruised and breathless, glared at him coldly.

"You coward," she hissed. "How dare you have the gall to say that to us?" She took a step forward.

"We had those lionesses right where we wanted them. Another few heartbeats and they would have retreated. And then you," she snarled, her face twisting into a grimace. "*You*. You led that lion right onto us. You destroyed any chances we might have had. And you--"

A larger female broke in, clearing her throat. "Kichasi..." she said. "Let it be."

Khulo gathered his courage. "What's done is done," he told Kichasi. "If we leave now we can survive to hunt again. If we stay to fight, we're as good as hyena bait." He turned to the older female. "It's time we were off. Find the others, and then back to the river."

Kichasi seethed, but as she watched, Khulo stepped through the small pack of cheetahs and took his place at their head. All three others immediately followed him. She watched them disbelievingly.

"You cowards!" she shouted again. Then, from far behind her, an impassioned, snarling roar broke over the valley. The sound, a cry of anguish and fury, bored into her mind and set her will toppling. With a shriek, she bounded after the others.

When they first saw him, slinking from behind a tree some distance away across an open field, Kolo and Malaika could make out nothing of Taka's form but a dark blur, seeming to defy their eyes. They were each of the mind to ignore the King's brother, to pretend they had not noticed that he was there; yet each was unsure enough of the other's fear and respect for royal protocol that a glance between them assured them both that they would have to accost him.

Malaika was the one to hail him from a short distance away, raising her voice to be heard over the whistling wind. "Taka! ...Is that you?"

Taka's head snapped up from where it was trailing at the level of the tops of the grasses, which were short in this area of the valley. Almost instantly he turned his head to stare off to the right of the lionesses, then took a step toward them. "Yes... I'm here."

Kolo and Malaika uncertainly followed his gaze to the right, but could see nothing. Kolo turned back to him, confused, and stepped forward.

"You're here," she said. She could think of nothing more intelligent to put into words.

Taka still did not turn his head to look at them. "I am here to assist the pride," he told them in a low voice. "If they want my help."

"Of course we do," Malaika said quickly, though to both Kolo and Taka the voice was rather forced. "What's happened? Is everybody all right?"

"I can tell you where to hunt down those wretched cheetahs," Taka replied, ignoring the question.

Both lionesses pricked up their ears and glanced at each other.

Taka formed a strange shape, squatting in front of them with his head tilted to their right. They could see that he was looking at them out of his right eye, but his head was turned as though he were watching intently for something to fall upon him from that quarter. The lionesses continued to glance to their right uneasily.

"Mng'ariza is his name," Taka was saying. "Their leader, the large male. I came upon him while I was on my way here. He told me, in exchange for his life, where we could hunt down his clan."

The concept dumbfounded the two females. It was preposterous. How could the leader of a group betray it so deeply? To ensure his own survival, perhaps, but... the good of the group is always more important than the benefit of the one. As lionesses, as part of a pride, they knew this.

"You don't believe me, I can tell," Taka sighed. "Cheetahs are loners, you realize. Loners and opportunists. And this one," he added with a trace of a smile, "was the most shrewd opportunist I have ever met."

He kept his head turned to the side. "Go northeast of here. There is a dry riverbed where they are hiding. You can catch them unawares. You can drive them from the Pride Lands forever."

Kolo looked at Malaika, then narrowed her eyes at Taka. "*We* can?" she asked. "What about you?"

Taka smiled. With his face turned from them, it was a distant, enigmatic expression. "I'm scouting the lands," he told them. "How else would I have known all this?"

Mufasa came upon the lionesses huddled in a hollow out of the wind, some distance from one of the kills. He looked from one frightened face to another, his concern growing.

"Where's Sarabi?" he asked urgently. "Is she all right?"

Ng'ara propped herself up on her forelegs. Her eyes were white and fearful. "Taka," she hissed to Mufasa. "Find Taka. There's... something's happened to him."

Mufasa's eyes widened. "Taka? But..."

It was at that moment that Sarabi appeared over the edge of the hollow. Mufasa's head and ears up rapidly, and he breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Mufasa," she gasped, and ran to his side. Leaning against him, burying her head in his mane, she sobbed.

Mufasa gaped as he lowered his nose to her neck to sniff her over. "What... what happened?"

Sarabi shuddered against him spasmodically. The other lionesses raised their ears, all eyes fixed on the two of them in fascination.

How can I tell him? Sarabi thought to herself. I can't. If I tell him what happened, I will be sentenced to death for drawing Taka's blood. I'm trapped. I can't say a thing.

She pressed herself against Mufasa's body, using him to shield her from the wind and from the other coldness that she felt inside her. She was still unable to believe what had happened to her, and even if it weren't for the law, it would still likely be days before she could face the ugly fact.

Mufasa sniffed down her back. She stiffened. Had Taka touched her? Had he left any of his scent? She shut her eyes and trembled, waiting for Mufasa's reaction.

Mufasa's nose had been clawed several times over the past few days. In the latest skirmish, a wound had reopened, and he could barely smell anything in front of him. As his nose moved down Sarabi's back, no scents at all reached him-- nothing. All there was as he reached the base of her tail was the now-familiar scent that told him that his mate was still in heat. He had expected that. And there was nothing more that he could detect.

"Sarabi?" he asked, concern tinting his deep, commanding voice with vulnerability. "You're all right. Nothing's the matter." He paused. "I'm fine. The cheetahs are gone. Our kill is safe. There's nothing to worry about." His voice grew more reassuring.

His mate raised her head to his, forcing a smile, her eyes troubled but fixed lovingly on her King.

"I'm glad," she whispered.

The wind was now strong, and gray clouds were scurrying across the horizon, threatening the sun's dominance in the sky. Taka's head rose above the bowing and bending grass.

Staring out over the rolling land, he could see only a red haze through his left eye. It was too painful to open that eye, and he closed it again. He realized that Sarabi's claw had only injured the flesh surrounding his eye, and that he would soon be able to see again. Yet he would need to explain it. And it would surely leave a scar.

Taka's body shuddered under the pressure of the wind. He was still weak, but his anger and frustration were enough to keep him on his feet.

As his mind slowly cleared, it told him first, above all, that his honor had been compromised, that Sarabi had made a fool of him. He would have to get revenge. He would have to redeem himself.

Taka watched the clouds advancing. He bared his teeth at them, but they moved forward inexorably. Doubt seemed to flow from the clouds down into Taka's mind, and soon he began to feel small and ineffectual, powerless to prevent what threatened to befall him. "Redeem myself," he growled. His one yellow eye stood wide open as he gazed upward. "Redeem myself to whom?"

To the pride? No. He could tell Mufasa; he could tell the other lionesses; he could attempt to bring the charges against Sarabi of drawing his blood, royal blood. But the absurdity of that possibility struck him almost immediately. To admit, publicly, that he had submitted so

deeply to his own weaknesses as to approach Sarabi, the betrothed of the King, to try to claim her for his own? That she had spurned him in disgust? That he had brought the injury upon himself by insisting upon proceeding? No! he thought.

But then what was the alternative? To live the rest of his life, a part of the pride but bearing both a mortal grudge against his brother and a terrible secret against Sarabi? And this was aside from the scar that he would carry...

The wound throbbed against his skull. With his good eye Taka scanned the horizon for water with which he could soothe the burning pain. Yes, he was scouting. He had not lied to the two lionesses that had appeared out of nowhere. He was searching the wide lands for answers, for a solution that would enable him to live again, to allow him to join the pride of his ancestors with his head held high, to contribute and to eat, to find a female who would listen to him and accept him, to father cubs and carry on his legacy into the future. His eye turned to the northwest, where the sun was beginning its descent into the red afternoon sky. Was the sky really that color? Or was it his wound, tinting his good right eye with the color of anger and wrath as he thought of his future?

His future. His tortured mind cleared. His future was to the northeast. With Wamase.

His body had overcome his mind. Sarabi was now a malevolent specter, not an enticing vision. Now his head was filled with the sights, the sounds, the smells of Wamase, the dark lioness who he now realized was meant for him, had always been meant for him.

Rousing his complaining, cramped muscles into action, Taka snarled as he thrust himself forward, breaking into a gallop on the path that he knew would end where he and Wamase would meet. And this time the terms would be different.

Mufasa's large golden eyes roved over his mate's trembling face. "You're sure you're all right?" Receiving no answer but a smile, he turned to Ng'ara. "What was that you said about Taka?"

Ng'ara stood up. "I'm... not sure, really," she said slowly. "He burst in among us. He was saying strange things." She searched for words. "He looked as though he had gone mad."

Sarabi cringed. The truth had almost been avoided. It was now on the verge again of being told. Mufasa would question Ng'ara. They would deduce that he had approached her. And when they hunted him down, when they saw his eye...

"Mufasa! Your Majesty!" came an excited voice from behind Mufasa. Sarabi craned her neck to look over his shoulder; the King turned to face the sound. Malaika stepped over the lip of the hollow, with Kolo at her flank.

Kolo stepped ahead of her comrade in her excitement. "Mufasa," she said breathlessly, "We just met Taka. North of here."

A murmur went through the reclining lionesses. Mufasa narrowed his eyes. "Taka?"

"Yes! And we have some news!" Kolo sat down. Malaika bathed her forepaw at one side, letting Kolo tell the story.

"Where did he go, Kolo? We have to find him," Ng'ara said quickly and sternly.

Kolo shook her head, her breath still coming short from the exertion of running. "He told us he'd met a cheetah on the way here... Ariz... Arzi... Malaika? What was his name?"

"Mng'ariza, he said."

Kolo nodded. "Mng'ariza. He was the leader of the cheetahs. And Taka said he managed to get Mng'ariza to tell him where the cheetahs have retreated! We can follow up our attack and drive them out of the Pride Lands for good!" she finished excitedly.

Mufasa looked at her. "You believed him?"

Malaika looked up from her paws. "There was no reason not to," she said softly. "He's out scouting. He knows the landmarks. And why would he lie about such a thing?"

Mufasa pondered. When he had seen Taka that morning, he had seemed genuinely helpful. Had he seen the value of cooperation at last? Had he decided to rejoin the pride? This could easily be an act of good faith.

But Taka's history of deceit and bitterness was just as strong a factor in Mufasa's mind. Could he trust his brother? If he did, and he was right, they would have been able to eliminate a threat to the Pride Lands, ensuring their food supply for that much longer. If he was wrong... what could Taka do against an entire pride?

All ten lionesses sat on their haunches or stood, their eyes fixed on their King. It was his decision. He was the one to direct them, to dispatch them wherever he wished them to go. Each lioness gazed over him with emotions ranging from the loyalty due a great king to the love due a wonderful mate. All were confident that he would do what was right.

The emotions surging through Wamase's mind tore at her. Taka. What was happening? Her fascination with him had turned to fear. Yet she was still sure that it was outside the realm of possibility for Taka consciously to betray the pride, for whatever reason. She rocked slowly back and forth, at the back of the crowd, her face showing her anguish. At the end only one emotion remained in her mind, only one driving force. With a shout she gave it voice.

"Let's go get 'em!" she cried.

All eyes turned to her. Some faces smiled in spite of themselves, and Mufasa's mental turmoil broke. He chuckled deeply.

"You're right, Wamase," he said. "There's nothing for us to fear. I think we can trust Taka, and if we act quickly, we can do ourselves a great service by driving those cheetahs out of our lands at last." He stood. "We'll go now."

Sarabi lowered her head and smiled into Mufasa's mane. Her secret was safe.

With a sudden show of authority, she stood away from the King and faced Kolo and Malaika. "Can you find Taka again?"

Both nodded.

"If you do, tell him to return here and guard the kill. All the rest of us will be on the hunt. If he agrees, it will be the proof of his good faith, and we can welcome him back to the pride. We can make this a day to remember in stories to tell our cubs!"

Mufasa looked at her in admiration. She was a true Queen. As the enthusiastic sounds of lionesses preparing for a fight rose around them, he nuzzled her cheek with a deep, throaty rumble.

Six spotted forms made their cautious yet hurried way through the grass. The one in the lead moved with purposeful steps, its eyes fixed immovably on the horizon, the muscles under its shaggy coat rising and falling in a steady, untiring rhythm. A leader.

The rest were of varying types. Some straggled. Some were enduring wounds which must have been painful, but such a fact none were willing to admit.

Coming last, and constantly looking back over her shoulder, was a small, lithe female, with a nervous air and wild eyes. The movements of insects in the bushes startled her. Her tongue drooped from her mouth in the afternoon sun, even though the air had turned chill; she was wasting far too much energy in her erratic pace, her nervous motions, her constantly shifting gaze.

The group passed close by the old, squat baobab tree, close enough for the aged occupant of its upper branches to peer downward into the eyes of each cheetah and determine its feelings, its level of confidence, the amount of fear controlling each one's mind. He drank in the information like water.

His eyes were the only part of his garish face to move, and they twitched back and forth from cheetah to cheetah like dazed insects. His eyes betrayed the activity of an agile mind, though otherwise he remained motionless as he scanned the group from the fork of branches, squatting with his arms curled around his knees. He balanced perfectly on a horizontal branch, and as he turned his head slowly to follow the strangers as they moved away from the tree, his weight shifted just slightly so that he could not have been seen to have moved at all.

"We're being watched, Khulo," came a trembling voice in his ear. "I can feel it. I don't know where, but something's watching us."

Khulo did not take his eyes from the horizon ahead. "I know. I feel it too." He spoke shortly, deep in thought.

Was it too late? Had they retreated only after provoking the lions so far as to make it unavoidable that they would be pursued? Khulo cursed under his breath. He had advocated retreating from the very first. He had warned Mng'ariza; he had told him at the outset that it was a stupid and risky plot, that it would end in nothing but death.

But Mng'ariza had loyal followers-- loyal and hungry. Hunger overrides judgment even in the most sober of creatures. Mng'ariza had always been known for being an intelligent leader, a brilliant tactician, and a strong fighter. Khulo sighed. When hunger becomes a factor, it is that last quality that becomes the most important.

Now Khulo was in charge. Mng'ariza, the cheetah who had led the confident clan brazenly into danger, tempting fate to fall upon them, was gone. Dead? Possibly. No matter. He was gone, and his leadership had passed on. Khulo's responsibility was to bring the clan out of the Pride Lands and into a new place where they could feed themselves.

A growl escaped his throat. It was a desperate sound of frustration, futility, and anger. Five cheetahs were following closely behind him. Even if they were to escape without being attacked again by the pride, how would they find food? The lands were nearly bare outside the Pride Lands. Who was this new King? Why did he not lead his pride away when he should have? Why had he not followed the herds? It was a ridiculous predicament. None of this was Khulo's fault. He was merely following food in the manner that thousands of generations had prescribed, trying to survive, doing so in the only way he knew how. And for this he was being pursued for his life. He growled again.

"Look," the voice came in his ear again. "We've made it. We're free."

Sunken into the savannah ahead was a steep-walled, dry riverbed, its banks overhung with graceful trees whose branches swayed insistently in the strong wind that was now rushing through the grasses, moaning across the cheetahs' ears, warning Khulo that while they might have reached their destination, their danger was greater than ever.

Sarabi stopped. "Smell that?"

They were lucky. Once again, the lions were downwind of their quarry, and the smell of cheetahs wafted to them clearly on the cutting breeze. Mufasa stepped to the head of the pride, climbing up to the lip of the rise, and his mane blew across his face as he took in the scents.

"They're close," he said. Turning his eyes to scan the broken line of dark trees that cut across his path, he saw it immediately.

He sank into the grass. "There it is. See that?" He motioned Sarabi down next to him. "That's the riverbed. They're in there."

The pride gathered just behind Mufasa and melted in order into the grass. Only a few tails, flicking in the wind and in anticipation, betrayed their whereabouts.

Mufasa waited. As he evaluated his position, he reflected briefly on himself, on his life, on what he had learned.

Just a few days ago, he would have rushed directly into the cheetahs he could smell so clearly ahead. He had been as impetuous as Wamase... yes, there she was, just to his right again. Wamase. She was at the head of the pride, her lips pulled back from her teeth in a grimace of hunger for action. She had not had enough already.

The King smiled slightly to himself. Strong gusts of wind pushed the grasses down in front of him and diluted the smell of the cheetahs that he knew were still there, directly ahead. The smell beckoned to him. All his senses told him to rush forward, to let out a roar and charge into battle-- but he knew, after only a few days of experience as leader of the pride, that the opportunity had not come. It would show itself. Patience would reward.

Wamase fidgeted on his right. Mufasa turned an eye toward her. "Calm down, Wamase," he said reassuringly. "It won't be long now."

And it was not. Just as he fixed his eyes back on the dark, forbidding trees ahead, the clouds scudding across the sky reached the sun, now low in the northwestern sky. As its shadow fell across Mufasa, the wind seemed to cut into his very bones, rising into a tormented gale. His limbs shuddered.

The King heaved himself to his feet. "Now."

Wamase gave a terrifying snarl, leaped forward, and was the first to strike.

The uneasy water of a small creek swirled and jumped as a large lion paw crashed into it, followed immediately by the face and mane of a lion who cared less for injuring himself even more than for easing the pain he felt already. With trembling limbs that held him up only from the adrenaline that had surged through him, Taka submerged his left eye in the cold water, letting it clear the blood away and numb the flesh, bringing bitter relief from the gash Sarabi had given him.

Sarabi. That she-hyena.

All she would have to do to ruin him was to tell Mufasa. "Taka tried to take me against my wishes," he could imagine her saying one night to his brother. And Mufasa would without hesitation banish him from the kingdom. How could he do otherwise? What kind of king, what kind of mate would he be?

Taka growled. It was Fate once again. Fate had taken his plans and twisted them against him.

Hadn't he forced himself to lust after Sarabi? It was all a scheme to avoid the thought of Wamase. How could he have been so foolish? All it would need was a moment of weakness, just a small fault in his will, to make the plan lash back out at him like a cornered beast. And that was exactly what had happened.

He raised his head, water dripping from his face and matted mane, blowing and breathing hard. Blinking his left eye a few times, ignoring the pain, he found that he could see dimly through it. He had not been blinded.

"You fool!" came a cackle from his left. Taka spun in time to see a twisted, spotted shape crash from the grasses and collapse into the water at the creek's edge with a splash. The form lay on the ground, on its side, and threw its head back to laugh at Taka.

Mng'ariza. He was clearly delirious now. The once proud, muscular shape was now emaciated, covered with mud and dust, and trembling. Taka approached uncertainly.

"You're... going to rejoin your fellows?" he asked, his voice conversational, though with a mixture of menace, fear, and uncertainty underlying it.

Mng'ariza stared at him, then laughed again. "You fool!" he repeated. "You absolute and total fool. Look at yourself."

The cheetah lay pathetically in the mud at the edge of the water. He hardly seemed to be in a condition to draw attention to the condition of others. Taka was about to say so, but Mng'ariza was continuing.

"You've been injured, I can't help but notice," he said in a low, condescending tone. "My, my. If I didn't know better I'd have thought you'd gotten yourself into a little fight with some cheetahs. Well, wonders never cease."

When Taka had last left Mng'ariza, the cheetah had been submissive and apologetic, bargaining frantically for his life. Now, Taka could see, he was dying. But why was he trying now to provoke Taka? Unless he were now bargaining for his death. Taka narrowed his eyes, but remained silent as he stood a short distance from the creature on the ground, forepaws held together, his wounded eye standing in clear view.

"Or perhaps I'm wrong," Mng'ariza went on. "Any number of things can happen to a lion in unfamiliar country. Did you fall out of a tree?" He broke into another peal of unnatural, high-pitched laughter and his body thrashed convulsively in the water. The wind howled over them.

Taka stepped up close to the cheetah, advancing until he was standing over him. He peered down into Mng'ariza's eyes, which turned upward to meet his, the fiery gleam gone.

"Or perhaps," Mng'ariza panted, "Perhaps it's something even more intriguing. That's definitely a claw mark I see there. If it wasn't one of my cheetahs you encountered, then who?" He fell back, musing, his belly upward. "Who indeed? Was it... a quarrel? Did you have a little disagreement?"

Taka raised his lips from his teeth and released a warning growl.

Mng'ariza took no notice, but kicked his legs once or twice. "A female," he gasped. "That's it. A lover's quarrel. The pain of courtship!" He squeezes his eyes together, threw back his head, and laughed once more, the sound pounding into Taka's tormented brain.

Looking down on the broken shape at his feet, lying with exposed throat, Taka's will snapped. He snarled, lunged, and seized the cheetah's neck. Mng'ariza continued to laugh uncontrollably. The sound rose in intensity and then suddenly cut off as Taka's jaws closed. The cheetah tensed, shook a few times, and then went limp, dragging Taka's head with it to the ground.

Taka stood up and looked at the motionless body. At last, he thought to himself, the naive cheetah's futile plans had ended. They had ceased to punish him.

He turned, moved away from the water and vanished into the grass. Mng'ariza lay by the stream's edge, his face frozen in a grin.

Khulo's head snapped around at the sound of the rumbling sky above him and to the east. Before he could calm his mind and reassure himself that nothing was abnormal, that his danger was imagined, a much nearer, higher-pitched snarling roar of fury struck his ears as a flash of dark fur and gleaming claws shot over the lip of the riverbed. The sleek lioness flew through the air until she hit the ground just in front of the stunned Khulo and swiped at him with outstretched claws. He yelped and spun, letting the lioness' momentum carry her past him.

All six cheetahs were now standing and had gathered around Khulo, growling threateningly at Wamase as she stood, shifting her paws restlessly. She showed her teeth, retreated a step, and stood with her hackles raised. A new rumbling rose above her.

Six pairs of cheetah eyes lifted from Wamase and slowly fixed themselves on the lip of the riverbank above them. A few mouths fell open. With a gust of wind more powerful than they had yet felt, the clouds above them released a stinging torrent of rain that immediately began to penetrate the animals' windblown fur. The rumble grew to a roar of many voices as Mufasa's head appeared directly above Wamase, staring down at Khulo with the light of battle throwing his eyes into sharp contrast with the dull gray of the sky. He stood motionless, and all his lionesses poured into the riverbed on both sides of him, teeth and claws flashing as they came.

No voiced command was necessary. With death bearing down upon them, all the cheetahs acted as one, their claws extending, their voices simultaneously rising to a defiant scream as they leaped forward, all fear leaving them, the only emotion left to them being the desire of each one to survive and to defend the survival of his comrades.

Khulo watched, fire surging into his mind, as Mufasa leaped down behind the lionesses and closed with the snarling, thrashing form of Kichasi. He sprang forward with a yowl and struck at the nearest piece of tawny hide he saw. Cries of pain merged with his snarls of rage. The last thing he thought before his conscious thought became lost in a sea of energy and claws and speed and strength was that if he were meant to die today, at the very least it would have been enough to show Mng'ariza that he had been wrong.

The skies opened and water poured down onto the two battling, snarling masses of fur and flesh. The dry river began once more to flow, the water clear at first but soon picking up the loose dirt of the fight, stirring itself into mud as body after body ran or rolled through it, pounding it into a mire of deep brown mud that immediately began to coat the soaking bodies as they crashed against each other. Below them the river began slowly to deepen, the water an opaque brown tinged with traces of red.

Rain spattered against the faces of Kolo and Malaika. The cold wind tossed the grasses around them, and they looked nervously at each other.

"We're not going to find him, are we?"

Kolo shook her head slowly. "And we need to get back to Mufasa. Anything could be happening."

Malaika sighed. "It's a shame to leave the kills unattended," she said, peering longingly back over her shoulder, though she did not know the exact direction. "We'll have to fight off the hyenas when we get back."

"Yes," Kolo said flatly. "But we're not hungry right now. The pride needs us more than we need the meat. Let's go."

The two lionesses both shook out their matted coats and began running into the darkness of the northeast, toward the angriest and most threatening of the clouds, into the heart of the storm.

Mufasa stood under a rock, his mane dripping, numerous scratches on his shoulder and back. His chest heaved.

"Sarabi," he growled, "Get to a safe place. I don't want to see you hurt." His eyes were full of concern, though the fire of battle continued to smolder in them.

She merely nuzzled him and smiled. Her coat was unscathed. "Don't you think I can take care of myself? I should be the one telling you to go and rest. We can't lose the King himself."

A thud just behind Sarabi interrupted Mufasa's reply. Both lions jumped as they spun to face what had fallen from the riverbank above.

Sarafina snarled as she disengaged herself from a long female cheetah that lay on the ground in front of her. She stood back, panting, with her lips pulled back from her teeth, then turned and noticed Sarabi.

Her eyes widened. "Sarabi! What are you doing still here? I thought Mufasa told--"

Her voice turned into a shriek as she was suddenly brought to the ground by a bulky form that landed heavily on her back. Mufasa and Sarabi watched, wide-eyed, in speechless terror.

Taka gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut as he futilely shook the water from his eyes. More water continued to run from his mane down his forehead and into his wounded eye. As he ran he stumbled, fell, rolled, and clambered to his feet again. He was past feeling pain. His mind had gone dark except for one driving thought: To find Wamase, to protect her, to show her that he loved her and always had...

He ran, but he could not feel his feet touching the ground. Through his right eye he could barely make out a vague set of blurred, swimming shapes flowing past him. None of his other senses told him anything. His ears hummed dully at him. He could hardly tell he was drawing breath through his nose; his nerves were numb and unresponsive, and no scents reached him.

Was it his imagination, or... was the humming in his ears growing louder? He felt a dull throbbing pulsing against his head from both sides. When at last his mind was able to understand that it was his heartbeat, rapid and thin, it began to break up into more agitated sounds-- high-pitched shrieks, snarls, intermittent thuds against the ground. His senses were clearing, and he was approaching his destination. Feeling immediately surged back into his feet, and the pain forced his legs to stop moving. He stood, head down, tongue dripping, his body swaying from side to side. And his vision clarified to pour images into his brain through his good right eye as he painfully opened it wide.

As though in a dream, he watched silently as below him in the riverbed, moving powerfully but slower than life, the dark, dripping form of Wamase that he knew so well leaped forward with a snarl. Her outstretched paws struck a lighter-colored lioness who collapsed under her weight and rolled away from her. Taka watched, frozen to the spot, unable to move or even to breathe. Wamase began struggling to her feet, only to be borne shrieking to the ground by the weight of a large, lanky cheetah whose claws had been intended for Sarafina but found a target all the same.

Khulo rolled over with Wamase, his teeth snapping at her throat. She tried to kick him away from her, but her limbs were already weak, and her will was flowing steadily away from her. She gasped as her eyes rolled upward and noticed the dark form of Taka above her on the riverbank. Her vision darkened and the image slowly faded.

Sarafina raised herself on unsteady forelegs and looked around. Her eyes shot open as she saw her cubhood friend kicking with her last energy. Khulo had already leaped off her and

was running across the riverbed.

"No!" she gasped. She leaped up and ran to Wamase's side. She lay on her back, and as Sarafina peered into her eyes, she saw the fire go out of them, and Wamase slowly sank onto her side at her friend's feet. As she stared dully downward, the sounds of battle raging around her, she could do nothing but nuzzle once at the still face and turn away. Snarls and roars shot past her ears, but she could not move to face them. Her head rose slowly to the riverbank above Wamase, and the dark shape that was Taka stared back down at her, one yellow eye wide open as he gazed in disbelief, petrified and unable to make a sound. Rain dripped unchecked over his mane and down his face.

Sarafina's expression hardened. She growled deep in her throat as she peered back at him accusingly.

Thunder rolled across the sky. Wamase's body sank into the mud as the ground below her soaked up more and more water. Her fur darkened slowly under the rain.

Mufasa ran up the opposite riverbank and held himself at the brink with his powerful forelegs. He watched in satisfaction as three cheetahs ran with all the strength they could muster northward away from the river. He slid carefully back into the riverbed and turned his head. The ground had been trampled by countless violent footsteps. The lionesses had scattered in pursuit of the cheetahs as they had retreated, and only two moving forms remained in the muddy river. He stood and faced the nearer one, only a few steps away.

Khulo looked defiantly at Mufasa. "I congratulate you, lion," he said in a low voice. "You've proven, just as I thought you would, that you would solve this problem in the only way you knew how. And you've won. My congratulations. And my condolences." He turned away and climbed up the bank. Upon reaching the top, he raised his tail and peered down again, stepping along the lip of the bank. "You have your lands, but without any food in them, what good will it do you? Perhaps you should consider using your intelligence next year. Assuming you're around next year." He stepped away from the lip and vanished.

Mufasa stepped past Sarafina, who was crouching and shivering in the rain. He paused to nose at her cheek consolingly. "I'll be back in just a moment," he told her. She opened her large green eyes and smiled weakly up at him.

"Taka!" Mufasa called. He found a foothold and pulled himself to the top of the southern riverbank, where Taka was still standing motionless, his eye fixed on Wamase's still body.

He approached his brother slowly, uncertainty. "What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. "Do you want the hyenas to get our kill?"

Stepping closer, the King noticed the bleeding red tear across Taka's eye. The rain running down his face was drawing the red stain down his cheek and his mane below his chin. "What... what happened, brother?" he asked, the concern suddenly surfacing in his voice. His brother was hurt. Something had happened. It had been a bittersweet victory, and both sides had felt their bitter wounds. Taka had done his part, to see his torn face.

A violent shudder racked Taka from his nose to his tail as he began slowly to rouse himself from his motionless stupor. His right eye blinked several times to clear the water from it. Shuddering, he turned his head to face Mufasa. Only after a few moments did recognition dawn on him. Then his mouth opened.

In a cracked, gravelly voice, he hissed, "I... killed Mng'ariza."

With that, Taka's legs at last gave way under him, and he collapsed trembling to the ground. The rain beat down on his shuddering side.

The air lightened slowly. The worst of the rain was over. The lionesses began to return to the site of the battle. Some came close and tried to console Sarafina for her loss. Others talked excitedly among themselves, reliving their own victorious skirmishes. Sarabi paced slowly in, not a scratch on her coat, and her comrades came to her side admiringly. She had done her part in the battle; they all had seen her punishing one large cheetah until it had run in terror blindly up the riverbed. She was the Queen. Mufasa had still not claimed her, but the entire pride could tell by now that by all rights she should lead them. It was right.

Mufasa stood over Taka, watching his pride reassemble, waiting for the rain to stop. At last the clouds in the west broke apart, and sunlight touched Taka's form. Rain still fell, but it was rapidly breaking into mist, and the grasses were already beginning to steam. Mufasa reached down and touched Taka's nose with his.

His brother shivered, and his eye opened. Raising his head, he looked wearily up at Mufasa, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"Don't reject me, brother," he said softly, plaintively. "If I can give my life for the protection of the pride, I will."

Mufasa looked down in surprise, but his eyes read the sincerity in Taka's face. He smiled, then nodded.

Taka stared up at his brother. Watching as his last attempt to invest hope took hold, he laid his head softly back on the ground and looked out over the pride as it moved about in the riverbed below. He pulled his lips back in a painful smile, and the red haze in his right eye faded slowly to black.

END OF PART ONE



Part Two

The Pride

Chapter Ten

Mufasa would have had to look straight into the sun, setting huge and blood-red into the western clouds, to notice the bright blue shape of Zazu approaching rapidly from that direction. As it was, he was too preoccupied with the words of Khulo and of Taka to pay much attention to the sky, or indeed to his own progress along the ground. The hornbill fluttered down to his eye level and hovered agitatedly.

"Sire! Are you all right? I've been frantic!" he shouted. "Kolo and Malaika, they told me-"

Mufasa quieted him with a grim look. "Yes, Zazu," he said after a pause, not having broken stride. "I know. And it's all been taken care of."

Taka paced along behind Mufasa, his nose brushing the grass, the red slash across his eye standing out sharply from his dark and sodden fur. Sarafina brought up the rear of the pride. She was receiving comfort from Sarabi, but her pain was one that she was only just beginning to feel.

Mufasa eyed each in turn with a backward glance, then turned back to Zazu. "All the blows of this battle have been struck."

The hunched form atop the baobab tree chuckled as he watched the pride thrusting its way through the grass just a short distance from him. Yes, they had done what they had come to do.

His eyes followed the leader. Mufasa, he knew. Yes, that was Mufasa. He knew the name well. He heard it often enough on the wind. And now the sight that met his eyes did not disappoint his expectations. The massive lion was wounded and sodden, but bore himself regally and strode forward with determination and purpose, his head held high. He had led his pride through a battle and had emerged victorious. He was now ready to be the King.

Behind Mufasa, then. A lioness or two, and then another male. He raised his eyebrows slightly. This one was dark and scrawny, and he stumbled occasionally. Was this Taka? Yes, it must be. Either he was not long for the world, or... or...

From such a distance Taka's scar was visible to him only as a vague bright spot. He could not guess at its significance, and the wind told him nothing as he sniffed the gusts that blew lazily over the savannah after the storm had lifted. No matter. From the look of him Taka was no concern.

The pride moved slowly past him. A spot of bright blue against the greens and yellows of the savannah grasses, Zazu appeared to flutter near Mufasa, then to dart away again, swooping toward the rear of the procession, then circling high in the air as he scanned the horizon for dangers or goals.

And now the last lioness in the line was making her way forward. He sniffed curiously. Yes, that was Sarabi. He had heard nearly as much about her as about Mufasa. Indeed the wind had told him so many things about her that he recognized her queenly manner of walking and her characteristic habit of waving her tail, even though he had never actually witnessed it with his eyes before. He smiled. She had quickened her pace, and was now pulling alongside Mufasa to walk with him. The new rulers, he thought.

The smile died on his eyes when he looked back toward the end of the line and noticed the hunched and dragging form bringing up the rear. His eyes opened wide. Who was this?

He swung to his feet and moved to the highest point on the tree. A fresh breeze floated to him, and his nose searched it for any information. He immediately found it.

The scent of death was strong, but not as strong as that of grief. That was it. She had lost someone close to her. He crouched back down into the leaves as the pride passed the tree. He sniffed again. Oh yes, he knew who she was. Sarafina. Yes, that was it. The wind had told him things about her in the past as well. Not the same things as he sensed about Mufasa and Sarabi, but things which were more difficult to understand. The signs that surrounded Sarafina told him few things about the present, but much more about the future. She was vital to the pride's future, he was able to deduce-- but what, exactly? He stared appraisingly after the retreating lions.

Time would tell, he thought as he dropped back into the tree's interior. Time, and the wind.

Mufasa tilted his head to the left to find his mate walking beside him. His face softened as he bent to lick her cheek.

"Mufasa," she said softly. "When we get back..."

He turned his head to fix her with his large golden eyes. "Yes?"

She faltered. It should not be her place to ask him. Yet if she did not... how could she ever feel safe again? This was what she had worried about for many days, and now the uneasiness was all the greater after the incident with Taka. She glanced back at him and shuddered, though she was relieved to find, for once, that his eyes were not fixed on her body.

She turned back to Mufasa. "When we get back," she continued, "Will you... what will you do?"

"What will I do?" he returned, sounding slightly uncertain. "Well, there will be the food to carry back to Pride Rock, and I need to decide how to act on what that cheetah said in the riverbed. If we are going to be a successful pride, and if I'm going to be a good King, I need to decide how to rule."

She shut her eyes and fell back a pace from him. What was holding him back? Frustration rushed over her, and she gritted her teeth.

Mufasa turned his head further. "And, of course," he went on, "I'll need a Queen to help me make those decisions. The first thing we'll do when we get back is to arrange the ceremony." He chuckled slightly, his eyes glinting at her when her head rose again to meet them.

Slowly a smile of relief and gladness took over her face. She ran up to his side once again and butted sideways into him, nearly knocking him off balance. She rumbled contentedly in her throat as she pressed herself gratefully against him, feeling him chuckling through her skin. He bent to lick her face, and she met the grooming motion with a thrust of her head and a series of loving licks in return.

Zazu watched the exchange from high above. He thought about diving down to ask the King what was causing such a display, but almost immediately thought better of it and flew off to check on the lionesses who had been dispatched to the site of the kill to drive off scavengers and to prepare the food for carrying back to Pride Rock.

He rose laughing into the sky, bursting out of the misty wreathes of fog that lay along the ground and into the clear and light-bathed region above as the sun began to heat the upper airs, bearing him higher and higher with warm updrafts until his eyes turned back down to the earth and could see to all the corners of the Pride Lands, or so it seemed. Far below him was Pride Rock, where all the lions were gathering from a night of well-earned sleep. He looked down and laughed again, then dove into a tight loop which carried him high into the sky once again. He laughed for joy as he circled and dove, wheeling in the air as the world turned around his head, letting the rush of the wind carry him beyond worry and beyond fear. Today was a great day. The destiny of the Pride Lands would be ensured.

Mufasa stood proudly, smiling as his head turned from side to side, on a large flat rock at the base of the Promontory. The entire pride sat in a half-circle around him, tails twitching in anticipation. They had been waiting for some time. Now at last something would happen.

Sarabi sat smiling to herself in front of all the rest of the lionesses, her tail wrapped around her forepaws, her face turned away from her comrades to hide her smile. It was all she could do to keep it from thrashing from side to side as she waited for the proclamation from Mufasa that she knew would come soon.

Mufasa smiled down at her as Zazu descended from the sky and fluttered to a perch on the King's shoulder. Mufasa opened his mouth to speak.

Zazu's raucous voice rang out before Mufasa had a chance to make a sound. "Attention, everybody!" he shouted. "Attention! May I have... yes, thank you. Very good." He quieted down only after the lionesses had done the same, and ignoring Mufasa's look of slight indignation, he fluffed out his chest feathers and cleared his throat with a pompous air.

Ten tails curled around ten sets of forepaws, the ends twitching lightly in anticipation. None of the lionesses doubted what was to come, though the excitement they felt was none the less for it.

Behind them all sat Taka. His thin and bony form was hunched in a posture of submission to his King, his brother, though the fire of bitterness had never fully died from his eyes. If a lioness were to peer into them, as several had after hearing what he had gone through, she would have seen nothing but a faint glimmer of what she would have called hope, set against a background of cloudy resignation and acceptance of his fate. The lionesses were slowly on the way to accepting him.

"If I may," Zazu was saying, "I would like to have the honor of making a very special announcement to you all on this very fine..."

He was cut off by a growl, a deep rumble tinged with playfulness, from under his feet. He glanced with alarm at Mufasa's face, then rapidly changed his tactic.

"This... er, this fine morning. I'd like to announce... that, ah, the King Mufasa has gathered you all here today to speak to you." He breathed deeply. "Yes, The King has an announcement. A royal announcement."

"Sit down, Zazu," cried a joyful voice from the gathered group. Several lionesses chuckled lightly.

Another cut in. "Yeah, let Mufasa speak! We want Mufasa!"

Zazu folded his wings curtly and hopped to the ground. He turned his back on the lionesses in indignation and faced the King. The lionesses' playful laughter only continued.

"Sire, do something," he said, an edge on his voice. "They're ruining the ceremony!"

Mufasa bent slowly down until his head was level with the hornbill's. His half-closed eyes smiled into those of his majordomo.

"They're having fun," he said. "They have a right to be happy. Let them, Zazu."

Zazu lifted his bill sharply and stalked off to the side. "If you insist, Sire," he called back, the indignation clear in his voice. Mufasa began to chuckle with the lionesses as he raised his head. Looking down, his eyes met Sarabi's for an instant, her mouth open in suppressed laughter at the hornbill's embarrassment. She looked into his smiling golden eyes as the sunlight glinted off them. Immediately looking away, she waited for the announcement.

Mufasa glanced at Zazu, who was now sitting primly on a rock to his side, his eyes closed uncommunicatively. He chuckled once more, then drew himself up to his full height. The lionesses immediately fell silent.

"My pride," he began. The air seemed to echo under his voice, which seemed to have grown deeper and more kingly since the battle. Zazu opened his eyes, and Sarabi raised her head to gaze on him in spite of her propriety.

He continued after a pause in which he took in the form of each lioness, strong and content, wounds healing rapidly, morale high. "Today we begin a new stage in our lives. It is less than half a cycle of the moon since my father Ahadi died and left me to rule the Pride Lands, and for that time I-- we all have been learning what it means to do that. We have gained a new understanding of the balance that exists in the world, of the Circle of Life itself. We have learned that all things occur in circles: the movements of the herds, the changing of the seasons, the reappearance of old memories and enemies.

"We have shown that we are a strong pride, one that is willing and able to take the responsibility of ruling over the Pride Lands the way our ancestors have for more generations that we can count. But in this time, from Ahadi's death until today, there has been one thing missing. Our future."

He paused briefly. "Someday I too will be gone, and it is now time that I take the responsibility to claim a mate so that when I go the way of my father, there will be another to take my place. A new Prince."

One or two of the younger lionesses giggled helplessly. The elders quieted them quickly with nudges. Sarafina, however, remained silent. She was still distraught over the loss of Wamase, and nothing could cheer her up-- not even thoughts of Mufasa.

"And so today," the King went on, "I will make the formal announcement that my Queen for the coming years, the one who will be your leader and the mother of the new Prince, will be my beloved Sarabi, the one--"

He was cut off as squeals of joy rolled over the gathering. Voices immediately leaped into life in excited discussion of the decision. Zazu opened his eyes and looked at them in mixed consternation and pride. Mufasa stopped speaking and merely smiled.

Out of the commotion stepped Sarabi. She paced coolly up the rock to where Mufasa was standing and nuzzled under his chin, leaning into him gratefully. The King bent to lick her face, and the lionesses began to raise a cheer. Even Sarafina lifted her head and smiled slightly.

Only Taka, in the back of the pride, was outwardly unmoved. Deep inside, his blood had stopped flowing. The only dream he had left was being taken from him. He painfully opened his wounded eye, which was beginning to heal, and glared up at the joyful couple.

His tail thrashed. There was, of course, nothing he could do. He had cringed when Mufasa had mentioned 'a new Prince,' for it meant that he would never have the chance to show the pride that he could have been just as good a king. He could have ruled with a wise paw--more than that, he could have shown the pride that there was much more to be had from life than the mere endless cycle of hunting, eating, and dying. He could have given them the world! If only Mufasa had listened to him! He sighed.

"Thank you," Mufasa was saying. "Please, settle down. I'm not finished yet." The lionesses's chatter continued undaunted.

The King and Zazu looked at each other at the same time. Mufasa chuckled and nodded.

Zazu spread his wings and rose into the air, hovering just in front of Mufasa, glaring out over the pride, a bright blue spot against the rocks. "Quiet!" he shrieked with all the shrill power his voice could muster. Silence fell immediately.

Mufasa forced his face to remain expressionless as he watched Zazu descend, satisfied, and nod contentedly to him before moving aside once again. He smiled back, regaining control with difficulty and peering with Sarabi out over his pride.

"There is another matter that I must make clear to you all," he said. "With this new time in our lives, we must also learn to accept certain things into our lives. There have been many changes in the last few days, as you all know."

He paused and looked at Sarafina solemnly. "We have lost one of our number, a lioness very dear to many of us, and a valuable asset to the pride. Wamase was her name." He sighed and met Sarafina's gaze, reading there a look that seemed almost pleading. He returned the look with a smile.

"But," he went on, "As we mourn Wamase's passing, we need to realize all the more that we are a group that cannot afford to have anything less than love for all its own members. And so I must ask you all something, something you might not like at first."

Taka looked up. Was he really going to...?

"Taka is my brother," the King said slowly. "I will not have him treated unfairly. He is entitled to his due share of any kill we make, and he is not to be made to feel alienated or slighted in any way."

Several lionesses made quiet noises, but most simply looked back at Mufasa silently. Some even nodded in agreement, ready to do anything their King bidded. If he said it, it was law.

Taka fixed both eyes on Mufasa, trying to read his brother's expression. Was he sincere? He had never known the big fool to lie, or even to know how. But how was he to understand this? Mufasa, knowingly or not, was ingeniously putting him in his place as well as ostensibly lifting him up in the eyes of the pride.

What the King was saying would certainly guarantee him a place at the kill, a place in the pride-- that much was clear. But how could the oaf have been so clever? By telling the pride in public that Taka was to be treated fairly, he had deftly removed Taka's last bit of pride-- his self-reliance.

How could he ever look at himself again with satisfaction? His only strength was his ability to live without the pity or the concern of his pride-mates. He had survived this far on that strength alone. Now, with sympathy falling upon him by royal decree, what reason was there for him to live? His identity was being stripped from him as he listened.

Now the lionesses were turning to him with kindness in their eyes. No! He looked from one to the other in growing alarm. He involuntarily took a step backward.

No. He must not let it show. Taka steeled himself and composed his expression. He smiled up at Mufasa-- a grateful smile, he thought-- and met the benevolent looks of the various lionesses with a deferential nod. He sighed inwardly. It's better to give them what they expect, always, he thought.

But he seethed. This was the heaviest blow that could have fallen on him. Taka could have handled a lonely existence, existing on the fringe of the pride, taking part only so far as it was necessary for him to live. But this?

He closed his eyes and sank to the ground, laying his head on his forepaws. To all who looked at him, he was simply overcome with emotion at his brother's generosity. As well he should be. Two lionesses moved back near him and swallowed their pride so far as to sit next to him, touching his side. Mufasa smiled happily, content that his announcement had been a success. Sarabi sat at his flank, the Queen who had claimed her place. Zazu hovered above the two proudly. Only Taka, as usual, was unhappy.

The large cavern of Pride Rock was empty except for a few mice, scuttling furtively between fragments of bones scattered across the floor. Taka smiled to himself. Just the way he liked it.

He slipped to a shadowy corner and curled up on his side, disturbing a ghostly layer of dust into the air. His eyes closed. His wounded left eye stung him, and he carefully licked a paw and brushed it over the spot, wincing gingerly. It was not healing cleanly.

Taka blinked a few times. It was no good; he'd never be able to get comfortable. Too many things were on his mind. As he stared into the darkness of the corner of the cavern, out of the path of the intruding sunlight, into the darkness floated images of memories both recent and old. He saw his mother's face, Akase, and then his father's. His father, the great king Ahadi. He

had known how to govern the Pride Lands. His ideas were ancient, and Taka knew of better and more efficient ways to rule, but what Ahadi did was good for the pride. They had been successful, they had fed well, they had defended their right to the land.

Then he saw Mufasa. His face rose to Taka's vision not as the adult he had become, the massive and authoritative King he had just seen outside claiming Sarabi as his Queen; rather, he saw Mufasa as an overgrown cub, romping in the grass and chasing birds and grasshoppers. Taka curled his lip in annoyance. How he had always envied Mufasa! He had the time and the security to play. Taka had always had to struggle merely to hold his place in the pride. And now he was King. Not the one who had been forced to learn the hard way about life, but the one who had always had it easy was now King. How could this be right?

Mufasa's playful face-- such a mocking expression!-- floated out of his vision, and now new faces came to him. Sarabi. Sarafina. Wamase.

Wamase.

He gritted his teeth to suppress a choking, constricting feeling in his throat. Wamase. She was the one he had loved all his life; he understood that now. But he had realized it too late. And the realization had come at a price; now he and Sarabi shared a secret that could never be told-- Taka for his own reasons, Sarabi for hers. It was likely to ensure that Taka would never command the slightest bit of respect.

As if Mufasa had left him any anyway.

He sighed, and watched unhappily as the scene of Wamase's death played itself out before his eyes in the darkness. He watched her leap to save her friend from the claws of an attacking cheetah, and she had gone under those claws herself. And he had sat above on the ledge and watched. He could have stopped it... he could have done something. The choking feeling rose again, and it was all he could do to hold himself motionless for a few moments, eyes squeezed shut, until the feeling passed. When he allowed himself to look again, the vision of Wamase was gone; her still body had floated out of sight, leaving only the grieving Sarafina.

Sarafina. She was still stricken, and it would be a long time before she would recover, he realized fully. When they had reached the zebra carcasses on the way back from the battle, Mufasa had compassionately made sure she had the first pick of the meat. Though her appetite was small, she was visibly grateful to him, and over the course of the few days they had stayed at the carcasses she had grown hungrier and stronger, benefitting more and more from the kindness the King showed her. And the gaze she turned on Mufasa now was one of more than the childlike adoration she had always had for the lion who would be King.

He sighed and shook his head. Another reminder of what made Mufasa the more popular. Forcing Sarafina's face, her wide innocent eyes, from his sight brought one last image to him: that of a cheetah. A cheetah with wild, staring eyes, lying on his side in the tall grass underneath him. Broken but defiant, cackling words that he would never forget. Mng'ariza.

He remembered vividly... the cheetah who sacrificed everything to save his clan, and then sacrificed his clan to save himself. Why had he done that? Taka could not begin to guess. But he remembered that the cheetah's words had made sense when he recalled them afterwards, as he ran across the savannah with the red miasma of anger in his eyes, and as he trailed behind the pride as they returned from the battle.

"Your boundaries are meaningless when they block the weak from surviving."

The weak? Surely the weak are weak for a reason. They are not meant to survive, thought Taka. But then look at the cheetahs. Are they themselves the ones he meant by "weak?" "Oppressed" was a better word. They certainly proved that they were anything but weak during the battle.

And, indeed, what gave the lions the right to set boundaries, to prevent others from living? Surely that was a violation of what his father would have claimed-- that the Circle of Life allowed all a chance, a right, to survive.

He himself was oppressed. He had known that for a long time.

And the cheetahs? They were oppressed... by the lions themselves. They were being denied the very right to survive that the Circle promised them.

And who was responsible?

Taka laid his head down. Mufasa, again.

He gritted his teeth and said the name aloud-- "Mufasa"-- in a low grating voice.

A cool breeze drifted through the entranceway and ruffled his mane, and he shivered.

The Pride

Chapter Eleven

Mufasa stood at the tip of Pride Rock, the empty air below its promontory filling the void beneath his feet that the long shadow of the Rock in the long slow sunset was creating. All before him was falling into shadow as he watched, streaming out before his eyes as he faced eastward over the sweeping plains that were his kingdom.

His kingdom.

Trying to recall his father Ahadi's face before his own, he stared into the deepening darkness, the lengthening tongue of shadow that was now reaching to the horizon and spreading to the sides as the sun behind him reached the western skyline and began to sink behind it. Ahadi. The old, wise King. Mufasa's father. The one who had taught him all he would need to know.

Or had he? How much was Mufasa going to have to discover on his own before he could be the King his father had been? Surely life was more complex than simply ruling his pride from the Rock and keeping the hyenas and cheetahs at bay. But what more was there? Nothing that he had seen, certainly. The Circle of Life was a mysterious thing to him. It seemed so deceptively simple.

Surely Ahadi had been brief on the subject of love, Mufasa reflected. His head turned slightly as he scanned the horizon, as though searching for his Queen, Sarabi, who was leading the hunt as she had become accustomed. He smiled softly to himself as he thought of her. She was his mate and his companion as well as the one who shared the responsibility of ruling.

And she was always able to understand a situation when he could not. He shared this secret with his mate: that when he was at a loss, he was able to preserve his image among the rest of the pride by the contribution of her own agile mind. Between the two of them, no problem was too great to be solved.

Mufasa's eyes stopped, dilating to adjust to the dusky light. He had detected motion out there on the plain. What was it? Was it the hunt returning? But whatever it was had just gone behind a low hill and out of his line of sight. He fixes his eyes where the moving spot had vanished and concentrated, rising to all fours at the tip of Pride Rock.

His concentration was so great that when Zazu fluttered down from the sky and settled lightly on his back, he jumped in surprise and nearly lost his footing on the precarious cliff's face. Scrambling back from the brink with a gasp, he regained his breath with difficulty and turned reproachfully to face the bird who was preening on his back.

"Oh, sire, I do apologize," he said with what sounded more like the affected concern used to cover up amusement than actual apology. Mufasa's face softened, and he chuckled lightly at his majordomo.

"Sooner or later, Zazu," he said, "We're both going to be too old to keep up this charade. Who's going to believe I'm a king if you never treat me as anything but a cub?" He laughed and turned his head back to look out over the land.

Zazu looked at the back of Mufasa's head indignantly. "Mufasa! What makes you think..." He broke off when he realized it was a futile argument, and sighed.

"At any rate, sire, I have news from the field. The lionesses are on their way back."

"Yes," the King mused. "I was just thinking I'd seen them a moment ago."

Zazu hopped up to Mufasa's shoulders and looked out on the Pride Lands along with him. He paused, then cleared his throat.

"Er, sire," he began. "It doesn't look good out there."

Mufasa turned to face him, his eyes narrowed inquisitively. "What?"

Zazu gulped. This would not be an easy thing to tell the King. How would he take it? How would he respond? What would he do about it?

He took a deep breath and shifted his weight. "Mufasa... the cheetah was right. Khulo, I mean. He..."

Mufasa broke in. "Khulo was right? What do you mean, Zazu?" he asked. His voice was not one that would be put aside, and the hornbill steeled himself and continued.

"Khulo was right, and so was Mng'ariza, from what Taka has told me. There's no food anywhere, sire. The hunting party has come back without any prey. There is nothing for as far as the Pride Lands extend in any direction. And believe me," he continued, "They've tried. They've done all they can."

Mufasa stared at him for the space of several tense heartbeats. Zazu hurriedly went on.

"Of course it's not your fault, sire," he said, fluttering his wings slightly. "It isn't anybody's fault. But something has to be done. We can't stay here or we'll starve."

Mufasa looked away, and suddenly seemed deep in thought. "Leave Pride Rock..." he mumbled. He closed his eyes and looked at the rocky surface he stood on, and over into the darkening air below him.

"No," he said at last. "I can't leave. This is where the pride lives. I am holding it in the name of my father and all the great Kings before him. It is our home-- the home of all of us." He turned back to face Zazu with a stern expression, enough to make the bird hop down from his shoulder onto the ground.

"I will not let the history of the pride be dishonored by leaving our ancient home. I cannot. I am the King, but so were they all. It is my duty to maintain the Pride Lands the way they have always been. How can I do anything less, Zazu?"

His majordomo flapped into the air, still nervous. "Sire," he said in desperation. "It's your decision to make, but... but think of your pride... their health is more important than... than..."

"Than the great Kings?" Mufasa asked, now sounding genuinely angry. He turned around and brought his nose close to Zazu, where he hovered agitatedly. "That's not something I expected to hear from you, Zazu. There is nothing in the world that is more important than your

heritage. You should know that. I have learned that the hard way. And I am not going to let that lesson be wasted!" The King almost seemed to have tears in his eyes.

Zazu rose into the air, managed a hovering bow and a stammered "S... sire," and then dipped out of Mufasa's line of sight, flying back down under Pride Rock's promontory and vanishing below his feet. Mufasa watched him intently as he went, still staring at the blank rock as he breathed heavily, trying to regain his composure.

He closed his eyes and shook his head, then found he had to blink back painful tears. His father was gone. He knew that. But he still thought of himself as Ahadi's son, as his Prince-- not as a King. His was the decision to do what was needed to make the pride prosperous, but hovering above it all was his dedication to the memory of his father and the honor of his ancestors, the Kings he knew were watching his every move.

Mufasa slowly raised his head. Yes, the sun had gone, and the sky was deepening into a purple color. There was the first bright star of the night. The eye of the Wildebeest. His father had shown him that star and had told him the star's name. But he had forgotten it. It was so long ago...

Overcome with irrational guilt, Mufasa scanned the sky as other stars came out. He could remember the names of some of them, but not nearly as many as he thought he should be able to. The world seemed to revolve around him, making his body smaller and more helpless in a whirlwind of a deeply ancient past, faces that were now looking at him with disapproving glares.

"How could you forget, Mufasa?"

"What kind of a King are you? Without your heritage you are nothing."

"Our names are what you must cling to for your pride to survive! Neglect your past and you are doomed to fail."

And then Mufasa heard his father's voice rolling into his mind. His eyes tried to focus on the hard points of light, but tears made them blur, and all he could hear was the voice.

"Mufasa..." it said. "You are the King. It is your part to rule. Follow what you know is right, and you will do what you were meant to do. Remember your past. Remember me."

Mufasa turned from the point of the Promontory with a roar of sadness and frustration and ran recklessly back into the darkness of the cavern, through the dust and past the remains of old bones, and out into the night. When the lionesses reached Pride Rock, there was no trace of the King.

Sitting with hunched shoulders, Taka glowered over the shadowed land from his perch on the very peak of Pride Rock, the lookout point of the whole kingdom. His eyes were dull and narrow as he pondered, and the scar over his left eye smarted in the chill night air. He bared a fang at the faceless pain; the rocks under his foreclaws showed pale streaks from Taka's agitated motions.

That wound over his eye had now healed, or had come as close to healing as it ever would. He had glimpsed himself in a pool of water earlier that day, and he noted with chagrin that the fiery red gash had now receded into a pale streak running vertically across his eye socket, a light color that contrasted bleakly with the dark tawny hair of his cheek. It would never get any better, he realized. And not just in what could be seen.

He growled as he remembered. On his way back to Pride Rock from the water hole, he had walked past Kolo and Malaika-- those two were now inseparable since the fateful hunt-- and he had caught a snatch of their conversation.

"It's that scar," one of them had said to the other in a hushed tone. Taka's ears had pricked up at this, and he moved closer, as unobtrusively as he could, to hear what the rest of the thought was to be. But as his dark form approached the two lionesses as they walked, they quieted and nudged each other before turning to face him, forced smiles on their faces, ears fighting not to lay back against their heads.

Taka closed his eyes and let another growl escape him. So now he knew that they were talking about him behind his back. Even after Mufasa's impossible royal order for the pride to treat Taka as an equal, they still abhorred him. So now another element to the hatefulness of that order had come about. Not only was Taka stripped of his self-reliance and ability to respect his own ability to survive, but the entire pride secretly hated him, or at least distrusted him, even in defiance of the order. Yet to Taka's face they were as pleasant as could be. Oh, Mufasa... how could you have accidentally and yet to deftly struck upon the most effective way possible to destroy your brother?

Taka stood up and turned from the edge of the rock, setting his teeth and ready to descend to the cavern, to the room full of mocking smiles, of deceit and treachery, of his own lost future. But as he took a step toward the steep path down the Rock, a flash of blue rose abruptly into view just in front of him. He leaped back and snarled defensively in surprise, baring his teeth and claws, but calmed instantly when he realized it was Zazu, returning to his roost in a cleft of rocks at the peak, and now fluttering about in agitation, squawking out mixed apologies and accusations for the near-collision.

"Zazu!" Taka shouted. "Calm down, you silly bird. I was just leaving."

The hornbill fluttered in a gentle arc around Taka, skirting his range distrustfully. "All right, all right," he said. "It's a good thing you're going, too. The lionesses have returned from the hunt, and if you don't get down there you'll miss where they've left the prey." He settled onto a rock and folded his wings, glaring back at Taka with a mixture of imperiousness and apology.

Taka stared back at him from under hooded lids. "Yes," he said after a long pause. "After all, they shouldn't want to eat with me themselves, of course." His voice was acid, almost beseeching a retort.

"I'm not passing judgment on you, Scar, or on anybody. It's not my job to--"

Taka cut him off, his eyes opening wide. "What?" he shouted, the word reverberating back into his throat and ending in a snarl. "What did you call me?" He took several steps toward the bird and bared his teeth menacingly. It was all he could think to do; his head was swimming with rage at the fact that his badge of shame had been used as a name; the only recourse left to his reeling mind was to threaten Zazu with tooth and claw.

But the hornbill was now hovering in the air at a safe distance over the edge of the cliff; he was now genuinely embarrassed and apologizing profusely, a feather or two falling from his bristling back as he fought to gesture and keep himself aloft at the same time.

"Oh, Taka, do forgive me," he was saying in a shrill squawk. "It's-- er-- well, you know how things are... the lionesses have been-- well, how can I say it... it's just too... well, you see..."

"Enough," Taka growled. He was breathing hard now, but his face had regained the dark glowering expression that it had carried before Zazu had arrived. "I see now. Well, let them," he spat, and turned away.

Zazu rose a bit higher, falling silent. He watched as below him on the peak Taka circled once or twice, then settling down among a few flat rocks and laying his head on his paws.

"I'll be sleeping up here tonight, bird," he called bitterly.

Zazu hovered a few moments more, and then, muttering, "Oh dear, oh dear," dove down to the cavern's entrance to sleep at the base of the Promontory, where he could still serve as lookout, but where at least he would be away from the lion he knew no longer as Taka, but as Scar.

Out of breath, Mufasa paused on a hilltop and looked back. His mane was unkempt and blew erratically back from his head, allowing the light of the full moon to fall into his eyes, accusingly, as though hunting him. He looked briefly at Pride Rock and then shuddered away from it, turning his nose toward the eastern horizon and disappearing beyond the crest of the hill.

So many stars. Dimmed as they were by the fullness of the moon, they all wheeled about in an infinite dome over the King's head, not stationary, but each one in a different position with each passing heartbeat, everywhere and nowhere. Each one was a mind, a spirit, watching over Mufasa's every action, glaring over each of his missteps, muttering disapprovingly with its fellows. They surrounded him. There was no escape. He closed his eyes and stumbled on, growling low in his chest-- a sound of self-defense against a foe he knew he could not fight.

Which one of those stars was his father? Would he ever know? Sometimes he thought that the one that rose early in the evening, in the sign of the Giraffe, was the one that spoke to him and told him what he needed to know. Other times he thought that Ahadi must be one of the Four Kings that he saw in the uppermost part of the sky on winter nights. How would he ever know? And would he ever be able to face that star again, once he knew which one it was?

Yet it was upon different eyes that at that moment the star which was the spirit of Mufasa's father cast its light. Those eyes stared calmly back up into the night sky, motionless, fixed upon that one point as it made its slow way across the heavens. Thoughts were traveling between two minds. When at last Rafiki had learned what the star would have him know, he

lowered his eyes, drew a hand over them, and slowly stirred from his perch at the top of his baobab tree. Grabbing deftly onto branches, he lowered himself from the openness of the night sky into the interior of the tree, grasping onto the thick limbs when he reached them, and arriving thoughtful and introspective at the hollow. He took a deep breath and looked up at the smooth wall, peeled clean of bark, and covered with smears of pigment from berries and leaves. There was the sign of the Star that he had put there only a few days ago. He studied it a moment, and then reached down to his tortoise shell which he kept filled with paint. After another few moments of careful consideration, he added a few spots to the aura surrounding the star, and then a beam reaching down from the star onto the ground. Then, in crude lines, he added the running form of a lion, making its way determinedly across what in the dim light looked like the trackless, golden sands of a desert. He stood back and smiled.

It was not what he had set out to paint. What had caused him to do what he had done? It was not his habit to wonder; he simply painted whatever came into his mind to paint at any given time. But this time, he had thought...

No. The star was right. It itself was not the one. Rafiki had tried to argue. How could it not be the one? But the star had been adamant. Now the mandrill knew that he had not been imagining the strange feelings he had been receiving, in non-verbal thoughts, underlying the main points he was exchanging. He stood back and looked at the painting again. He could see roughly what it implied; but when? How?

The wind blew. His coarse hair rose up and waved lightly in the chill breeze, and he turned sharply. Facing directly into the wind's teeth, he peered off into the distance, trying to see what was calling him. Nothing. Nor was there a scent on the breeze. His eyes and nose were not as keen as they once had been. He turned to his large shell which he used for reading the messages the wind brought him.

He laid a leaf upon the small pile of grasses and earth that was already in the shell, and then looked up through the leaves toward the star. Peering closely at it for a moment, he began to feel the breeze again-- the same direction, the same light chill. His attention snapped back.

And there it was. The leaf had moved just as he had thought it would-- drifting to the top of the shell and burying itself slightly in the other debris. A smile grew on his face.

Dropping the shell and grabbing up his staff, Rafiki leaped from the hollow and dropped out of the tree.

The Pride

Chapter Twelve

The winds blew ever so gently across the lands bringing with it a collection of cool air to calm the inner soul. Under the moon lit skies, basking in the silver light, slept the lionesses who made up the Pridelands Pride. Tonight they would rest in this comfortable evening provided to them. The previous days' hunt was disappointing at best, and the body had to be restored for the next. Tomorrow would bring a new day and with it, bestow a new chance for the pride to be successful in their hunt. Even if food was normally scarce this time of year, a shortage was foremost on everyone's mind. If the lionesses didn't find food soon, a panic could be on the break out to unsettle amongst their numbers. Yet, all were more than certain food was to be found somewhere amongst the grasslands of the Serengeti, even if the locale eluded them. Locating a 'beest would require masterful skills and keen reflexes but they were supreme huntresses, trained in the arts well, possessing quite perfected skills. Time was of the essence as all the lionesses raced against time, but through all the widespread disorientation, none of the lionesses seemed to have given up hope. In fact, every one carried good spirits as hope could not be lost.

Virtually inseparable since the Cheetah encroachment that fateful afternoon, Malaika and Kolo were the only two voices carried on the cool breezes offered by the Serengeti night. The two of them became fast best friends, and though today was a disappointment, excitement still filled the air. They were so excited in fact, all efforts to sleep were nullified! The big win over the cheetah's, the hunting, Sarabi's ceremony... everything! Who would or could even dare rest at a time like this!?

The two gandered at everything from Mufasa, to the cheetah's, the hyenas... even the stars that shone above. Every subject was fair game and there wasn't a topic that was taboo. "Sarabi seems to be different," said Kolo as they happened upon a conversation about their queen.

"She does," Malaika noticed. "But I think its the stress we're all facing. Sarabi is queen now, that has a lot of added responsibilities."

Kolo nodded. She was very happy for Sarabi and it reflected in her comments. Sarabi had finally received the formal declaration she'd been wanting and waiting for. It would be the final conformation for a position that in which she was born. None of the lionesses could hate her for it. To be queen was Sarabi's destiny. It had always been that way; determined by the Great Circle of Life.

"Everything worked out, didn't it?"

Kolo nodded, "It sure did. I hope Sarabi is very happy."

"I think she is," Malaika smiled. "She's lucky too. That Mufasa... Ooo!" And while Mufasa may be a hunk of a lion, Malaika decided, she was not meant to have him. Mufasa was bred for Sarabi as her mate.

Their voices were carried on the breeze that gently nipped at their ears. "My it's nice out there tonight," Kolo changed the subject. "I'm glad we decided to sleep closer to the entrance so we can be under the stars."

"Yeah," Malaika agreed. "It's nice and cool... hell for the devil."

"Or Mufasa's brother." Kolo giggled as their conversation quickly averted to the likes of the King's brother - Taka....

Scar.

The mere mention of that name and his wound grabbed the attention of Sarabi, even in her slumber. Awakened by the voices of her subjects, she laid silent - listening. Swearing to herself she'd never stoop to eavesdropping, but anything the two lionesses might say could be helpful to her. Maybe she'd become a bit too paranoid lately, in all that's happened, but no matter what state of mind she's in; if she heard the name, she jumped. Damn him for that.

"I don't know what to call him?" giggled Malaika.

"I know," offered Kolo licking her paw. "We got to call him something?"

"We could simply call him Scar..."

"Yeah! Kolo agreed. "You know, I wonder how he got that scar anyway."

Sarabi cringed. Surely no one was aware of the circumstances surrounding Taka and his scar, at least she hoped not. If the others knew, how long would it take Mufasa to find out... if he didn't know already. With even more intent, she listened to every whisper and every word of the two young lionesses.

"From what he explains... he got it from killing that cheetah Mng'ariza. But I don't know..."

"I know what you mean Kolo," agreed Malaika. "I think he just clawed himself!"

Both Malaika and Kolo broke into hysterical giggles about the king's unbearable brother. "Yeah, what do you want to bet he did!!" Clawing himself... what a laugh! Who knew, perhaps Taka did? Sarabi who was off in the distance, chuckled lightly to herself as the humor of Malaika's statement hit home. She too could picture that in her mind; Taka clawing himself trying to bat away some flying pest. She could hear him howl in pain over the wound now. It was a sound she was glad to hear... even if it were in her thoughts.

She'd stretched back out only, once satisfied that the two weren't discussing anything about her, Sarabi rose up and made her way from the entrance of the cave to the freshness of the air outside. Yes, today her secret was safe only to live again another day. And what of tomorrow, or the next day or the next? How would she put up with or handle with this burden? Would the secret eventually be told by Taka himself? Or would the other lionesses begin to piece together the subtle clues left behind... Who knew. Perhaps she was over reacting. "Yes," Sarabi told herself. "I'm just over reacting. Over reacting and paranoid!"

Outside, Sarabi wondered at the beauty she saw. The moon was full and the stars shown brightly. It was hardly a night to waste on two gossiping lionesses. Of course, it was dangerous territory those two lionesses were in. Talking about the king's brother was not allowable treatment since all lionesses were ordered by the king himself to treat Taka fairly, and accept him into the pride as an equal. If Mufasa were to find out that they were talking about him, especially behind his back, the King would be very unhappy. But, she'll leave that to him. Sarabi stepped up to the precipice of Pride Rock and was instantly surrounded by moonlight. Somewhere out there was her mate, hopelessly searching for a resolution to their immediate crisis.

"And what are you two giggling about?" came a voice from a fluttering creature landing next to the pair of cackling lionesses.

"Oh Zazu, I wish you'd quit doing that," Kolo said.

"Doing what?"

"Eavesdropping..." Malaika growled, playfully. She bat her paw at the bird hoping to ruffle his feathers, but he didn't budge. The lioness growled at him. Of course, it was Zazu. He wouldn't move for anything.

The King's Majordomo didn't know what to say. But finally settled on some pitiful excuse, "I was fluttering about in the neighborhood....and uh... needed to rest my wings for a bit."

"Right, sure," Kolo offered.

"Mmm-hmm.."Malaika agreed. "We believe you."

"Either way ladies, I believe as the Kings confidant I should inform you that Taka needs to be treated fairly. Per the King's orders, you know."

Malaika glanced at Kolo who was eyeing the bird with a humorous, if not almost pitiful expression. Only if Zazu knew just how obvious he was... or how clueless? "At least we didn't call him by Scar in error," the lioness offered with a chuckle. "now did we?" Kolo erupted in uncontrolled laughter, followed by her friend Malaika as Zazu stood with a frown upon his features.

The two were a lot alike. They were both relatively young adults who had grown up together. They were never really good friends until now... perhaps the Cheetah engagement coupled with Wamase's passing helped fuse together what was already there - a friendship. And it was that friendship that had obviously caused a stir withing the sleeping Pride. A bit too loud for some occupants, the elders looked up in shock as they were suddenly awakened. Even Isha and Ng'ara who were sound asleep moments ago were aroused by the laughter. The looks of dissatisfaction on their faces left the yellow beaked hornbill to sit, blushing before the Pride. "Now.. Now, " he stammered, turning back to Kolo and Malaika. "Quiet down. Shhh," he motioned to the two watching him. "You know I didn't-."

"Yeah, like we believe that," Malaika quickly replied.

"It doesn't matter what you believe... it was just a mistake."

But, how could one show respect to a funny looking--Inju, well; deformit--no; wound?

Malaika didn't quite know how to put it - That Scar! Where did it come from? What was behind Taka getting that scar? Surely not a wildebeest stampede; There were no large game to found. And certainly not from the zebra hunt she figured. He was fine after that. Perhaps the Cheetah incident as Scar suggested? Could be, but the unknown aurora surrounding that wound would only provoke questions in her, and undoubtedly in the other lionesses. And that would only leave them to guess....

Even thinking the name Taka sent chills down Malaika's spine. If Taka was unbearable before, he was even more despicable now. And by the looks of things, he wasn't going to leave which would really make her day. "Oh Zazu, you're spoiling our fun! Go away - take you and your mistake and go do... whatever you birds do at night." Zazu looked up and that got the two giggling again.

"Well I never!" Zazu retorted. "What a bunch of cackling women!" With that, she flew off, and out of the cave.

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"Come on you guys!" Kichasi called, "It's getting late!" Kichasi noticed the sun had already begun to set minutes ago. Now all that was left was a small sliver of fire above the horizon, shining its light as best it could. Kichasi knew darkness would fall soon, and if they didn't find shelter, they might not make it through this night. Ever since their rendezvous with the lions, their luck hadn't been so good. Khulo led them to their promised land, but they didn't find anything there of value! And without food or a decent place to stay, their kind would be lost to this drought. "Cursed lions!" Khulo yelled to the falling sun. "Why couldn't they see! Why couldn't they see the fault in their ways! We could have shared the lands... but no! They wanted to be greedy!"

Kichasi growled, "Yes well, that's all over now Khulo. If we don't find shelter soon, we're going to be left to the elements tonight!" In Mng'ariza's absence, Kichasi became the unrealized leader of the small Cheetah band of rogues that left their home those weeks ago to find food. Though, through the ranks, Khulo was Mng'ariza's first one but Kichasi was always on the verge of overthrowing Khulo for that spot. She was smart, but reckless and young. One day, she would make a great leader but not now. Not while the whole clan hung for their lives and all of Cheetah kind were on the verge of devastation due the lingering drought.

The drought was not as profound on the Pride lands as the Cheetahs found out, but its effects were still widespread. The homelands of the Cheetahs were completely devastated by the dryness, the effects in full force. It was Mng'ariza's hopes to possibly lead his group and possibly his whole kind on a magnificent journey where food was plenty, where the waters still flowed and the grasses were soft and green. Their goal would become The Pridelands. They didn't care that the lions inhabited those plains. Whether they realized it or not, life would return to the grasses far sooner than it would to the flats where all of Khulo's kind would be awaiting either their deaths.

Only their promise land of green grasses and cool waters was filled with war and emptiness. The waters turned red and the Pridelands devoid of most life. But, it wasn't completely far gone and Mng'ariza knew this when he pleaded to the lions to have temporary partnership of a small section of the lands, until the drought was over. But, as expected, the lion king Mufasa would not listen to his words. Now, Mng'ariza is dead and with him, all their hopes. But then, Khulo thought, "Life would return far sooner to the Pride lands no? If this is so, the effects of the drought may be already reversing themselves there." If that was the case, the Khulo could save his friends and his people by leading an uproar against the lions - taking what they wanted. But, war was not what they wanted.

"You're right Kichasi," he agreed, "We must find shelter soon. I don't want to sleep out in the open again! It's far too dangerous out here!" Agreeing to himself that all was not lost, Khulo walked away from his group leading the way closer to a possible solution to their housing problem. Behind him, followed Kichasi, muttering to herself, and the rest of the group.

They were about to give up yet again, when Tambulo spotted a small covering amongst the trees and bushes they had wandered into. He called to Khulo to stop and investigate. "There Khulo!" he pointed, "A place to rest!" He had a wide grin on his snout, but it was not well received by Kichasi, who was right beside him. "Very good Tambulo," Khulo praised taking a look himself.

He cautiously slinked up to the darkened area as conservative as he could, without looking too conspicuous. Kichasi was looking for any reason to call Khulo an unreliable leader so he tried to do it with as much dignity as possible. Kichasi even tried to have him debunked when Mng'ariza was still alive! And he knew she was still hot on his heels now. But, as he stepped ever closer to the tree line, he smiled. "It's a cave! A small cave, but big enough to house us all!"

Kichasi sighed, "Oh joy."

"Is it safe Khulo?" called Bhutai. Khulo nodded and returned to the rest of the group. "It's just fine. Let's get out of the night, before something happens." He wasn't overly afraid that any predator was going to attack a small group of cheetah's, but you never knew what could be lurking out in the savanna's of the Serengeti. And with the importance of their survival, they couldn't be too careless

With the blessings given by Khulo, the cheetah's settled into their home away from home, but not all too happy. Their stomachs were empty and roaring, telling them it was time to eat, not rest. But with the food as scarce as it was, Khulo knew tonight they would go hungry again. Kichasi on the other hand, went out looking anyway. As stubborn as she was, it didn't surprise him. "She's going to wear herself out Tambulo. She won't be helping us at all!"

"Let her!" spat Tambulo. "I for one am getting tired of her! Just because she was Mng'ariza's niece, she thought she could push us all around. Well I'm tired of it! I will be glad when we get back home!" Why should he take the heat for that girl. She hasn't done anything to help him one bit!

"Tam! You can't mean that!" Bhutai shouted in surprise, "Kichasi might be stubborn and overstep her bounds on occasions, but I would hardly say she doesn't help!"

Khulo sighed to himself as two of clan men went at it again... over Kichasi. She wasn't worth the trouble, he knew. But, it would at least keep them two busy well enough to forget about their hunger. And it would allow him the time to collect his thoughts and ponder about the future. Mng'ariza's death would not go unpunished; his overseers would see to that. He was a legend in his own time. He was honored, skilled and loved by all. News of his death would outrage his followers, more so than it bothered himself and the group that was left. Khulo smiled to himself though, "That would be perfect. And it would give us a reason to rise up and take the lions off of the Pride lands for good."

"What Khulo?" Tambulo asked, turning to his leader with wanting eyes. "What did you say? Khulo was unaware he had said anything. Even searching his memory yielded nothing. "What are you talking about Tam, I didn't say anything..."

"Yes you did!" confirmed Bhutai, "What about the Pride lands? I heard you mention the Pride lands... what does that have to do with us now?"

Khulo shook his head and growled slightly to quiet the questions. He cursed silently to himself for allowing his thoughts to escape him. His private thoughts hadn't been made public before and he hoped it never happened again - especially around Kichasi. She would eat that alive! "I was thinking to myself... I don't know what I said, but whatever it was disregard it." Khulo nodded his heads as he passed that lie. He knew what he said. He also didn't mean for it to happen. Not to mention even meaning it but he didn't want another conflict... not yet. "I must be getting old..." he muttered to himself.

Tambulo asked again, "What?"

"Nothing Tambulo. I said I must be getting old." He laughed aloud at his words. Old, puh. He wasn't all that old, of course, but it did sound like a good reason to pass to two simpletons! It seemed to work as they joined in his laughter. "Yeah, that must be it!" said Tam turning to talk to Bhutai about Kichasi again.

Khulo sighed and went over scenarios in his head, over and over and over. There were endless possibilities that could occur so far away from home... and no guidance from Mng'ariza. There were still so many things that could still go wrong. Leaving Tshatshi to scout, for instance, was not very wise, but it was necessary. Their intelligence was nonexistent and Khulo needed to know what was going on out in the grasslands. He hoped the others agreed with his reasoning and orders. Though, if Kichasi had her way, the others wouldn't be allowed to hear an intelligent reason for anything. Yes, she would be a problem; a problem he would have to solve before the day ended... tomorrow... or the next day... sometime soon. He was not to be outdone again by that repulsive girl.

His thoughts turned to food upon feeling his stomach tense and growl fiercely. Damn, Khulo cursed to himself, he needed to eat! Smirking a bit, he said "I should have gone out with Kichasi." Then again, she probably wasn't having much luck either. Deciding not to dwell on the subject, Khulo stretched himself out on the cool dirt of the secluded cavern, fitfully trying to put all his thoughts out of his mind and close off all noises. The voices of his comrades began to murmur and for the first time all day, he felt at rest. But it didn't last, hearing a rustle outside, Khulo opened his eyes a bit startled and listened to the noises approaching their standpoint.

Khulo lied very still, though Tambulo and Bhutai were still arguing over their views of Kichasi. And if they didn't shut up, it would be those two who would draw the most attention. And then it happened, a whirlwind blew through the cavern entrance and Khulo smiled at the sight he witnessed. Kichasi had returned, empty handed no less, with an angry look about her. "What's wrong Kichasi?" Khulo toyed from his stretched out position. "Catch anything?"

"Oh shut up!" she thundered back hoping to shut out the male. Tam and Bhutai turned and looked at the approaching storm and hung their heads a bit lower. She noticed them, "What's wrong with you two?!" "Nothing.. Nothing!" Tam answered and laid down, knowing full well that the fun was over. There would be NO talking about Kichasi now, especially when she was around. Knowing her like he did, she wouldn't hesitate to rip them to shreds!

"Aww, did the poor lass return empty handed?" Khulo prodded again, hoping for once Kichasi would listen to him before she'd go out and waste her energy. Instead she gave him the meanest, most evil look he'd seen from her in a while. She was not in the mood for anything. "Maybe next time you'll listen to me and stop wasting your energy. So much uncertainty surrounds--"

"Quiet!" she yelled loud enough to wake the others. Her tone sent a chill down Khulo's spine as he saw her eyes become as big as the moon outside. "I don't care! I'm hungry! And when I'm hungry, I hunt! End of it!" She padded away from the leader with a slight bewildered look on his face.

Kichasi entered the camp like a bat out of hell, cursing and mumbling to herself. She had come back empty before but it was becoming an embarrassing habit for her. How could she lead her people or this group if she couldn't even catch a meal! Nevertheless, her looks were as if she could kill. Something, someone... it didn't matter. And she noticed how the others backed away upon eyeing her angered aura. They wanted nothing to do with her young attitude and that was fine with her. What she didn't need right now was a bunch of whiners.

Tam chuckled, and mumbled before closing his eyes, "I don't blame them one bit either."

Khulo lightheartedly chuckled, hearing the words from his friend and second lieutenant. If one was smart, you knew to stay out of her way when she was angry. If you weren't too smart, she'd eat you alive! Smiling, he gazed out of the cavern - their home for the evening - watching the stars shine their light as best they could through the semi-dense trees of their surroundings.

He hoped with all his heart that he wouldn't have to come to violence to make the lions see that they needed to survive as well. He was not much for violence, just like Mng'ariza. But, if provoked, he could be just as deadly. The young cheetah shook his head, trying to clear the waves protruding his rest. Taking a cool breath in, he closed his eyes and fell fast asleep leaving Kichasi with her rage and the rest of his group to fend for themselves.

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Outside, basking in the moonlight of Pride Rock, sat a patient yet worried Sarabi. She had so looked forward to some quiet time with her mate after the hunting party returned but when she returned after that hard day's work, there was no sign of her love. It hadn't worried her too much at the time, but now? It had been hours since her hunting party had returned and there was still no sign of the King. And she wondered where in all creation he could be. She thought of her, she thought of the hunt... before finally hitting on the subject of Ahadi. Sarabi knew the passing of Ahadi was taken very hard by Mufasa. He stepped up to the challenge of being King without any remorse, but inside she knew her mate still hurt and did on occasions, slip out for some time to think if Mufasa needed some time to himself that was okay by her, but this long?

"Where are you my love?" she whispered into the cool breeze taking her words and instantly carrying them away. "Why are you not by my side..." She looked out from the promontory and sighed. The view from the tip of pride rock was undescrivable in the day time, but at night, under one of the fullest moons seen in many cycles, the scene was dreary. Flooded with whitish light, the grasses of the Pride lands turned into ghostly illuminations as the grounds were lighted from above. And it was that light that helped Sarabi search for her beloved, her King even if it were futile. But with minute by minute passing, Sarabi grew even more worried, tired and cold.

The breeze fluttering across the land was crisp and it chilled her to the bone. Standing outside, like a fool, allowing the wind to whisk through her highly kept fur was Sarabi looking still for her love. "Oh Mufasa..." Sarabi closed her eyes on the land deciding to return to the comforts of the den and check upon the members of the pride. Lazily walking down the precipice back towards the cave, she knew Mufasa would come back. Time would tell but wherever Mufasa ran off too... he would come back. And wherever the king may be, she at least hoped he was happy and making sense of his troubles. She moved inside now, wasting no more time over her lost mate being welcomed by the sounds of her pride of lionesses snoring.

Her and Mufasa's Pride.

The only one missing of note was Mufasa, and with another glance around the room, Scar... er, Taka. She noticed Sarafina who backed herself in a corner not associating herself with anyone; trying desperately to fend off her nightmares. Nightmares that only came due to her suffering. The loss of her friend Wamase in the fight against the Cheetah's had dampened Sarafina's spirits and left her with a legacy she would not soon forget. And it hurt Sarabi to see her friend in this manor. She deduced that even sometimes the Great Circle of life dealt one a devastating blow - it's never pretty; or easily justified, but it must be true as it is by the Circle.

Even during the ceremony earlier, Sarafina didn't seem her usual cheerful self. They all were happy for her she knew that, but Sarabi couldn't help but notice that not everyone was having a good time. She guessed it was just the tough time Sarafina was going through... after Wamase had been struck down, there was no one besides the Queen that the young adult confided in; no one she cared more for. Sarabi was quite proud of her friend for having the nerve and courage to stay with the Pride and continue on even in the face of this devastation.

Yet, both were in pain, and both only had each other to understand their pain. Even if all the other lionesses, including Sarabi truly understood what brought on the pain, guilt or anguish as these two have been given. Sarafina would heal in time and Sarabi knew that it would also take Mufasa time to heal from his father's death. But time is something the pride did not have a lot of. She saw there was no food out there, and as Queen, she knew what that meant. It could mean that the pride must move from Pride Rock, to seek the herds elsewhere. It also could mean that the pride was doomed to starve to death unless a miracle act occurred.

Her ears picked up as giggles were heard giving rise to the Queen's attention and inquisitive nature. She began eyeing through the night, trying to find the source of the outburst. She immediately stopped on the forms of Malaika and Kolo. And without further thought, made her way to their side.

Her presence immediately snapped the two whispering lionesses to attention and they immediately became quite uncomfortable. "Sarabi," they bowed, slightly. Returning the gesture ever so delicately, she mumbled in question "Have you seen Mufasa?"

"Us?" Kolo asked surprised, turning to her friend. "No," she finally answered. "Why?" But she had already known why. Just as Sarabi questioned the two, Kolo made a quick scan around the interior of the cave and found no sign of the king.

Sarabi looked at Malaika worriedly and voiced her answer, "I don't know... where could he be?" That was a very good question indeed. Kolo and Malaika didn't seem all too concerned with Mufasa's absence, but soon changed their persona when they noticed the uneasiness following Sarabi. "Sarabi," Malaika called softly, "I'm sure he's fine. There has been a lot going on lately...."

"You're right," she decided smiling tightly. "There has been a lot on his mind as of late. I suppose he needs a little time to himself. Maybe more than I realized."

Malaika smiled, reassuring the Queen, "That's all. He's probably tending to some problem now! A hyena engagement or maybe he's doing some scouting."

Sarabi looked as though her mind was at rest and at peace again; if only for a moment. Assured that Mufasa was tending to the Pride's needs, security and survival; Sarabi could finally rest for the evening. There was a lot of responsibility to handle when one becomes king. Not nearly as much as there was to being Queen. Royalty; It would be a learning process for the both of them. "Thank you," she said and bid the pair farewell before wandering off. She found herself again at the entrance to the cave, peering out, hoping to catch a glimpse of motion amongst the Pride lands. In the stillness that had now crept up, there was no clue, no rustle, no anything. And somehow, her thoughts turned from Mufasa, to his brother - Scar.

Scar?

What had possessed her to call him Scar? Perhaps she'd overheard it somewhere. Yes, she did. Some of the other lionesses referred to Taka by that profuse name earlier, but now herself? Calling the king's brother by that foul name could land her in a lot of trouble, not to mention embarrassment. Though his wound did stand out like a sore thumb, she did not want to draw any undeserved attention toward it. And now, when ever she heard that name, she would feel the grief and anxiety that produced the deep scratch in the first place. She would forever hold the secret that could possibly destroy Taka, as he held the secret that could possibly profess death in her direction.

But, now that Mufasa had officially claimed her as his mate, Sarabi wondered how Scar would treat her. Whether or not Scar would tell Mufasa and confess her crimes to him. Those crimes have been punishable by death in years past, and Scar's behavior could just as easily condemn him. Knowing Scar like she did, losing further control over his reign here would certainly berate him even more - that was something the dark lion did not want. She was sure Mufasa wouldn't be too pleased to hear that his brother tried to mate the one to be Queen, when he knew all too well that she was betrothed to him.

Ahh the endless circle that was life. Sometimes it dealt menacing blows to society and order and sometimes it can leave loved ones behind. The Great Circle of Life worked in mysterious ways indeed which was why Sarabi was very glad Mufasa understood it well, or at least pretended to. One thing was certain though and that was no matter what pitfalls she and Mufasa ran into; the lion was going to make a great king, and herself a distinguished queen.

The winds on the Pride lands had changed again, causing Sarabi to reenter the cavern. There she found Kolo and Malaika once more, growing tired and weary. Jetting in she noticed Sarafina had finally dozed off (after a time of tossing and turning, balling up and finally just passing out). All the other members of her pride were fast asleep engrossed in their dreams for the future. And Sarabi? Well. She wandered to her normal sleeping spot in the center of the pride and sighed. The slightly elevated chamber was fit for a king, and queen, and was usually where she and her mate had slept. Only now, it was going to be her. Because of that, the room felt empty... There was no one waiting in her dreams tonight. There was no one to cuddle next to, to hold and to draw warmth from. And most of all, there was no one to say "I love you," to. She laid at the center of attention, shivering from the cool breezes blowing in and began to wonder if she'd be spending more time alone like this... in the cold.

Taka had noticed Sarabi outside the safety and warmth of the cave and wondered what she could be doing out amongst the stars. Though no longer present he wondered what troubled her. So much for her wander out in this chilled night. Push come to shove, he still loved her no matter what she or Mufasa has done. It didn't matter to him whether she was the chosen one or not. "I can still dream," he mouthed to himself. "Can't I?"

He nuzzled his nose against his crossed paws and looked out from atop the peak of the plateau. Taka could see it all from up there, including the precipice below. The moonlight was just enough to illuminate his surroundings and that was enough for him to tell that Sarabi was in distress. Yet, amongst the midnight chill, Taka too was stressed. He now bore the mark of his treachery; forever cursed with its retched name. Of course it was his own fault. But no longer would he be referred to in the Pride as Taka. Slowly but surely he would now be known as Scar. Such a damnable name. A name for the cursed. A name for the accused.

"But let them. What do I care? I don't need them. I can fend for myself!" His words only served to outrage him even more as he laid in the cool night of the Serengeti. His anger was the only thing keeping the blood flowing and the warmth protruding. Closing his eyes now, he tried fitfully to fall asleep but the only thing keeping him from doing so was the throbbing pain festering up in his scar...

Rafiki was more than certain that the image he painted in his Baobab tree had hardly any credibility to it what so ever. The symbol it represented was very disturbing; one that could never happen within this pride. But the image he painted blew caution into the wind. It was not some random thought he coaxed out of the air, it was an envision. A vision he had many times as of late and so it had to be a sign from the stars; a prediction from the wise elders above. In his years, Rafiki learned never to doubt what came to him on the wind or from the stars themselves for they held a vast oasis of knowledge. In the past they had been his guide - his insight into the past, present and future of the Pride itself. This image was no different. Yet, it called to him like no other; beckoning some kind of comprehension. The attention he could yet not give the painting.

"Well," he said. "I guess da only way I'll know for sure is if I go check muhself." So the wise mandrill set forth on a journey; where he would stop would be at the mercy of the wind. He was certain his travels would take him to Pride Rock, a place of beauty that he had seen in the past, and would probably see countless more times in the future. And as the wind told, he was correct.

The wind, stars, and moon had also told him that he was vital to the Pride's future in an indirect way, relating to an incident yet to come. And while this also offered no information, he didn't shy away from it. It would require some meditation, and some thought. Though an image of a lion, a cub had been seen in his dreams as of late. A cub, he'd never seen, or had even knew. A cub that undoubtedly had some influence in the future affairs of the Pride.

Yet all of Rafiki's senses, either bodily or magical could give no leeway on the image of the running lion. None of his reliable sources had given up their secrets of the image, or provided any clues to its meaning. Rafiki hoped it had no dire consequences for the Pride, and if that were to be, he hoped he could have a magical influence, just like his ancestors. The wind was beginning to die down as even the Earth went to sleep. Rafiki was glad of it too. Any more cool blasts and he would go back to his Baobab tree and stay where it was warm. But, the Pride came first, with all its troubles.

A smile protruded on his face when he saw the outline, drawn in shadows, of Pride Rock. There, he hoped to get to the bottom of the troubling images he had seen. The wind here told him absolutely nothing, but he was sure everything was quiet, and the Lions would be fast asleep, resting for their hunt. As Rafiki got closer, he noticed the blue form of a Hornbill, and chuckled lightly. Everything is as it should be, as it was meant to be.

The poor bird was all snuggled up, beak in wing, weathering the cool weather. Rafiki thought about waking the creature up, but decided differently... not wanting to cause a ruckus. And with Zazu, any thing was possible. Especially what he had witnessed of the bird lately, one would think Mufasa would have gotten rid of him by now.

Tiptoeing to the main entrance to the cavern; Rafiki peered into the dark hole. Though the darkness took over, he did receive some help in the form of moonlight cascading down from above shedding its light as it danced across the forms in slumber. The light was just enough for Rafiki's keen sight to pick up the outlines of the sleeping lionesses. Nothing out of the ordinary but... the Mandrill looked again and sure enough; Mufasa wasn't present - and neither was Taka! Taka was undoubtedly off doing his own thing... but where was Mufasa?

Then, the pieces started to fall together. The visions, the image... all warnings. Rafika held onto his staff pondering what it is he should do next. Acting on instinct alone now and allegiance to the Great Kings of the Past; Rafiki finally had bestowed in him the knowledge to answer his own questions. The image of the running lion wasn't a metaphor for an unseen event; it was real! And it was Mufasa running away! Now, there was much more that met the eye.

Satisfied that he found what he came for, Rafiki returned to the shadows from which he came on a search to find the King of Pride Rock. His journey through the night took him through some of the most densely packed sections of the Pride lands. The grasses around the rivers and streams here seemed the most green, the most strong, and the most tasty! But not even the bubbling springs of a nearby waterway could put a hold on the Mandrill. Through thirst or hunger he would push on because he had to find the King of Pride Rock, whatever it took.

Traveling at night did have its advantages; Rafiki wouldn't have to worry about the searing heat or the fear of being hunted by Hyenas, Cheetahs, or whatever else might come along the way. At night, he was protected and quite happy about it. Coming up on a stream, he bent down to take a sip and marveled at the stars as reflected in the water. They seemed to shine even brighter to illuminate his path. The Wise One looked up from his drink to be basked in the light - light of wisdom. He paused, taking in the light and energy of the wisdom that surrounded him. He drew more and more of the answers in; causing the wind around him to gust - thirsty for knowledge. And just like it came, the phenomenon disappeared leaving Rafiki alone and empty but enough to fulfill his journey.

The blue butted monkey hadn't noticed, but he'd wandered into banks of the stream. His only clue was the lapping water at his feet. The coolness washing away the pain in his feet. But his pain wasn't all he felt. Through the phenom he was privy to, he learned of another's pain. The mission was clear now, clearer than it had ever been. There was trouble with the King and he must locate him. But where? He searched his overworked mind once more and found the answer

quickly - NorthEast!

Rafiki's travels came to an end when he happened upon a paw print. Immediately upon examination, it was determined that it could not belong to any other lion. And as by magic, a rather large lion appeared in the clearing just beyond the tree line where Rafiki took refuge. Smiling at the pacing form, Rafiki knew there was a lot of trouble out there, and it would take time to sort through and learn from it. But time wasn't what the Pride had. The King had many decisions to make - most of which would affect the Pride directly. Making the wrong one would be disastrous for everyone...

"Schtop!" shouted a silhouetted form. "And where do you tink you're goin'?" Rafiki asked the lion out of nowhere. The lion jumped, shocked that anyone was out there, and actually speaking to him. And that voice, sounded so familiar. His face was set in a cold expression, waiting for anything to happen. "Who is out there?" sounded Mufasa, very concerned now, for his life.

"Tat is no concern of yours yet, my friend. Da question is, where are you goin'?"

Mufasa's expression changed to that of surprise. Who was this creature to ask him, the king, questions about where he was going on his own lands. It was none of his business! The lion began to pace in circles trying to find the intruder - a scent; a movement; anything! Even with his keen eyesight Mufasa was unable to locate the one who spoke to him. Nervousness overtook him and before he could calm himself, the voice continued. "Isn't da King supposed to be with his Pride?" The lion jerked back not knowing what else could come next when, as if the voice identified itself by coming out of the shadows; it surrounded Mufasa and it produced a look of confused amazement across his face. "What's the matta'?" asked the creature. "Never seen a Mandrill before?"

The voice continued his chuckle until Mufasa finally recognized the sound and fit it to the image before him. "Rafiki..." he called out. "Why of course..." Rafiki the wise old Mandrill who had helped the Great Kings of the past, who was always there-in the distance. But why would he be here, now?

"No..." he teased.

"What are you doing so far away from your home?" Mufasa inquired.

"I should be the one to ask you dat question..."

And he was right. What was Mufasa doing all the way out here on a cold night, away from his defenseless Pride of lionesses? A good question indeed. One, Rafiki was going to keep asking until he got the answer he was looking for. The Mandrill was about to repeat the question again, but halted when Mufasa sighed, reading to speak.

"What am I doing out here," Mufasa offered. "That is a very good question wise one." And after a few moments, "I really don't know."

"You don't know, or don't want to tell a wise old monkey..."

What seemed like an eternity went by before Rafiki would speak again. It was clear to the mandrill now that Mufasa did not want to talk about what ailed him. But, he promised himself and the kings of the past, he would find out exactly what went wrong in the prodigy Mufasa.

"Certainly running away can't be a good trait of a king?" asked the mandrill, striking a chord within the big lion. "Can it?"

Mufasa shifted his weight in response, not believing that yes, he was out here in the middle of the night running away -- abandoning his pride. That he was leaving them defenceless and hungry. Why? How? What has come over him? These questions swimming around in the mind of the king were very disturbing. "No, it is not." His voice flowed through the land, turning all attention to it and the speaker. "The truth is. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Yes you do," Rafiki said, stepping a bit closer. "You know exactly why."

"I do?" Mufasa shot back quickly... "Yeah, I do...." he finally said.

"A lot of things have happened - my father, my brother, the cheetahs, and now the pride. And I have no control over them!"

"WRONG!" affirmed Rafiki, and let out a small sigh. The moon's rays danced upon the face of the young king, highlighting his troubles. As a wise man, Rafiki picked up on the attitudes and went with them. "Da Great Circle of Life may control your destiny, but while you are heah, you and you alone control the fate of the Pride."

"And how am I supposed to take control?"

"You are da King!" bounced the Mandrill, "you figgure it out."

After a brief time Mufasa finally decided, "It is impossible!"

Rafiki looked to the stars as if to say "I've tried," and failed. The king had made up his mind. He would rather run, than stand and fight. What a king this one turned out to be. Not even king for one full cycle, and he's already giving up. "Noting is impossible if you set your mind to it King Mufasa."

The mention of his name startled the lion, it was the first time the wise one used it. As it was the first time he'd called him King, rather than referring to him by it. "Rafiki," he began gently. "I know what I must do... but it is hard."

Finally, some of the remorse was shedding and Rafiki could see the light - he could see into Mufasa's soul. There was good in there, the ability to be a great king. Only if he could get past his self doubts, and focus on the hear and now. "Ahh, yes. Being King is hard. But your fatter wouldn't have made you King if he didn't think you couldn't handle it." Rafiki sighed, grabbed his stick and turned to face the direction of Pride Rock. "Your destiny lies within da pride. Take your place in da Great Circle Mufasa... before it's too late."

Mufasa turned to gaze eye to eye with the Mandrill, only to find he had disappeared. He turned frantically in all directions - still no Rafiki. He had vanished without a trace, nor did he leave any presence behind. As the winds blew ever so gently across the plains, Mufasa was given a lot to think about. He was the true King of Pride Rock, there was no other. He alone must burden the troubles and reap the rewards of the Pride. He was their ruler, their protector and their inspiration. And as he sat gazing at the moon, a question floated through his mind: "What would happen to the Pride if I never returned?"

The Pride

Chapter Thirteen

Sitting atop the plateau of Pride rock was Taka, an outcast of outcasts. He so loved this time of the morning. The winds were cool and the sky was tinted ever so gently with light that foreshadowed the events to come. Soon the sun would rise and with it another day of sorrow and despair. For Taka, it would be another day living with the snickers of gossiping lionesses walking through the shadow of Mufasa, or the gazes of Sarabi leering into him as if spitting on the ground he walked on. Then there was always Zazu, the pestering boob. "As if I didn't have enough problems to deal with."

The pain that welled up in his scar overnight subsided during the night, but the remnants would last a lifetime. Forever scared by the claws of the Queen; he would bear the marks that would be his undoing - an undoing that would undermine any immunity he now enjoyed. But, that would come only if he allowed it. "I will not suffer for this!" he growled at the approaching sun. "One day I will be king of this Pride... and it will not matter!"

Yes, he formulated, it would only be a short matter of time until he became king. He would make sure of that. Somehow a way would be found to seize the day. "Carpe Diem... heh. Be Prepared!" As he let his words trail off, his mane was picked up by a strong head wind that seemed to come out of no where. Stronger and more forceful it became until he could no longer keep his eyes open. "Taaaaakaaaaa..." He heard his name but could not target the location from which it came. And in a flash of light, the winds died down allowing Taka to reopen his eyes and gasp at what lay before him.

"M-mother?"

"Yes my son. It is I," the ghostly image said standing with such pride and dignity in the midst of cloud, smoke and mist. Though she had been amongst the Great Kings for many cycles, she looked no older than Taka had remembered; her beauty forever held captive in time. For as time continued, so did her loveliness. "I sense your difficulty my son..."

"Mother," the darkened maned lion eyed up at the image of Akase who appeared before him. "I feel betrayed and I'm concerned about a few things."

"Why is that my son..." she spoke. "What has you so concerned?"

Taka shifted his weight uneasily from one paw to another as he was unsure of where to start first. Uncertain he was, as the lion himself would put it: How to begin a sentence telling your mother that her son is a fool? Something like that was not an easy thing to discuss. Yet, Akase as his mother wouldn't condemn him for what he would say; she was nothing like Ahadi was... or even to the extent of his own brother.

"Well," Taka whispered aloud. "Mufasa is being a fool..."

"Oh?" Akase interrupted but was ignored.

"He is not taking this plight seriously. It is only a matter of time until we all starve to death."

"What is that any concern of yours?" Akase mouthed. "You are not the king of the Pride lands. That is for him to worry about."

Taka growled, "I do worry mother. It affects me as much as it does him."

"He is the king. He is the one--"

"Yes... so he is. That still does not contend to the fact that Mufasa cannot make a conscious decision as to the future of this pride."

He couldn't, Taka reasoned, to make a decision whether to move or stay. He on the other hand would move in a heart beat. There was no sense being king of a long dead and decaying pride of lionesses - ones who die day after day from food affixation. Yes, there was trouble upon the Pride lands and Taka knew what needed to be done; Mufasa did not. Instead of doing what he must, Mufasa would rather cling onto false hopes that the food shortage would some how magically come to an end and that things were all fine and dandy. Unfortunately, things do not happen that way. "I can see it, why can't he."

Akase mummered and asked, "See what?"

Taka grumbled, "That I can see that the pride needs to move elsewhere to find food. Instead we sit here to await our deaths? No. This is not what was meant by being King mother. He should be *here* making a decision on what to do next, instead of frolicking amongst the plains."

"Do you think he really doesn't care Taka?"

"Of course he *cares*, but he's too weak to do anything about it. Besides, our escapades with the Cheetah's is far from over. They *will* be back... and this Pride is in no condition to fight again."

"Too weak Taka? Surely you jest..." She spoke again, but was ignored.

"Perhaps he thinks different."

"No doubt," Taka shot back. "Unfortunately it will get us all killed. We need a leader mother... and that is not what we have."

Akase looked into the eyes of her son hoping to find some weakness that would lend her a hand in figuring out what troubled the lion. Instead, all she found was a ghastly scar staring back. "You just don't understand. Times have changed. And still no one understands me..." Taka trailed off and begun again. "My involvement with the hyena's has escalated."

"Hyenas?" Akase looked down sternly.

"They are almost..."

What has her son got himself into this time? Talking to the hyena's like they were--

"... my friends."

Shock registered on the former Queen's features as she could not begin to fathom her son's words. Mild bewilderment crept on Scar's own face as realization began to set hold. Yes, the hyena's were not the enemy to him anymore - Mufasa and Sarabi were. They were now the things he hated the most. Mufasa as king, and Sarabi at his side - Queen and mate. And what of his new "friends"? Surely, comrades in arms with the "enemy" would sure to raise a few

eyebrows amongst the Pride. But what did he care, he was already an outcast amongst his peers... even Sarabi for whom he loved.

And now thoughts of Sarabi encircled his mind. He gave a toothy grin as thoughts of sleeping with the enemy came to mind... but quickly dismissed them at the sound of Akase's voice.

"Why Taka? Why the hyena's?"

"They seem to understand me... they want to help."

Oh dear gods, Akase thought. Her son was beginning to fracture. The hyena's are the last creatures on earth that would understand a lion. The absolute last! The hyena is a mortal enemy of the lion - as depicted in the Circle of Life. *Oh Taka, what has gotten into you!* "Help?" Akase inquired. "Help with what?!"

"My desires mother..."

"Desires?!" she shook her head. "What kind of *desires*?!"

Scar grinned through a mouth full of teeth, "To be king of course..." But his grin soon turned down when he saw the look on the face of the lioness. Speechless she was, utterly left in silence. She knew Taka wanted to be king but..."My son, I fear you no longer have any grasp of reality."

"How can you say that!" Scar flared forward confronting the image. "Reality is here and now - with the living!"

The former queen snapped back in disgust. "Do what you must *Taka*... but this is not how to honor your father."

"Honor him!?!?" Taka spat. "I don't want to *honor* him! I want to be the king!!"

Akase stood silent as her own flesh and blood before her stood fast echoing those words. She knew of her son's desire to be king - but it was just not to be. And as much as Akase loved her younger son, she knew that there was the greatest possibility that he would never be the leader he so wanted. A fact the lion would need to face.

But it was Taka's determination that was puzzling. Why so gung-ho on trying to become something that he was destined not to become? And why to dishonor one's own father in a crusade to do so? It was appalling! "Taka!" she yelled. "Listen to yourself! You would dishonor your own family sake for a technicality?!?"

"Yes..." fire breathed in Scar's eyes as he bore the gaze into his mother. "I would do just about anything and everything to get what I am due..."

The image of Akase turned from her son in disgust. "Then I want nothing more to do with it. I am ashamed..." The anger in Scar boiled over and he lashed out at his mother with words so harsh, he thought it was never possible from him. Words so horrible that it made Akase break down into tears. She begged and begged, but her son would not stop the bombardment of anger and misjudgements. Sobbing until she could cry no more, Akase turned her back on Scar, muttering over and over, "You are not my son..." as she vanished.

The winds picked up as the spirit form of Queen Akase began to flutter away into the bright light in which it came forth. The illumination emanating from her vanishing form was as blinding as the morning sun which had now begun to peak its head over the lay of the land. Within little time, the rays of sun encompassed the spirit and engulfed it; eliminating its presence from the living world. The fireball sent out its tentacles of light and warmth as a last ditch effort to gain control over the day... with much success.

The morning sun rays danced across the sleeping form of Sarabi; peering through the cavern entrance giving highlights to her queenly features. Tossing, trying to fight the calling of the land, Sarabi yawned and finally forced her eyes open against all thoughts of protest. The sight almost blinded her as unprepared as she was for the onslaught of sunlight. Turning to the sunlight, Sarabi smacked her lips in another yawn, "Ahh morning". It was morning! A brand new day to start things off right. Yes, she decided, today would be a fresh day and smile grew on her face as she thought of her betrothed and turned to greet him only to find him absent from her side; turning her smile into a frown.

Her being succumbed to reflex, she quickly glanced around the cavern trying to capture a glimpse of Mufasa. Sighing to herself, Sarabi yawned once more and stood on all fours; there wasn't even a sign that the king had returned from where ever it was he ventured off to the previous night. This alarmed the lioness, but she tried to keep her worry from showing. She eyed to and fro for Scar, but there was no sign of him either. "No Surprise," she whispered softly as her eyes motioned to a quivering form of feathers just beyond the safety of the sleep chambers - Zazu.

Ever so gently, she picked herself up and began to tiptoe, with the greatest effort, out to the tip of the precipice. There, she could get a look of the surrounding lands and gauge their strategy for the coming hunt. Today was their day, she thought; today they would catch their feast. As she turned to leave, a small sound, from the back of the cave made its way forward. Startled, Sarabi turned to see that it belonged to a small rodent who wandered in during the night.

Sarabi chuckled and smiled at the cute little field mouse as it stopped dead in its tracks blinking up at the lioness. Putting up a paw to motion a "shhh", she winked; telling it that she would not cause harm. The mouse squeaked a tiny "meep" and it was then Sarabi voiced her thought. "It's okay... I won't hurt you." Standing in a frightened quiver, it nodded slightly in acknowledgement. "Awww," she frowned not meaning to frighten the little creature. "You can go if you want." But it just stood there looking up; only blinking occasionally still afraid to move. Sarabi became frustrated with the creature and batted gently at the mouse with her paw. This only served to arouse him and he tore off in a screeching fit. A little worried she was and thought about going after him. But that came to a halt when she noticed the little creature peaking its head out from around the cover it had found, smiling; she then knew everything was alright and returned the grin before making her way out of the cave.

Outside, the queen stood on mount heights basking in the early morning sunlight allowing the cool morning breezes to flow through her fur. It was a beautiful morning, only if turned a bit sour by Mufasa's absence. But, even that couldn't bring down the magnificence of

the sun above enhanced by the clearest of skies - a pure color of blue that even Sarabi herself hadn't seen in ages. She watched the Pride lands dance through the wind and come alive at the touch of the light and warmth the sun brought, hoping this new awakening would bring in a catch that would feed the pride for at least the next few days.

Scar watched as Sarabi made her exit from within the den. By the expression on her face, he knew instantly she was not happy. Happy or unhappy, Scar had a duty to perform: to assume the throne. Under normal circumstances, he would have naturally done so in Mufasa's absence already; that is, if Mufasa were deceased - or declared missing. Yet, this instance had not occurred under normal circumstances. Abnormal as the situation entailed, the fact that Mufasa would not return had not been established. Mufasa had run off, Sarabi despised him, and he faced a pride of lionesses that did not trust him in the least. They didn't even want to be anywhere near him! For his plan to work, Scar must find a way to be accepted... or holding the crown would be pointless.

The key to his acceptance apparently resided with Sarabi. If the Queen would accept his kingship; then so would the rest of the pride. But convincing Sarabi would be a rather difficult task. She was not too fond of the black maned lion - sharing the same attitude as the other lionesses. Though with her he had some nasty leverage... the Scar. Though his wound bears the audacity of shame; the scar could possibly be the controlling factor determining who wins and who loses in the battle of supremacy. The trick? The trick would be to find a way to use the newfound affliction to the best of his abilities. Perhaps, the lion wondered, if the shame ran in both directions? And if it did, such order dictates that it would, the shame could be the best leverage yet! The consequences of the truth, for Sarabi, were much more profound - she could even be put to death for drawing the blood of a member of the royal family. "Yes," he hissed. "This is how it'll be done." The plan... was perfect.

Sitting now, Sarabi allowed the sunlight to caress her form; warming her all over. She watched over the lands of her pride with sorrow and determination. She couldn't rule it all alone; not now. Time would not allow for a weak soul or a weak mind. Time would only allow leadership; and quite frankly, Sarabi knew she wasn't up to par in leading the pride and that angered her. Mentioning Mufasa's name only enraged her more; cursing his cowardess for running away from his fears, and his problems - their problems. She was the Queen, was she not? Did she not accept partial ruling responsibilities? "Yes, I do." It wasn't like Mufasa to back away from a challenge - any challenge!

But, running away, where'd she get that? "How do I know he's not out there finding some way of getting us food. Or battling the hyenas... Or..." but they were all answers - excuses - for something she did not yet know. All she did know was that Mufasa was missing and hadn't returned from some venture the previous night. And though she was confident her answer was the correct one, there was still something that tore at her emotions. It was as if she was sensing something that just could not be. Something that was unlike--

Scar grinned and licked his lips as the Queenly form of Sarabi wandered closer and closer... into the jaws of the... "Ahem," the lion cleared his throat. The form jumped in fright and startle before turning to shoot a look back to see who had marked her for prey. "Oh, you... Scar."

"Yes... me," he grinned with eyes burning of passion and anger. "And we have something very important to discuss." Sarabi's whiskers drooped at the sounds of those words; knowing full well what they meant and what they would come to represent. Judgement Day had arrived. What would it be Scar asked for or of her? What cunning and evil thought was he thinking now? Through her rasp voice, the lioness made her best effort at a reply.

"And... what is that?"

"Tisk, tisk my Queen," Scar spoke. "How could you have forgotten... so quickly."

"Yes, well..." the feminine voice let out. "You're not all that hard to forget Scar. Not hard at all." That should get him, Sarabi thought. He was quite forgettable under normal conditions, but now? Now he might make it so no one could ever forget his name.

Scar growled slightly at the hate sensed behind the spoken words, "Let me irritate for you then: Let's see, mmmm... where to begin... oh yes. Mufasa is missing; the Pride without leadership; disaster ahead... ring any bells?"

"--The Pride has leadership!" Sarabi interrupted the lion before he could finish. "I am their Queen! That is why I am here - to lead them!--"

"No, my dear," he snarled for being interrupted. "You are not their leader. You are Queen for one reason and one reason only: To lead the hunting parties and to be the bearer of the king's cubs; not to mention moral support, love, and guidance. That is the context of your existence my dear."

Sarabi looked on in horror, "How dare you talk to me in this manner! My duties are much more than that. I am not a detachable thing or something you can just throw away. I am vital to the success of this Pride - as a good Queen should be!"

"Tisk, Tisk my dear..." Scar grinned and shook his head. "You really have *no* idea..."

"Ooof! I am the queen, I am entitled!"

Scar knew she was not. A Queen was just a mate of the king; but she was also a bit more than that - A Queen had her place. She was looked up to among the Pride... and annoying her was not what he wanted to do just now. There definitely would be plenty of time for that later. Sarabi would have to give into his pressures first; and agree that he was the best choice to succeed Mufasa as the next king. The way he saw it, it was the only way to secure the spot. "I realize that the Queen has her place... but the Pride must have a King in order to survive." Sarabi started to protest but the male continued. "Sss sss sss ss.. Go ask the elders Sarabi. They would agree with me."

"It's not that they wouldn't Scar... I *am* capable--"

"Oh," he interrupted again. "So you're going to romp off at all hours and defend the plains against the cheetah's or...." Scar had a hard time saying this..but, "Hyenas... hmm?" The lionesses sat in silence as the coolness of the breeze blew by. "Are you going to be able to lead an attack if one becomes necessary - and lead a hunt too? Kings and Queens have their places. You are a Queen - the Pride needs a King."

"I... I know. But Mufasa..."

"Mufasa is not here," Scar tried to comfort. "And we have no idea where he went or if he'll be back." Sarabi placed a paw over her eyes as she began to cry. "We need to move on and hope that he returns to us." He sat closer and placed his paw around the confines of the Queen while using the other paw to wipe away the stream of tears that begun to run down and matte her facial fur. "Shhh, we will get through this. We are strong. We will get through it together."

Sarabi began to realize, "And logically... you're the only male."

"Yes," Scar affirmed for her noting that his plan began to take shape.

She clung to Scar's fur like a frightened, beaten creature. Tears streamed from her swollen eyes as she could no longer bear all the emotions she held inside about Mufasa's absence and everything surrounding the oddity. He *was* gone; he hadn't come back last night - perhaps he would return in time. But for now, Taka was right: The Pride needed to go on... "What must I do?"

Scar grinned and licked his lips, "All I need from you dear, is your support. Tell the lionesses that I'm the best one for the job. You know.... to be King and so forth." He rubbed his paws up and down Sarabi's body, sensually massaging as best he could. At first the lioness purred at his touch, but then opened her eyes with a growl. "How dare you!" she spat. "How dare you try to coerce me in this manor!"

The lion was caught off guard by the first outburst which seemed to arouse the sleeping form of Zazu not far away; but recovered enough to give Sarabi a stern glare as she continued. "How dare you fondle me!" Scar growled back. "I will not help you!! You do not have my support! Mufasa *will* come back. You will *never* be king as long as I live!!!" Sarabi cast an awful glare at the black maned lion as she contemplated taking another swipe at those emerald green eyes before her.

"Oh you will help me Sarabi!" Scar replied in a yell as Sarabi protrusively shook her head violently. "Oh yes you will", he let out maneuvering his right paw towards his face while extending its claw to point towards the gash he now sported. "This says you will! So, I think you will my dear."

Sarabi almost began to cry once more as she followed the path of the paw to its destination. She held her composure enough to growl a reply. "Why, you are a despicable creature..."

"Don't growl at me Sarabi... I... am... the King."

The Queen growled even louder as Scar romped off away from her side and out of sight. She couldn't believe she'd been cleverly outmaneuvered. He used the one thing she was deathly afraid of... and most ashamed. That was an act which she would do almost anything to keep secret; and now desperately doing so. But at what cost? Her Freedom? Her dignity? Her love? Or her life? Breathing a sigh of relief that he had ridden himself from her presence; Sarabi got up on all fours and made her way back to the sleep chambers; hoping those lazy lionesses were up. Within an instant of coming to all fours she was instantly met with a fluttering mass of feathers - Zazu the Instigator.

"What was that all about, your highness," he bowed.

"And a good morning to you too Zazu..." she said a bit sharply.

He half laughed as his beak blossomed into many shades of pinks and reds. "Uh, heh heh. Sorry. Good morning."

"That's better," she smiled, but it still didn't take much of the edge off of Zazu. He was still intending on gathering the facts, and ask his question again. But before the bird could repeat himself, she answered for him. "That was nothing Zazu. Just a little talk."

"Beggon your pardon," he looked up. "That was a little more than just talk. What I saw was outrage."

Sarabi paced around not knowing what else to do. She couldn't tell Zazu; oh gods no - it would ruin her! Or worse, get her killed. And that would not do the Pride any good if she were dead. Scar would win by default then. "It is very complicated," she said at last. "And very personal."

He hummed with understanding and curiosity. "Too personal to tell me?" Sarabi nodded at Zazu. "Tell me Sarabi, it will make you feel better - to get it off your chest." Even with Zazu's encouragement, she paused; in an unknown state. "Tell me now before I beat it out of you!"

Now that would be a sight, she thought. A bird beating on a lion. She almost laughed at the gesture. But the bird wouldn't get anything out of this lioness. Not today; and not ever if she had her way. Though the hairs on the back of her neck raised slowly at the thought of one day having to come clean and face the consequences... "Perhaps one day Zazu." She knew today would not be that day. "One day."

Zazu was fuming as he stomped around in a charade. Spittle protruded from his beaks as he tried to form the words raging in his brain; unsuccessfully releasing them. Sarabi let out a laugh at the sight before her wiping some of the spittle from her nose. "Oh Zazu calm down. You don't have to know *everything*!"

"Yes I do!" he said at last. "I am the king's majordomo; it is my duty to know everything!"

Sarabi shrugged off the questioning stance of the hornbill and turned her attention to the noises of the sleeping lionesses. "I don't suppose they are awake yet?" Zazu noticed the abrupt change in topic and nodded as an answer.

"No... Sarafina is the only one stirring."

"Hmmm," she thought. "I hope she is alright."

Zazu nodded, "She is strong Sarabi; she will get through this."

"I certainly hope so," Sarabi said and glared at Sarafina with intent eyes.

Sarabi and Zazu stood outside the entrance to the den unnoticed. Their focus was not on each other; but on a mutual friend - Sarafina. As with the other lionesses, still asleep; Sarafina laid herself out in an awkward position - fighting to stay asleep for as long as she could. What turmoil she dreamt at night was known to her and her alone; but whatever was troubling the young lioness - it was turning a once bright, happy and energetic soul into a sad, angry and droopy shell. And it concerned the likes of the majordomo... and the Queen.

Sarafina was tired. Oh was she tired. She might be young but the emotional strain was wearing her out. The lioness had hardly been able to sleep the last couple nights; especially with her recent loss - the head of those troubles. Tough times were ahead, and the Pride would need

her guidance and her skills as a hunter. If her mood could be turned around, she could be a valuable helper to the Pride of lionesses. First, she'd have to be turned out from the black hole she has entered and return to the living to survive.

"Sarafina?" shot out of the breeze, startling the lioness. The voice, belonged to Sarabi there was no doubt of that. "How are we doing this morning?" Sarabi said, stopping beside her.

Sarafina thought she had also seen Mufasa walk in and craned to see; but she lost sight of him. He could sure brighten up one's day! "As good as can be expected. In light of our recent loss." Sarabi looked upon the younger one, the only one of her age, and smiled. She also knew the turmoil she was going through. Sarabi had lost someone dear to her once too, as did most of the lionesses of the Pride. But they moved on too, as Sarafina must also. "I see you have your hands full."

Sarabi nodded. "There is a lot I have to sort out friend. Until then... I don't know." A smile crept up out from under Sarafina's lips. The first genuine smile in a long time. "But I'll be quite alright. Things happen; life must go on." Sarabi nodded and looked as if she were about sneeze. "I can't sleep the day away now can I?"

Sarabi sported a wry smile on her face and answered her friend, "Afraid not. We lionesses have to hunt! Are you ready?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Sarafina, awakening Isha. Malaika, who was startled by the sudden outburst, frowned at the lioness who only smiled back and shrugged. As for Kolo? She was probably just as lazy as herself and didn't take kindly to being waken up. So, Malaika took the liberty of teasing the grumpy lioness by pawing at her.

"When do we leave?" asked of Sarabi.

"As soon as I get all the Lionesses up," a smile spread across her beautiful facial features. She too shared the same sentiment as Sarafina. Though, looking at the disarray of the resting lioness; her pride was lazy alright. There was no doubt about that!

Scar listened outside as Sarabi tended to the lionesses; trying to get them up and ready for the hunt. He liked it best this time of morning. It was still cool, but the sun was up, and everything just seemed to feel right. From his surveys last night, the Pride lands were in pretty good shape. He didn't see many animals, but he knew there wouldn't be any out since it was in the dead of night; the time where no one came out. Of course, it was all a cover to go and visit his Hyena friends; still, as the new king he would need to perform these duties anyway. He didn't mind though because it gave him a chance to get away from the pressures and walk amongst the real nature of the Pride lands - where the beauty lay.

The bird had finally decided to pay Scar a visit after witnessing the argument between he and Sarabi; only, he found the conversation less than stimulating. "What a beautiful day it is Scar," he said trying to drum up some kind of dialog.

"Huh?" Scar said at first, "Oh, yes. It is," realizing what was said, "a very nice day." Zazu grunted; but when he did not continue, Scar annoyingly asked : "Is there something you want?"

"No," Zazu nodded. "Not particularly."

Scar thought about something for a minute then realized that Zazu hadn't delivered a morning report! "Zazu!"

"Yes Taka?" he perched upon his shoulder.

"Do you have a morning report?" he asked of the bird before grating at him sideglance "Get off my shoulder!"

Feathers flew as Zazu sprang off his perch and fluttered in the air. "Scar.. I, uh. NO! I forgot!" he apologized.

"You of all people forgot?" Scar narrowed his eyes in aggravation.

"I overslept," Zazu replied in awe. He never overslept. NEVER! "I'll get right on it!"

"See that you do," he ordered. Even if he wasn't officially king yet, he liked the role of the overseer...

Scar laid a paw on his forehead shaking his head back and forth. "Incompetence... I'm surrounded by incompetence!" He looked up once more to see Zazu, Mufasa's majordomo flying off to gather insight for his report. Zazu had to be the most serious of all hornbills he'd seen. A sign of a true loyal subject -one who would be beneficial to the Pride if he can be trusted. Zazu too would be hard to convert from Mufasa's rule to his but there was one thing to being a majordomo: If you wanted the job you had to serve the current king no matter what the cost. Grinning a toothy grin, Scar eyed the sun and sprawled out under it. He so loved picking on Zazu... besides, the lionesses would be leaving soon and it would bring about some much needed time alone.

* * *

Khulo awoke instantly upon hearing Kichasi's voice waver throughout the cavern walls in which they had all stayed for the night. The young female cheetah was already up and at 'em and obviously had been for some time. Khulo could only guess as to why she'd gotten up so early - it wasn't as if they had some place to be. Instead, he tried to ignore the outburst the best he could and rolled over in protest, to continue the delicious imagery of his dreams.

"Lazy bums," Kichasi cursed. "Get your hides up this very instant!" She was mad as... well, she was very angry. It was mid morning already and time was a wastin'. The lions probably had a good head start on hunting by now already having the upper paw by stealing today's catch. It wasn't as if she were mad at the lions as she was at her own race. Was there one of her own in particular she was angry with? Oh, yes... and he was supposed to be the leader of this group.

"Some leader," she thought. "No leader would allow his pack to miss out on such an opportunity as we have this morning. No leader would be so lazy as to sleep every chance and opportunity away." A lazy, useless creature; that's what Khulo was - utterly and extremely useless. What leadership ability her uncle Mng'ariza saw in Khulo was beyond her. For Kichasi, a leader was strong, informed, enthused and focused. Khulo wasn't any of these. He hardly seemed interested at all about solving their problems. "That's where I come in," she whispered aloud. "I *am* strong. I *am* concerned. I *am* focused. I *am* interested. I should be leader."

Yes, Kichasi reasoned. She should be the one calling the shots, not Khulo. But how? How would she convince the others to follow her instead? How would she accomplish her goals if they didn't follow her... Hmm... Though a simple accident would be too suspicious - she ruled that out right away. But a humiliation or confusion amongst the ranks - that would most certainly be prominent enough to escalate her to the top.

"Hey!" she yelled again. "I said get up!"

"Put a paw in it girl!" Tambulo cried from his sleep. "We're trying to get some sleep here!"

"I can see that you idiot," Kichasi said while kicking the side of the male who chastised her. Quickly he jumped up; claws in plain view and teeth bare.

"Don't test my patience with you Kichasi...."

"Or What?"

Tambulo grunted in disgust, "Or I'll attack you where you stand." There was one thing he didn't enjoy and that was being kicked around. The second was being rudely awakened but that can be excused at certain moments. But this! No... Mng'ariza would never initially kick around his own members. And it was he and only he who could keep Kichasi in line... but now? Now she was a terrible handful - getting out of control very quickly. It wasn't Tambulo's place to say anything about it; but he wouldn't allow himself to take any punishment or abuse from her. Not from that girl.

"Hey!" a voice yelled from ahead. "Stop this display this very instant!" The orders came from Khulo himself, angrily aware of what was about to happen. "Now cool it!" It would suit him just fine to see Kichasi take a few hits from Tambulo; but it wouldn't be right, nor would it serve a purpose. At least any kind that Kichasi would understand. She'd been a real handful since he became her guardian upon Mng'ariza's untimely demise. Khulo thought if he let the two fight it out it would teach her a thing or two and exhaust her enough to curve that attitude back. No, as a good leader he could not allow internal squabbles to develop and continue despite their apparent necessity.

"Now just what in tail kinkers is going on here?"

They both spoke at once; one trying to out due the other. Eventually the two got so loud that they woke the entire clan of cheetahs before Khulo could silence them both. "Just one minute here... one at a time. Oy!" And he then motioned to Tambulo to take his turn first... at the behest of Kichasi. "Alright, tell me what happened."

"She kicked me!" Tambulo exerted. "Just because I didn't feel like getting up by her whims! The bitch kicked me!!" The cheetah was turning redder by the second; becoming angrier and angrier at the female who attacked him. *How dare she do that! Who does she think she is? Spoiled brat!*

After hearing Tambulo's side of the story, he turned immediately to the accused who was in a stance of utter annoyance. "Well, Kichasi? Aren't you gonna say something?"

"Forget it," she shrugged. "Why should I? You're not going to believe my motives anyway. Nor would you care to hear them."

"Why wouldn't I care to listen to you Kichasi? You *are* a member of this clan and are under *my* leadership." Khulo shot back but she ignored him. "Oh you are a stuck up bitch Kichasi...and as stubborn as an elephant!"

"You bet your spots I am!" she said at last. "Never mind that I'm the only creature that seems to not have forgotten our purpose out here in the first place."

"We're here," Tshatshi said, "because Mng'ariza failed. Because he promised something he could not give. That is why we are here little one."

"That is a lie!" shouted Kichasi.

"Is it..." he shot back.

Khulo offered a paw in between, "Whoa...whoa..." Tensions were definitely running high... morale falling. And all this because a bold vision of a promised land was shattered and lost in a fierce battle. But it wasn't anyone's fault; certainly not Mng'ariza's. Nor was it his fault - he wasn't in control then. It was no one's fault...maybe that was what was so hard to fathom for someone wanting so badly to assign blame.

"Look, no one is at fault here... we gambled and lost. Now it's time to go home."

"We can't go home," Bhutai entered. "There is no reason to believe there is even a home left to go back to!"

Everyone else awake grumbled in agreeance. "Then what would you like us to do; stay in this cave for the rest of our lives?"

"Well, no Khulo..." Tshatshi replied back. "But we can't go back..."

Everyone in the cavern nodded; including Kichasi. They were marooned out amongst the savanna now. Their home; a possible disaster area. The Pride lands were lush and green - they would retain their growth throughout this drought. This is why the Cheetah's must retain it. If they can't find a place soon; they'll starve...and die. And now, through all the commotion; Khulo forgot to ask why it was Kichasi wanted everyone up so early. He let out a sigh, and began, "So, why was it you wanted us up so early?"

"Because! It's morning and that means we hunt! Stripes beware we must hunt!" Kichasi exploded in words she'd been waiting to express; but in the end couldn't get any of them to come out. "You just don't realize the importance do you..." Khulo shook his head. "The lions! We have to get to the herds before the lions!"

"Kichasi... look around," he quieted his voice. "There are no herds... anywhere."

"We'll we're definitely not going to find them here!"

"She's right Khulo," Bhutai offered. "We do need to find food.... something - anything"

Khulo hated to admit it; but the girl was right. By sleeping in they did almost forfeit any kind of catch for today and they so desperately needed food. "Perhaps she is more right than I know. Maybe I can't lead this clan. No," he said at last. He was the First Lieutenant here; the next in command. "I didn't get here by not knowing what to do."

"Alright everyone," he mouthed at last grabbing everyone's attention. "Lets go hunt us some zebra." He smiled as they all erupted into a cheer. It was good to hear. Perhaps they could put their anger aside for a while and concentrate on something worth while. One could only hope...

* * *

Sarabi was a bit disappointed that Mufasa couldn't go on today's hunt but she hoped he would be around for company later. Even if that was a far reaching concept. And Sarabi knew that her love would probably not be there when she returned - though there was always hope. Turning to the pair Malaika and Kolo, who were gossiping about who knew what, she asked, "Are you all just about ready?"

"For what?" Sarafina replied for them.

"For the hunt!" her voice thundered.

"Oh," she smiled. "Does this mean we're gonna have to get her up?" Sarafina pointed to Kolo.

Sarabi chuckled and nodded. That's exactly what it would mean. "We're ready as soon as we get Kolo up." Sarafina added. "They've managed to rally everyone else, but her." Sarabi looked at Malaika and Ishsana who, with Isha, were still trying to get Kolo up, and sported an evil grin. Sarafina too started a grin when she saw the look on Sarabi's face.. "What are you--"

"Shhh," the Queen whispered as she tiptoed up to the sleeping lioness. Sarabi had something up her sleeve and she wasn't about to share it just yet. Creeping along, as she did, aroused the others suspicions and soon gleeful expressions were abundant. Kolo, unfortunately, was unaware what was about to transpire - she was still fast asleep and totally content in the dream world in motion. Once Sarabi was into position, she sat back on her haunches and let out the loudest roar she could. A roar so powerful the echoes off the walls penetrated the fur of the lion and vibrated her soul; awakening her with a start. It had the desired effect on Kolo because she shot right off the floor into a stance of bewilderment with that "no, you just didn't do that" look about her. Her look of tired annoyance turned to a goofy grin when she eyed the Queen patiently sitting in front of her.

"I take it you're up now?" she said playfully, her voice still echoing off the walls muttered with the giggles of the rest of the pride. Kolo bowed ever so slightly blushing at the incident. She didn't quite expect that kind of alarm but she was awake now - no doubts. Sarabi addressed her hunting party before she turned and trotted off, "I'll wait outside."

"Alright, let's get going!" Malaika announced and followed the Queen out of the chambers followed by five other lionesses.

Scar watched with perverted satisfaction as; one by one, the lionesses of the pride filed out of the den and into the surrounding world of the Pride lands. The dark maned lion's mouth watered in sinful delight as the sunlight glistened off the soft furs below. Shaking his head with a chuckle he muttered, "Make me proud...." as he took in the majestic sights from above.

"Proud? You?" Ng'ara replied searching for the exact location of the voice. "Why should we make *you* proud?"

"Because, my dear," he looked straight down into the lionesses eyes affixing his gaze.
"I'm your ki--"

"Come on," Sarabi interrupted and ordered; motioning to Ng'ara. "We have work to do." The stern tone of her voice betrayed her feelings of irritation towards the king's brother and he knew it. Ng'ara hunched as she turned away from the lion above and his blaring emerald eyes to follow Sarabi.

"Just who does he think he is anyway?" Isha remarked in disgust. Taka above just chuckled lightly and slinked off - introducing the pride to a new concept.

"I dunno...." Sarafina offered, "I think he believes himself as the king of our pride. Maybe he is now. Who knows..."

"Oh Gag!" Malaika exclaimed in offence while Sarabi held her line; retreating. It would not be easy to accept Scar as their king. But, if it did come to that; Sarabi knew she would be right in the middle of it all - thanks to him. She would probably be forced to be the go between - the ambassador between he and the lionesses. A position she did not want to be in. But, what if it did come to that... what if it did come to a choice where Scar would be king - oh gods; what if it did?!

Ng'ara, Kolo, Malaika and Sarafina set out and brought up the rear of the pack as all were in good spirits. Today they were determined to bring down a zebra, wildebeest or antelope - some kind of wildlife! Kolo and Malaika; displeased with the silence began singing a verse of their favorite hunting tune: "A hunting we will go, a hunting we will go. Hi ho the merry-o, a hunting we will go." Sarafina and Ng'ara let out a giggle as the two crazies bounced around while they continued their verses.

The Pride

Chapter Fourteen

The night had been a rough one for Mufasa. Tormented by lucid dreams of his past, present and future; the broken lion laid amongst the grasses surrounding a familiar baobab tree. Everything was still and quiet as it usually is this time of the morning. Secluded as the sole tree was out in the Savanna, Mufasa knew he could count on privacy here - not even the birds would bother him here. With a sigh, he rolled over and looked out through the various foot paths that lead in all directions from his vicinity for some sign of activity.

The lion looked to and fro for some indication of life but was offered no clues. Only if Mufasa had looked up against the trunk of the tree would he find some movement. On a branch alone, stood a wide eyed mandrill whose eyes were fixed gazing down at the lion; who appeared to be leaned against his tree. Bewilderment crossed his features and the creature swept his elongated hand across his eyes, as the early morning drearies were fighting to keep ahold of him. Rafiki stood there in silence, scratching his head for a moment before jumping off the branch and swinging into the innards of his tree.

Once inside the cavity in which he resided, Rafiki quickly located and grabbed up his staff and hi-tailed his way back up. Something was wrong, he thought, and he needed to know just what was going on. Mufasa was sleeping at the base of his tree, that was peculiar enough! As he passed one branch after another, the wise mandrill caught glimpse of a painting he'd finished up the previous night and stopped to take a quick look. Suddenly it all became clearer. "Yeeees," he whispered. "I see et now." Quickening the pace, Rafiki used his staff as a catapult - grabbing higher and higher branches as he leapt up. When he reached the top, the leaves parted to wash his body with glaring morning sunbeams and by holding his furred hands out in reflex, he was able to shield out the blinding light. The only thing left to burn into his eyes was the image of his painting. If Mufasa was doing what the image had suggested; last night was just a waste.

Grumbling as he swung, Rafiki transported himself from the haven he resided and plummeted to the ground below with a thud. Dust kicked up from the dry moisture less soil causing a small cloud to plume. Just then, a slight breeze picked up the suspension and carried it in the direction of the lion in slumber. Rafiki chuckled to himself as both feet were firmly planted on the ground now and he watched the scene unfold before him. By all means Mufasa should have noticed his presence right away. Either he could not detect the mandrill, or for some reason Mufasa chose not to acknowledge him. Either way, this was going to be the first time in a long time that the Mandrill was able to sneak up on the King - ever since he was a cub! And he certainly wasn't going to lose the opportunity now. All questions aside, Rafiki still had to have his fun with the king. So, he began to tiptoe over when a roar of a sneeze spewed from the lion rousing a grumble out of him.

Rafiki stood fast watching Mufasa as he barely moved. The element of surprise was lost now, but perhaps something could be salvaged out of it. Rafiki spoke for the first time, "Well, what are you doin' heah?" the elder breathed and full silence fell again awaiting a reaction.

The Lion jumped up with a start at the voice he heard, and turned to face his attacker. Despite being surprised, tired and weary; Mufasa was now ready to fight whatever beast had come to kill him. He began to breathe heavily with his claws extended awaiting to slash at an approaching figure. Yet, the mean tones quickly turned unreadable as Mufasa eyed the one creature who had startled him. Immediately; instant recognition washed over his being and it stammered the lion, "Why, um... Rafiki... I... Um..."

"Didn't take my advice... and ran away..." Rafiki shook his head disappointingly. Mufasa slowly nodded back in return. Of all the things an emerging King did - this was most irregular. A good king doesn't run from his pride or from the troubles he inherited; A good king embraces the challenge and fights to make things better. This was definitely not the Mufasa the wise monkey had come to know. "Did nothing of last night help you at all?"

"Yes..." he lied, "It helped a lot." The mandrill looked through the slits in his eyes. "Well, no." Mufasa admitted at last.

"Why do you tink dat?"

The lion frowned and turned his gaze to a flickering blade of grass. Mufasa stared as the wind broke the stamina of the blade; watching as it bent over. He too was bending and breaking - but it wasn't the winds behind it. The problem wasn't as simple as the breeze... only if it were. Only if one could hide behind a tree long enough until the troubles passed. Isn't that what cowards do? Hide? *I am a coward*, Mufasa labeled himself. *Look at me. I'm hiding behind Rafiki's tree!*

"I am no king, Rafiki." Mufasa said at last though still intently focused on the blade of grass. "I can not handle the pressures of the title."

"Nonsense!" the mandrill jumped in the air. "You are the perfect--"

"No," the lion cut him off. "I am not. What you said to me last night made some sense; however, there are too many problems to solve - far too many for me to handle. Or would even care..."

"Bah!" Rafiki shouted and watched innocently as a couple tick birds ascended from the ground in a scurried fit - startled by the sudden outburst. "Et's easy muh friend. Would you like to know da secret?"

Mufasa nodded and stepped one step closer to the mandrill under Rafiki's direction. The monkey cusped his hand over the ear of the king and parted his lips gently... "You take et one at a time."

Mufasa's eyes widened then narrowed in stern annoyance. "Why can't you just accept the fact that I've left... for good."

"'cause," the mandril replied. "You are the rightful king."

"Puh..."

"Okay den; if you don't want to go back for yourself; how about for your mate -Sarabi?"

Mufasa looked up quickly at the mention of her name. Oh, Sarabi - her supple golden fur soft to the touch; how he now longed for her. "What about Sarabi?"

"Do you not love her?"

"Why of course I love her," Mufasa shot back wrinkling up his nose slightly.

"Then why did you leave her alone last night?"

Mufasa was stopped cold. He thought he knew where this line of questioning was going until Rafiki breathed those last words. Damn him! Damn him for dragging his beloved into this. He did so love Sarabi with all his heart - but there was more to running a kingdom than loving a mate. The problems were too overwhelming! Just too overwhelming! "I love Sarabi, Rafiki. You know that. I wouldn't do anything to harm her."

"Et's too late fer dat... you've already hurt her."

"I have?!" the lion questioned. "How's that exactly?"

Ahh, Rafiki thought. He got him. Finally some line of reason he would listen too. If the stubborn lion wouldn't listen to the reasons of duty for his return, perhaps he'd listen to the reasons behind love. "Yes... you've left her alone Mufasa. She loves you and she misses you."

"She does?"

"Of course she does... What would make you think that she doesn't?"

That was a very good question. Mufasa sighed and looked up to the clouds that were starting to form overhead. He searched the cotton forms for clues to the answers of his questions and inhibitions he had. There, he found none and turned to the familiarity of the Mandrill before him, "I don't know. Because I've hurt her. You said it yourself," he lifted his paw in suggestion, "that I've hurt her... If I have, then how can she continue to love me?"

Rafiki chuckled, "Mufasa.... she doesn't understand your dilemma; does she?"

The king shook his head, "No... she doesn't."

"Why?"

"Because," he said looking at the clouds again. "She wouldn't understand."

"Bah, I think we've been through this already." The wise shamen stood leaning across his staff hoping the lion would come to his senses; but when Mufasa kept staring at the sky, Rafiki knew it would not be today. There was still plenty of work to be done to reiterate the position of kingdom.

As he continued to watch the lion gaze up a smirk advanced across his features. An idea, he had an idea! "Mufasa..."

"Hmmm?"

"Sarabi still loves you; she is just as confused as you are."

Mufasa took a couple steps closer and placed his eyes directly on the pupils of the monkey. "How do you know this?" Mufasa's tail flickered in anticipation; hanging on the words to be.

"Because she is your mate," He saw Mufasa start to slump. "C'mon. I have a smashing idea."

"That is?" the lion replied with a sigh.

The Mandrill grinned and waved with his hand, "Oh, you'll love it." Rafiki said, continuing the motioning gesture to Mufasa with his padded hand; however, the lion reluctantly stood his ground.

Rafiki hunched and threw his hand back at the lion in frustration. "Fine, you stay heah and look for tings in da clouds. Hope you have fun; I on da otter hand have tings to do." Mufasa offered no resistance nor did he comment on anything the mandrill had said. "You know," the shamen looked back, "When I git back, you and I are goin'... hey! Are you listnin' to me?" There was no reply; only the shallow hails of the morning breeze rustling the leaves overhead, and the occasional chirp from the feathered inhabitants above. "Oy..." he sighed as he took to his staff and hobbled off. The lion was in trouble, and more so was the Pride. Rafiki had to do something - and fast! If Rafiki read and understood everything correctly, in its present condition, the pride wouldn't last long without its King. Surely, someone would come by and try and force their way onto the Pride Lands. And to think without a king to protect the pride or the lands they resided upon could be an invite for disastrous consequences.

* * *

The mid morning sun was warm against the follicles of the Queen's fur; opening her soul to welcome the majestic warmth. Compared with the previous night, the heat was a blessing to soothe the savage beast. It had filled a void of warmth that she hadn't felt all night. Yet it was still cool enough out to call any of the creatures from their slumber and into a feeding frenzy; where the lions would be ready to pounce and finally get a meal. It was fortunate the Pride hadn't left too late to embark on this hunt. Their only savior was the fact that the sun hadn't reached its peak in the skies yet. But when that happened - the fireball would be directly overhead - the hottest part of the day would begin. The event would chase away even the most determined of creatures back into hiding. Before this happened Sarabi knew they had to act soon.

Usually, all creatures would hear the call of the morning sun; peak their heads out and perhaps heed the invitation to feed. Currently, the hunting party hadn't seen any such stirrings... yet. "That's not true," Sarabi thought. There was the ever active Gopher Underground. One gopher - maybe two they had seen. Neither worth the energy of pursuit. "Gophers, yuuuck!" Gophers were not the animal of choice for the lions. Even if they were on the select menu; the two gophers they ran across wouldn't be enough to satisfy a pack of hungry lions! They would serve as appetizers only, a teaser of what yet was to come. And the Pride couldn't eat them! Where would Zazu get all his underground information from?

Sarabi grinned and let out a brief laugh as her thoughts wandered to the hornbill. *What was the world coming to?* she thought to herself, *Zazu oversleeping?* She smiled inwardly as she could only visualize what the majordomo must be going through right now to gather the facts for the morning report. The poor bird was probably fluttering to and fro in a frantic fit trying not to disappoint his master... only if his master were present. Today, she'd be the one getting the morning report - if Scar didn't demand it out of Zazu first.

Zazu was a crafty fellow though, and didn't trust the likes of Scar any more than the rest of the Pride and he knew his job well. The hornbill had served Mufasa's father as his kind served the Pride for countless generations of kings. They had earned a spot in the Circle of Life at the

side of the great Lion Kings. Zazu deserved no less honor. Though sometimes Mufasa had the nerve to replace the bird, he hadn't. And while he could be way too serious at times, he could also be quite humorous. And at these times, the Pride needed some humor to relax them. The pride had suffered a lot of losses and if they continued to walk down the path they had chosen; they were going to require a lot of humor and a lot of guidance. Zazu had that guidance. He knew the lands; he knew the animals. Basically, life wouldn't be the same without the hornbill. Besides, it wouldn't be right or proper to get rid of him now.

What was proper anyway? Sarabi wandered through her thoughts. Was Mufasa really gone? Could he not make the decisions? And now, will Scar become the king of the Pride lands? "No!" She quickly let out. "That lion will *never* be king as long as I live." And Scar; all he wanted was to be crowned, nothing more. There was much more to being a king than getting your way all the time. Mufasa said that many times. There was a responsibility to be had; a responsibility to protect not only the lionesses of the pride but also the lands themselves. It was the king's duty to see the Pride lands prosper, to remain in the pride's hands and one day leave the kingdom a new prince. Scar could not provide for any of those. He was too interested in being recognized for his deeds than caring about the life of the lionesses - and Sarabi was sure as the Kings above that Scar would *never* be her mate - *EVER*.

A prince. The word seemed to echo all around the conscious world of the Queen as she pondered the word. Surely there would be a new prince one day. It seemed only a twinkle in her eye; but now... now it was a reality. Now she had a mate... and a new responsibility. She frowned; not wanting to think of the pain and sorrow her thoughts brought. Right now, she was obligated to command and concentrate on the hunt at hand. There would be no more discussions of Scar and mating... as far as she was concerned, the two subjects did not mix!

The lionesses of the pride had walked along the grass wilderness of the Pride lands away from Pride Rock, and away from Scar. The scent in the open air was refreshing and somewhat cooler here than at their home. Breezes were in season this morn which was unusual for this time of day but it kept the plains cooler than normal. Unfortunately with all the breezes its coolness couldn't entice any creatures; and the endless hour of searching the hunting party turned up empty pawed. There wasn't a soul or a morsel of food to be found anywhere "I don't know Mufasa," Sarabi almost let out but quickly corrected herself. "I can't believe this Malaika..." She let out a sigh as the sentence was left trailing off. "I haven't seen a thing."

Malaika watched Sarabi's ear twitch with a tickle as a light gust walked up... "I know," she growled, obviously aware of the lack of herds. "They just have to be around here somewhere? Sarabi?"

Sarabi closed her eyes and willed all the questions and worries that were surfacing within her. She had to hold on... the feel of her fur lightly whisking in the breeze, was enough to call her back to reality. It did no good to worry about the things she could not change. Mufasa was changing; perhaps for the better. Yet, Sarabi felt resentment towards the lion who didn't care to share his feelings with her. Maybe that was what erked her the most... that he may be gone without sharing the reasons why... "Follow me," she said at last. "You all must be parched."

The queen received nods in return from just about every lioness in the Pride. They'd been walking for quite some time and a nice cool drink may actually serve to lift their spirits. "Alright, follow me." Sarabi trotted off through the parting grasses towards a place no one knew about. It was a nearby pond; a place Mufasa would take her for their getaways. Now, she figured, it would be a nice place to rest and collect until the next stretch of the hunt was begun.

The pond was about the best thing the Lionesses had seen all morning. Able to quench their thirst for the first time today, the luring of the water was too overwhelming. As protocol allowed, the royalties must go first, then followed by the other members of the group. This time however, protocol would be denounced and she allowed the others the chance at first drink. They were stunned, but grateful. And very parched! They began lapping up as much as they could!

Sarabi turned and sat upon the grasses tending to a splinter buried somewhere within her paw. She was unsure just where the splinter lay or where she even picked it up; but her right forepaw had been throbbing all morn! It felt like a whole herd of elephants had invaded the sensitive areas of her underfoot. Walking on it only made it worse; and if the hunt was to continue without distraction - it would have to be removed now! As she extended her tongue to massage the intruder away something caught the attention of her senses. Not a scent per say; but it was something out of the ordinary. Call it intuition - a feeling. Call it anything, but whatever she sensed disturbed her. Eyes... YES! Eyes... she felt eyes burning into her flesh - intent to watch every motion...

And then it was gone. Sarabi looked up in alarm but found no clue to her feeling. A few feet away denoted the lionesses indulging themselves in the cool, crisp liquids of the water. Still she felt a chill - a feeling that wasn't easily explained. "Calm down girl..." she said. "Get a hold of yourself."

"What's the matter Sarabi?" Malaika uttered.

The lioness perked up after hearing her name and immediately grunted through her teeth in an attempt to grasp a hold of the intruding form between her paws, "I've got something - *stuck* - in my paw. And it's killing me!!!"

"Do you want us to help?" Sarafina inquired, running over.

Sarabi sat back for a minute to rest herself a minute; needing the time to regroup in preparation for another assault. "Thanks, " she smiled, "but I think I got it this time." Malaika, Kolo and Sarafina had returned the smile, but made no move to leave her side. The trio intended to help the Queen whether she needed it or not. Sarabi was all they had right now... and they would give her all the help she needed. So, they sat intently watching their Queen battle it out with a splinter.

"Any bets?" Malaika let out.

"Bets? To what?" Sarafina asked.

"On how long it takes her..."

Sarabi chuckled, "Alright.. Alright; enough from the peanut gallery." The lioness chuckled as they looked upon the struggling before them as Sarabi tried and tried to extricate the sliver. After a few minutes of grunting, licking and growling; Sarabi managed to remove the invader. All eyes were on the item as she withdrew it from her forepaw - the sight of it capturing wincing from the onlookers. The item was about an inch long and the others knew there had to be immense pain involved. The queen sighed as the stress relieved itself when the fragment was finally removed from her flesh. "Are you alright Sarabi?" Sarafina asked.

She looked up from the paw she'd set out to lick clean saying "Oh, I'm fine. I'll be just fine. Time will heal it." Sarabi nodded to herself. "Time."

"Sorry?" Sarafina inquired, but was shrugged off with a smile.

"It is about time that we move on," the lead huntress said trying to cover her slip up. Unaware as she was to her words; Sarabi almost worked herself into a paranoia fit over what else she might have said. But that too became subdued as the lionesses rose from their rest and limbered up.

The facts still remained. Mufasa was gone; Scar was on a power trip and for her? She was caught between Pride Rock and a hard place. In her heart she knew Mufasa would return to her, but in her brain she also knew that if he didn't there would need to be a male leader for the Pride. Scar was not the best choice, but there could be worse candidates. And without some protective presence in place; the Pride might fall victim to an unwanted predator - the cheetah's or hyena's perhaps. Not only would their lives be forfeited; but their lands too. The future looked pretty grim from Sarabi's point of view.

And what of the future? What would happen to Pride Land history if Mufasa did not return. And, and... and... Ha! She laughed at herself, her mind racing. "Calm down Sarabi, you don't know what will happen yet." She laughed aloud once more realizing she'd slipped up once again. Her realization came to her attention when Malaika, Isha and Ng'ara snapped their necks back in her direction. Sarafina was not generally concerned. "What do you mean? What has happened?"

Sarabi smiled to them reassuringly and turned to her approaching friend, "Oh silly me. Nothing has happened..." Yet, she thought. "Just letting my imagination run away with itself."

"It's about Mufasa...isn't it?"

She nodded hesitantly.

"Everything will work out," Sarafina comforted while raising her paw for support. "You'll see. Everything always works out - trust me!"

Sarabi sat back for an instant watching her friend while allowing the cool breeze and hot sun blaze upon her wound. The two forces of nature caressed the detached flesh soothing her paw. A thought of actually bathing her appendage in the spring almost got her to rise; but she quickly thought better of it. The others were there... and she would only be faced with questions she was not prepared to answer. At least; not at this present time.

Closing her eyes as tightly as she could; she willed away all the tensions housed in the mighty muscles of the body and focused only on her daily duties. This morning there was a hunt; successful or unsuccessful. This afternoon? It all depended on Scar and how he decided to

handle his new found agenda. The others would not handle his kingship in a generous light. Mufasa was the rightful king; but has decided to denounce his throne leaving Scar to usurp it. Sarabi shook her head, "What is my life coming to?"

A pair of eyes watched the lions at rest with intent. The surveyors watch as the lionesses have their normal fun of romping through the grasses and enjoying the cool drink from a spring water pond. Yet, as the eyes of the watcher roamed the plains; they stuck onto the golden fur coat of a lioness he knew as Sarafina - a beneficial member of the pride. Her immediate contribution would be her hunting skills but in the future? For future's sake she would provide the means for the next queen of the pride lands. A very special commodity indeed; a lioness that bared close watching.

The eyes then turned their gaze upon the form of Sarabi. Gleaming, those eyes did at the sight of the Queen; she was as beautiful as a Serengeti sunrise and as loving and caring to her mate - only he was missing from the picture and he could tell almost instantly the effect it was having upon her state of mind. Sarabi looked withdrawn, tired, and misguided. When together, Mufasa and Sarabi were the pinnacle of the pride; working together to perpetuate the vision of the past leaders and the prosperity of the Pride lands.

Turmoil was all the mandrill witnessed now. Mufasa had run away from his responsibilities leaving a dejected Queen alone in an air of uncertainty. She alone was *the* center place of the Pride; the utmost key member! Calmness must be restored; Mufasa must return home if not for himself, but for her - and the future! Rafiki had to make quick work, if this was left unchecked for too long it could explode into an odious affair. Which was the one thing the shamen wanted the least. The eyes winked shut and vanished without a trace. Rafiki had seen enough of the devastation. Soon he'd consort the winds for his answers and contemplate the information sensed on his journey. All hopefully leading to a glorious future by returning Mufasa to his rightful place within the Circle of Life.

* * *

Khulo watched with oblique satisfaction as he and his clan approached the lion's hunting party. He liked the sound of that... *his* clan. It was his clan, he decided, while peering out over to the lionesses. They were at rest now, but Khulo wondered if these hunting lionesses had stumbled across something edible - or if they were just resting because their searches so far had turned sour. He turned at the rustle of the grasses behind him and found Kichasi was walking up beside him, trying to peer through the same small opening in the bushes as her superior. "What's going on!" she demanded of him, nosing in further.

"Shhh!" he slapped her up side the head with a paw. "Do you want *them* to hear us?" Kichasi loudly growled back for the strike she got but took no further action. As annoyed as she was, she let it slide - this once and only once would she tolerate it. Instead, she bowed out and slipped behind him and looked out over the horizon. She was wrong for speaking out - and she knew it. But curiosity had pulled on Kichasi's tail and she wanted to see what was out there with her own eyes, not some account by Khulo. A good leader must witness things for herself. If she

was to be leader, she'd have to take the initiative and do things for her. She would have to stay informed no matter what the cost. For now, the punishment would be taken and time would go on. But, Khulo would pay dearly for it eventually.

"They're just sitting there..." Khulo breathed out silently. "Resting perhaps."

"Do they look contented?" asked Tambulo back.

"Yes and no... but-"

"But what?" Tam asked again.

Tshatsi peered around the backside of Tam and echoed, "What?"

But where was their male... Muf... Mus? Mustafa? No.. Mufasa! *Where was their King Mufasa?* Shouldn't he be out here with a helping paw? *This is a very serious problem*, he thought. And quite awkward. "If the Pride Lands are as devastated as our plains are - why isn't their king helping as much as possible?" Not believing it, he shook his head from side to side and began thinking. *Did I just say that aloud just now?* But he had, and it caught the attention of Kichasi; way too late to retract his statement now.

The lone female's ears perked up immediately and she shoved her snout once again through the confines of the thorny bush to take a gander for herself. Sure, enough, with a quick glance around, there was no sign of the male lion. Quite interesting indeed. "Hmmm..." the cheetah offered and turned back to the others. "He's right, the King of the Pride Lands is not there." A look of bewilderment was abound as her brain fought long and hard to rationalize the absence.

"It is not uncommon Kichasi..." Bhutai offered. "Most kings don't go hunting with their lionesses."

"But with the conditions--"

Bhutai frowned, "Yes, with the conditions-he should be there, but that doesn't mean he has to be. Perhaps you're overlooking him?" A snort followed, "He's there... somewhere."

"No." Khulo shook his head. "I don't know." The leader turned from the lions with a look of confusion on his brow. "I don't sense him."

"Sense him?" the female shot back sitting on her haunches with a frown upon her questioning lips. "What are you, a psychic?"

"No," he offered. "But look at the them Kichasi. Do they look happy? Do they look in control?" She just stared back blankly. "You're a fool Kichasi. You think you want the leadership; you want it so bad but you don't have the skills!"

"Bah!" she growled in shock. "This is neither the time nor the place..." Whoa, it hadn't appeared to her that Khulo was aware that much of her distaste with his rule. And Kichasi was genuinely astounded by his timing. What was he up to? The others too looked up with eyes wide and lips parted in a gasp. All glares were on Kichasi and Khulo as heated words began to discharge.

"She's right," Tambulo hushed. "This *isn't* the time; *nor* the place. The winds are shifting and those lions will be able to detect us. We need to move *now*!"

Khulo nodded, backing down from Kichasi; who was made quite clear of her attack abilities - ready to strike at a whim. Time was of the essence. The winds had already begun to

carry their scent to the awaiting receptors of the lions. And if they picked up the scent, who knew what would happen. It threw an unknown variable into a delicate situation. It would also spoil the mid-morning hunt. Besides, if the lions were here, food must be out *there*...

With the decision upon him, the Cheetah turned his back on both the hunting lionesses as well as the sniveling Kichasi and headed in the opposite direction; dedication inbound. The others too turned to follow leaving the female behind. Kichasi was being turned away from by Khulo after being put in her place, as he did it so well. Perhaps the old fool wasn't as clueless after all and knew what she was up to. One can not dismiss the comments he made..."you want it so badly; but you don't have the skills!" Now that was not the reply of a stupid mind, thought Kichasi. It was a reply of someone firmly in control over his own agenda.

But, how would she make him see what should be done? The lions should pay for Mng'ariza's death. One way or another; she would make them pay. With, or without Khulo's help. "Tshatshi!" hailed the leader shattering the thoughts of the female.

"Yes?" he yelled; returning to Khulo's side.

"Stay here - lurk around. I want to know if the lion king is present or not. And if The Pride is truly vulnerable. Can you handle that?"

"Yes Khulo," the cheetah bowed, determined to follow orders.

Khulo wanted to get to the bottom of this perceived problem and get some answers to the questions gnawing at his being. He so loved a mystery; but now wasn't the best time to hunt down clues. He needed to know now because all further decisions would be based on it. "Report back to the cave by twilight... okay?"

"Yes my leader." And the cheetah crept away from the pack and into the bush to locate and observe the pride's members. Answers, answers, answers! Khulo needed answers - quickly! If anything, Tshatsi was a good prowler. He could hide and seek with the best of them and because of that he was a real asset to the clan - Mng'ariza's clan.

Once they were all loners before forming a clan out of desperation. Their assignment: to survive at all costs. Mng'ariza himself gave that directive - his top priority! The second on that list was to encroach on the lions' pride lands for their needs; forcing an incident and to resolve the incidental situation - peacefully. Which, of course, would still give them a clear advantage then what they had started with. But that was not the way to do things now... or was it? Would the original directive work? Who knew; Khulo didn't. And he wasn't about to base a decision without gaining all the facts. "Alright, let's go..." he ordered and one by one everyone followed him out through the bushes away from the lions.

Kichasi looked on as Khulo and the group retreated beyond her realm of vision. Even Tshatsi was lost to her now. "No bother," she said. "I am not going to sit idle and watch Khulo dismiss the most important opportunity for survival. Him and his assurances; bah!" There was one thing Kichasi was not about to do, and that was follow orders. Like her uncle, she had to continue his vision and assure Mng'ariza's wishes were kept. If not for her; who else? Khulo was certainly not going to do it or it would have been done by now. "And if I were in command we wouldn't be waiting... this business with the lions would be all but a distant memory..." All a distant memory... Kichasi smiled at the group of lionesses before trotting off after Tshatsi - she

wanted to know firsthand; well before Khulo what was transpiring. Being informed would definitely put her in a better position for anything she might plan for later.

The air was getting hotter Sarabi sensed It wouldn't be long now before any grazing game retreated back to their mid-day hiding spots to get away from the searing heats. If their hunt was to be a successful one today it had better get back underway. To lead the charge Sarabi called for the one lioness who she needed the most. "Sarafina, rally the rest of the lionesses. We're proceeding with the hunt."

Hearing her name jumped her into paranoia. What had she done? But when she heard the rest of the request her blood pressure dropped. She'd done nothing wrong; it was only Sarabi giving out a command. Sarafina glanced up at the sun and she too agreed. The sun was getting high in the sky. Soon it would be near impossible to find anything to feed on. The lioness honored the request by sending out an order to stop the clowning around and prepare for the next leg of their journey. Where they were headed this time was a mystery. The leader hadn't said where she intended to go next; which was just as well. The more mysterious the place the higher her hopes got that something to feed on was out there.

Seeing that everything was in order, Sarabi led the party with Sarafina closely behind. They were abandoning the Waterhole traveling South wishing the South-East corner of the Pride lands would be populated; at least with *something* to eat. Albeit something a little more than a gopher. A nice zebra would do; a few antelope would do, and if they could find a good lake - a big fat hippo!

* * *

Scar was pacing about at the tip of Pride Rock deliberating over his future actions. And through all his rage the only thing he thought of was Sarabi - that despicable lioness. One way or another he would find a way to strike back at her once he became king. He would get his revenge! "Yes Sarabi; I will avenge my pride." Through the sun spots dancing across his snout, an evil grin protruded upon his face. Yes, it was perfect; a plan that could not fail. Plain and simple blackmail was all Scar needed to get what he wanted. After all, Sarabi had committed a terrible crime upon a royal family member; shouldn't she pay for her crimes? And she would! "Perfect," he mumbled to himself. "She won't know what to do. No one will be able to believe her..." Besides, once he became king it was all academic anyway - he really wouldn't care by then.

Zazu swooped down from the circling pattern he'd been flying above and landed a few feet away from the pacing lion. Just what was Scar up to now? A question that got the majordomo considerably worried. Zazu decided he would investigate further and see what Scar had to say... "Good morrow to you --" immediately cutting himself off. Calling him by the name Scar would surely *not* win any points. It wasn't a good way to start a conversation with the owner.

"What do you want bird?" questioned Scar.

"Just making the rounds..." Zazu replied "Besides I have a morning report to deliver to Queen Sarabi as soon as she returns and wanted to see how you were doing after our little scuffle this morning." It was a lie though something had to be said.

Satisfied with the explanation he continued with the conversation to continue. "So.... they're not back from the hunt yet?"

It seemed obvious to the hornbill, but..."Uh, no."

"They're wasting their time..." replied Scar.

Zazu inquired, "And why is that?" Indeed why? One would need to hunt in order to find the food necessary to nourish the Pride... right? Where was the waste in that?

"You're a fool," was all that Scar had offered. "And so is Mufasa. But.... we don't have to worry about that anymore. Now do we..." The lion smiled a big grin for the hornbill, a gesture he was not easily able to decipher.

Mufasa was no fool. He was shaping up to be a great leader. Possibly the best the Pride had ever seen! Only where he disappeared off too was a mystery, yet; "What is so foolish in hunting?" This provoked an angry stare from the lion. A stare of disliking of being questioned, especially from this bird. "I'll tell you why," began the dark maned lion once he had Zazu's full attention. "Because there is no food left. Mng'ariza was right."

"W-who?"

"Mng'ariza!" exclaimed the scarred lion. "The leader of the Cheetah group you dolt! Don't you know anything?"

"Yes", the yellow beak of Zazu nodded. Mufasa mentioned the cheetah the other day but he found it odd that Scar would be referring to him now, especially on what he might or might not have said. "I am familiar with the name."

"Look around you bird. Do you see any grazing zebra? Any herds of antelope? Anything? Anything at all?"

The hornbill took a quick glance at the plains around him like he was expecting to see something from the tip of the precipice. He did have to admit, the only thing he could see was the sun drenched land and how parched and dry it had become. Zazu even noticed the main river channel had looked if it had dropped a foot or two. Which was something he noted to mention to Sarabi upon her return. "Well..." the bird stammered. "I do have to say I haven't seen any zebra or antelope lately, or any grazing animals for that matter but that doesn't mean--"

Scar hissed, "Precisely," finally the bird was getting it. "If Mufasa was half the king he claimed to be, he would be able to see this as well. Instead he decided to run away from his responsibility."

"Well I never!" was all the hornbill could muster. "After all he *is* the King and you are not."

"I realize that!" Scar roared. "I'm not a fool, unlike some I know."

"Whatever you think of your brother, he is still the king and in full control of the Pride lands."

"Is he now..." Scar's eyes flared.

Zazu was taken aback at the comment. "Yes he is. And you better get used to it." Zazu was defending the king, and quite well at that. He was sure he was getting his point across. Mufasa was the king. Period.

"Then bird, you better get used to starvation and death."

Zazu blinked.

"Where I'm standing, Mufasa hasn't full control over anything; not Sarabi, not the pride and not me."

"And just what is that supposed to mean? No control over Sarabi?"

Scar threw a paw in the hornbill's general direction. He was definitely through with this conversation. Zazu had angered him greatly for he was a fool just like Mufasa; neither one of them could see what was in front of their eyes. He could though. He could see the Pride lands wasting away, and if something wasn't done soon, devastation was soon to follow. In order to rid himself of the hornbill, he turned and cantered off to find his own lunch.

Zazu had received more than he had wanted. There was trouble brewing on the Pride lands and it looked as if Scar had a score to settle with his brother. That lion had always been the permissive type; overshadowed by Mufasa in every conceivable angle. Perhaps that is not to be anymore... but what Scar was planning was even beyond the wildest dreams of the majordomo. Either way, he must warn Sarabi of his evil plans. She now must make the next move and try and defeat the likes of Scar before he got started!

* * *

The hunting party lead by the Queen herself arrived at the South-Eastern most tip of the Pride lands. The land here was as barren as they had ever seen. The grasses were a lifeless brown; laid flat and dead. All nearby streams were gone - swallowed up by the force of the heat. Sarabi shook her head at the sight unable to comprehend the site before her. What *was* happening to the kingdom? Why was it eroding away like this? Everywhere they seemed to look it was dying out - all the grazing herds gone! And now to see the land as devastated as it was where they stood, it drilled into every fiber of her being.

"My god," she let out. "This is terrible."

Malaika had pulled up beside her and all she could do was hum in response. "I've never seen the Pride lands as barren as this. This is just... just unbelievable."

No wonder the herds have left - the lands here were barren and fruitless. There was nothing here for them. Something had to be done - fast! The Pride Lands must not be allowed to waste away into nothingness, Sarabi decided. It was their home! The very essence of their lives! Yet, through the sore sight before their eyes, it was becoming apparent that there was to be no catch found here. "It's getting late," Sarabi offered. "It's only going to get hotter - we won't find anything now." She sighed a bit and finished, turning away from the darkened grasses. "We should rest up for later."

She was bombarded with groans and pains of hunger. "I know it is not what you hoped. It wasn't what I had envisioned either. Maybe when it cools down again we'll find better spots to hunt." Sarafina nodded in agreement as she too could see the devastation and what it could possibly mean. If this were to spread, their whole food supply would be in jeopardy!

The lions moped their way through the parched grasses as they walked towards their home - Pride Rock, hoping that perhaps tonight, their luck will be better. That tonight they would be feasting on a great catch, and could put their worries behind them. "Alright everybody... let's go home."

The Pride

Chapter Fifteen

The Pride lands appeared to stand still in the afternoon sun; the winds ceased to flutter and the grasses didn't wave. If the hunting party was to find anything at all, this would have to be the time because after now, there would be no more activity across the lands. They would become dead and dormant. But, Sarafina was confident. She was surrounded by her friends and comrades. With the pair Malaika and Kolo at left flank and Isha and Ng'ara, two paces to her right, there was no reason to worry. Especially with Mufasa and Sarabi in the lead! Even now, Sarafina willed herself to believe that today, the lionesses with the King's help, were going to overtake a wildebeest, zebra, antelope, or some kind of animal. Then their stores would be replenished, and their food crisis over.

Mufasa had lead the lioness party from one corner of the Pride lands to the other, without success. All this traveling had wearied the pack, so much in fact, that they didn't care if they caught anything or not! They were just ready to go home, especially since there was nothing to be found. Eventually the leaders stopped and Sarafina took a look at her surroundings. She'd been here before, not long ago. They found themselves positioned on the other side of the gorge - not far from Pride rock. And Sarabi sighed as another hunt ended in emptiness. But then Mufasa's mane became very visible signaling that he'd caught onto a scent. The lionesses, excited, could hardly contain themselves and began to prance around. Sarafina herself was not all impressed yet; but Malaika, who'd nudged her in the side, was obviously exhilarated. Sarafina turned and gave the lioness a scornful gaze. She better not be the one to jump the gun, or it could mean a great loss for the whole pride. Calmed, Malaika received the warning and only then backed down; she too knew the importance of this possible find.

Sarafina on the other hand wanted to investigate on her own. She had seen Sarabi's tail twitch which could only signal that something important was going on. So, quickly and as quietly as she could, she maneuvered between the crouched lionesses, weaving her way to Mufasa. It wasn't easy. The grasses here were quite dry and any set off a sound loud enough to alarm any local beast. When she pulled along side Sarabi, she let out a brief sigh. She'd made it without causing a sound, and for that she was grateful. "Sarabi," she whispered.

The name Sarabi was called upon the wind. The lioness heard it, but could not ascertain where it could be coming from. She glanced at her betrothed, but he was engulfed in his senses, so she scanned the lands to try and see what it was Mufasa saw. And what made him tense up. She heard her name again, this time with more force, but still at a low tone. She turned to face the direction her name was coming from, only to meet the eyes of Sarafina, her friend. Immediately it registered that it was her friend that had been trying to obtain her attention and Sarabi smiled apologetically hoping the lioness wasn't hurt for her ignorance.

"What's the matter Sarafina?" Sarabi whispered in return.

"Nothing," she glanced back at Malaika, Kolo and the others, noting the awe on their faces and kinking tails. "I just wondered what was going on...."

Sarabi herself was unsure and knew that Mufasa had obviously picked up on something, but what it could be was a mystery to all, especially the Queen. She looked up at Mufasa once more but again was not acknowledged. It didn't bother her as much as it would probably bother Sarafina. Sarabi unfortunately had no answer for her. "Sorry, I don't know yet myself..." Sarafina nodded at her comrade and looked upon the King for her answers.

Mufasa was deeply engrossed in his senses. After catching a whiff of a strong scent due east, he'd stopped in his tracks. The sun was unbearably hot, but if what he smelled on the wind was correct, it wouldn't matter. He closed his eyes, allowing the ambience of the lands to flow within him. He knew what ever it was, had to be downwind, but the precise bearings were unknown. Precision was the utmost important goal. Because if they were not precise enough, they would loose it all.

The King glanced at an expecting Sarabi who provided him with her undivided attention. He found her eyes, how lovely they were. And inquisitive. He bowed slightly to speak and when he did open his mouth, what protruded was pure delight. "I believe I've caught scent of a small wildebeest herd..."

Sarabi looked back with happy eyes as the weight of waiting was finally lifted. "So, what shall we do?" Sarafina heard the king talking and was also impressed. A herd of wildebeest, albeit possibly small, would feed the Pride for a few days at least. And by conserving food, perhaps longer than that. She turned to tell her fellow lionesses the news when Mufasa stopped her in her tracks. "Sarafina, wait."

Her name thundering from the low toned voice of Mufasa was enough to petrify her where she stood. She turned, startled, and faced her king. "Yes your majesty?" He winced slightly at the use of 'your majesty' but not enough to cause alarm and Sarafina made a quick mental note not to do that again. He replied quickly, before Sarafina could think of anything else.

"I want you to be apart of the planning... so you can inform the rest of the lionesses what is about to happen."

"Yes.... Mufasa." she bowed partially, not knowing what else to do.

Mufasa looked on, trying to gather any and all information about what lie ahead. He came to one conclusion: They weren't going to be there long. "Sarabi," he began. "We must move fast. We're upwind, that gives us a great advantage. How do you think we should proceed?"

'Me? He's asking me?' Sarafina thought. "We should try and stay upwind as much as possible. How far away are they?"

"Not far," he answered. "Just over that ridge." He referred with his nose, they were close alright, too close. Close enough he could taste them!

"Then.." Sarabi was undecided. She hadn't eaten in a long time, and she didn't want to ruin things for everyone, especially what she'd been through lately. "I would recommend a straight on approach. " she finally said. "And fan out as needed upon arrival."

"Sarafina?" he asked of the lioness.

"That sounds good to me," she replied easily.

"Good. Quietly tell the others. We'll leave upon your signal."

Sarafina turned and quickly rejoined her comrades in the ranks. They were eager to hear all about the conversation that she had with Mufasa and Sarabi. So eager in fact, their excitement showed on their faces! "Well, give give!" Kolo shouted in whisper.

"Mufasa's sensed a small herd of wildebeest," Sarafina let out. And immediately the tails of her fellow lionesses danced and jerked around.

"So what's the plan?" Malaika asked.

"Yeah, what are we gonna do?" Khemontu inquired.

"Well, come on Sarafina!" N'gara exclaimed.

She understood their excitement, but she also knew that they couldn't get their hopes up. A lot still could go wrong with this hunt, and she didn't want to curse it. "We're going to make a straight approach," delivered Sarafina. "Until we're close enough to see them. After that, we'll get confirmation from Mufasa or Sarabi to scatter about in order to surround them."

"Great!" sounded Isha, the first time she'd said a word in a long time.

"Yeah!" the others voiced in unison.

"Alright, quiet now." She hushed. The plan, as simple as it was, had been delivered as promised. Her duties as the king provided were over. She stared into the eyes of Mufasa, conveying her fears about the upcoming incident, and her hopes and dreams. Through that contact, Mufasa knew everything was set. It was time to begin.

Before anyone realized it, the Pride had come upon the four grazing wildebeest and Mufasa had given the signal to begin their approach. In position, the lionesses intently stared at the unbeknown prey before them; totally unaware of what was about to happen to them. So much the better. Their deaths would be quick, easy, and painless. Best of all, they would eat soon!

In an instant the Pride was on the move, charging full force. The wildebeest, one minute care free, the next, on a run for their lives. Kolo and Malaika ran after one, a male. Very big, muscular and fast. Isha and N'gara teamed up and ran after another one. Mufasa was giving chase to another and Sarabi was no where to be found. Sarafina had located her the fourth fleeing beast and started after him.

Her wildebeest was more than a match in speed for Sarafina. Undernourished and hungered, Sarafina could hardly keep pace. But she knew if she hadn't, there might not be a second chance. Mufasa was hard out after his prey, and the teams of Kolo, Malaika, Isha and N'gara were still perusing. Mufasa was gaining on his beast when he lost his footing on a patch of rocky ground, sending him face down in the dirt. He watched painfully as his supper sprang away.

Kolo and Malaika were hot after the large one. He was putting up more of a fight than either of the two expected. Of course, he was the largest of the four, and being male didn't help the two lionesses either. Kolo and Malaika were gaining fast, they were right behind the fleeing wildebeest. They could almost taste the meat now as its legs charged just inches ahead of them. And just when the two were about to pounce, he turned and kicked Kolo square in the jaw. Malaika was stunned, she'd never seen a wildebeest do such a thing; especially with two lionesses hot on its trail. Malaika didn't stop to assess her friend's condition, she perused intently, but Malaika did loose ground. After slowing for an instant, the beast had pulled ahead. The male was very hard to keep up with; His muscular features overpowered the young Malaika. Exhausted, she too gave up chase and watched in awe as the wildebeest got away.

She returned to her friend; running as fast as she could only to find her laying lifeless on the grass. There was blood all around and at first glance she wasn't sure what to expect. But, Kolo was only stunned, dazed. She was alive! The blood, a superficial cut on the bottom of her furry chin. She would survive her ordeal but would come out of it with a terrible headache! "Did you get him?"

"No," Malaika let out angrily. Kolo sighed and remained where she laid.

Sarafina was right behind the smaller female. It might not be much to eat, but she would be something. Sarafina followed it for what seemed fifteen minutes, but she knew better than to leave. The thrill of the hunt was bestowed in her. Time was not flowing normally, and at times seemed to stand still. She was tensed and ready to pounce at any time. With her claws fully extended she made the leap of faith... her claws digging into the rear flank of the wildebeest. It came crashing down as Sarafina too clambered to the desert floor.

Smoke and dust had erupted and clouded everything around her. Sarafina laid where she landed, claws retracted fur packed with soil. She was exhausted, but achieved her goal. The lioness brought down a wildebeest...the Pride would eat tonight.

"Sarafina..." a voice called on the wind. She raised her head above her prey to answer her call. When she looked up, there was nothing to be found. Smoke filled the atmosphere around her, enough to make her choke. She coughed slightly at the smoke; when a form suddenly appeared in front of her eyes.

"Well done Sarafina..." the voice said, looking down at the prey below. The lioness peered though the dust and smoke with awe. The surrounding air conditions clouded the image of the form before her, but Sarafina instantly recognized the blackened figure. The person before her could not exist; she was dead! But there Wamase stood, right before her eyes.

Sarafina blinked to clear her vision, unsure of what she was seeing. When her eyes reopened to see the figure still standing there; the lioness knew it couldn't be her imagination playing tricks on her. The dust that had puffed up during the hunt began to clear allowing a full and unobstructed view of the black lioness. "The Pride can eat now... well done."

"Wamase?" Sarafina asked dumbfounded.

"Yes Sarafina. It is I." the voice had answered.

"What are you doing here? Aren't... aren't you--

"Dead," the lioness spoke. It was a fair assumption after all. The lioness was dead, at least, Sarafina saw her lifeless body on the plains after the Cheetah attack. As Sarafina regarded the form of Wamase in front of her, she looked lioness straight into the eyes and found them empty; all but of a fire - burning and raging out of control. Whatever stood before her was not the Wamase she knew. "I have passed on... I am among friends in the kingdom of the Great Kings of the Past." the form nodded. "I have been sent to... help you my friend."

"Help me? What? How!" Sarafina didn't comprehend.

"The Pride is in danger... It must find food soon or face certain destruction." Sarafina couldn't understand what her friend was saying. What was all this talk of finding food. She'd just killed a wildebeest, it was right here!!! Sarafina looked down at her prize but stared back as horror struck across her face. The beast had vanished without a trace. No hoof prints; no clues. It was just gone. What was going on here!

"But food is not your biggest worry any more Sarafina. That is not all that plagues the Pride... There is trouble ahead.... and you must help stop it. Sarafina didn't understand. Where did her prey go, where were the others and why was Wamase here?

"I... I don't understand."

"Look at yourself Sarafina and you will understand... I must go."

"No!" shouted Sarafina.

"I must - you have to learn of the other plague Sarafina... it's the only way the Pride will survive."

"Don't leave me again," she whimpered and hung her head low as to not disclose her facial features.

Wamase caught a tear running down her friends cheek and understood her pain. "I will always be with you... in spirit. You are my friend and the only one who really ever understood me." Sarafina was about to interrupt but decided to let Wamase speak, she was too scared to interrupt the apparition. "I could never leave you. Remember what I have said Sarafina. Confide in Mufasa, he is the key..." The form of Wamase was slowly shimmering into nothingness as her last words echoed upon the Pride lands. "I will be with you Sarafina... I will be with you..."

Sarafina had managed a weak good bye before the image blinked out of existence.....

"Wamase!" She shot up ready to give chase to her friend. Sarafina's breathing was heavy and erratic; her eyes dilated, and concerned stares from her fellow lionesses were upon her. She looked around and found herself at the familiar confines of their regular resting spot around Pride Rock. There they were, Isha, Malaika, Sarabi, Ng'ara amongst others, all staring back with wonder. Had Sarafina gone mad?

"Are you alright Sarafina?" Isha asked quickly attending her side.

Sarafina took a quick inventory of herself, her surroundings and her thoughts. She seemed fine but where was she? Or more importantly where had she been? "I'm fine...." but her

eyes seemed empty and devoid of life. Isha picked up on this, and wouldn't leave. "I'm fine really.."

"You don't look so good Sarafina," Isha was concerned. In fact, Sarafina looked downright terrible. Her face was drawn and fur unkept. It looked like she went through a rough time. But a rumble in her stomach gave her a quick out. "I'm just hungry... that's all."

"Aren't we all..." sighed N'gara who joined the pair. "We've not seen anything for days!"

Well that can't be, Sarafina thought to herself, I just brought down a wildebeest! But then it struck her... it was all a dream. Damn, it had all been a dream! She sighed realizing what had occurred. "When is the next hunt?" Sarafina asked at last.

"In a few hours. When the sun sets...." answered Isha.

Sarafina plopped herself back down on the hardened dry grasses and let all thoughts cease. Isha and Ng'ara had retreated back to their resting spots, leaving Sarafina alone. Alone to ponder about her dream: A dream, how could it be? It was so realistic! The hunt, the kill... and Wamase. What was it she said? The Pride was in danger? Yes, that was it. The pride was in danger of starvation! Or was it more than that... what could be more dangerous than starvation?

Wamase. What was she doing in her dreams in the first place. She'd just gotten over her passing, only now to be depressed all over again! But why had she appeared? And was it all a dream? "Oh stop it Sarafina... you're going to worry yourself to death." She turned on her side and tried fitfully to go back to sleep. "I've never left you Sarafina..." a voice entered her thoughts, "And I never will," continued to echo as she dozed back off.

* * *

Sarabi sat contently watching a small group of birds chasing one another through the plains below the rockcliff she was upon letting her thoughts trailed off as she watched the winged creatures dance to and fro between one another in a unique display. She began to go over every decision she made during the hunt earlier - and could find no fault in her tactics. Still though, the hunting party returned empty handed. There was no reason to the fact that despite all the cunning tricks she performed and all the attention to detail the lionesses took that there should be no meat to eat. "What else can I do?" she said aloud. "It is like the whole Pride Lands is falling apart."

The condition of the outer fringes was a burnt up undesirable mess. She in all her life had never seen that kind of devastation on the Serengetti plains. Not only was the land falling into disarray; it was taking her life as well. Raised as a cub to one day be Queen and mate to Mufasa; she'd grown unsure about his well being after his father died. But things started on an upswing when he confirmed her position as Queen and subsequently came out of his shell. The Great Kings only knew now what was going on within him since he hadn't slept by her side last night. Mufasa didn't show up for the Morning Report either; nor had he been around for the hunt earlier. Just where the king had run off too was a mystery; but it was a mystery that was tearing the heart out of Sarabi because her mate left without warning... "what am I to think?"

How was a queen supposed to react when her king and mate runs off without one iota of grief or notice. "Oh Sarabi," she said to herself. "I can't change the past. Nor can I change the future." She stopped herself cold startled at what would come out next. "Maybe Scar is right... I can't do this alone. Oh the web in which we weave..."

Zazu fluttered about and found Sarabi basking in the sunlight away from all the other lionesses. The hornbill circled around the lazy lionesses until finally diving down next to Sarabi startling her. "My apologies, your highness," he said, submersing a laugh. He hadn't seen Sarabi so startled before. And the sight of her jumping five feet in the air didn't help his control. "I saw you all by your lonesome and thought you needed some company."

"Thanks," she sighed. "but I much rather be alone."

The Hornbill began, "Sarabi, I understand you're going through some awful feelings right now. But I'm concerned about you. You are not the same lioness that I know."

"You're right," she looked up. "Things have obviously changed now. Haven't they..."

Zazu had served one of the great kings of the past, and his kind, before him. But the problems facing the two lions that were the royal family took everything beyond his training. The majordomo was just unable to handle this - the education was unjust! Mufasa and Sarabi were King and Queen; but both are torn apart because of some undaunting secret Mufasa was trying to hide. He would have to make further note to stick to his training: That one doesn't get too involved in the King and Queen's personal lives.

If he could keep to that standard through all this, he would probably go down as one of the best majordomo's ever recorded in hornbill history. Every majordomo has had some personal intervention to the party in which they served; and he was no exception. But this problem was big - and had Zazu caught right in the middle! He was trying to help; yet not... not sure of what he should do. Zazu's grief was interrupted by Sarabi's question: "Zazu, what do you think I should do?"

Zazu smiled upon recalling his mentors' words: "No advisor will EVER doubt, object, or question the authority or leadership of his potentate." Zazu never completely understood the meaning behind the words. Not until later under King Ahadi where his one fatal mistake almost cost him everything he worked for. The hornbill's smile turned to despair when he reflected over his actions. What he was doing now was going against his teachings, breaking the rule. And he hoped that it wouldn't come back to haunt him. "You know Sarabi... you're the only one who can figure out what is best to do. But I will say this... pick up; and move on."

"Oh sure," said a voice protruding into view. "Tuck tails and run away. Just like a fool."

Zazu barked, "Now there's a fine example of when to move on."

"What a lovely... a... uh greeting," Scar whimmed walking up to the pair. "And what are you two doing here on this fine afternoon?"

"Engaging in a chat," Sarabi hissed gazing upon the features of the interrupter. "A Private chat."

"I see..." but Scar didn't make a move to leave the two which unsettled them.

"Which would mean Scar," Sarabi spat "We shall require privacy?"

"Privacy?" the lion snickered. "Privacy could get you in trouble."

"No trouble that I couldn't handle..." the queen shot back.

"Get lost Scar," Zazu pouted. "We have official business here!"

"As do I," Taka grinned and ushered Zazu away with his paw. "I apologize for interfering but Sarabi and I have important things to discuss."

Zazu stopped and looked at the marked lion with an unbudging expression. He looked from Sarabi to Scar back to Sarabi and back to Scar before he sat there motionless awaiting some sign of what he was to do. "Uuhh, Zazu... I think you should go now."

"You can't be serious?" the hornbill asked. "You're going to listen to him!? What does he have to say that is more important than me!"

"A lot birdie..." Scar hissed. "Now move along or I will forcefully remove you."

Zazu blinked at the two lions who simply returned his gaze. What was it between these two any ways the majordomo wondered. When they are together they act very out of place - tensed and angry. And what was more out of place was the fact that each seemed to share the feeling; instead of one intimidating the other. Whatever was going on here bared closer examination... Zazu didn't like the looks of things. Not one bit. But, for now he did as Sarabi bid and flew to a much safer distance where he could watch the two as they conversed. There was no chance he'd let the Queen disappear from his watchful eye.

"Now that is much better."

"Alright... what did you want?"

The Queen didn't waste any time. If there was one thing she hated more than Scar, it was being interrupted - and with both of the things she hated right in front of her, Sarabi was in no mood for light hearted chit chat.

"You know what I want Sarabi..." Scar smiled innocently. "You know why I am here."

"Yes," she sighed. "I know. And I've been giving that a lot of thought."

"Oh?" Scar sounded surprised, "have you now..."

She nodded. "I... do this out of spite. I agree we need a staple point in our lives. One that I can not in my present condition; give."

The dark maned lion smiled with a new sense of life in his posture. "You won't regret it."

"I already am. But the facts still remain Scar; you may have my partial support. But you have to win over the other lionesses."

Scar placed a paw upon the Queen's shoulder, "That my dear is what I have you for."

"I will give it a chance Scar... but do not hope for a good outcome."

"I know the lionesses despise me Sarabi," Scar jokingly refuted. "But I have every confidence in you."

Sarabi sat looking at Scar with angered intent in her eyes. She had finally succumbed to his bidding and would allow him to become king - but that far out reached her liking the fact. Scar's eyes seemed to glow with anticipation; anticipation of what the future would hold instore for him. For the dark maned lion, the future was pretty bright. "You're doing the right thing Sarabi..." Scar grinned. Then he thought of his mother... 'what would she think?' She'd hardly be proud; especially now. Akase had turned on her own son... her own son! The lion now spat at the very mention of her name - a name of distrust and a name of disloyalty. No more would she be hailed as the mother of a king. Instead, the name Akase would be given to the ones who failed in life because from this moment on all of Scar's dreams and wishes were becoming true.

Sarabi was about to retort Taka's comment when she heard a blood curdling scream that made her tense up and stand in fright. It sounded like one of her lionesses but they were far from danger. "Someone help!" she heard - and it was Isha! Immediately she rushed from Scar's side and into the direction of the help cry. She was followed by Scar who'd begun to think more of himself as King; than king's brother. He would remedy the situation, whatever it entailed.

The two erupted onto the scene eyeing its contents carefully. Zazu loomed overhead fluttering frantically about trying to assess what was wrong while most of the lionesses gathered around. Sarabi looked around, but hadn't seen Sarafina. But her fears were laid to rest when she spotted the lioness darting out of the tepid heat of the den, out onto the openness of the outdoors.

Blinking as Sarafina stepped out the lioness covered her eyes with a paw; protecting herself from the downbeat of the radiant sun. With her paw in place, she reopened her eyes to witness Ng'ara, Sarabi, Malaika and Kolo among others surrounding Maloki, who was laying as she would in a position to catnap. Yet.....

"I don't know Malaika," Isha sounded horrified. "She won't wake up!!"

"Have you tried--" edged in Ng'ara.

"Yes!" exclaimed the one, "I've tried everything."

"Well try harder!"

"I am!" edged Isha.

Sarabi ran in and added, "Get back! Make way..." and she rushed in to see the lioness laying lifeless. She turned to Scar who seemed to already know what had happened but the queen refused to buy into it. "Maloki," she reached out with a paw and shook the lioness. "Maloki! Wake up dear!" She retracted and awaited some kind of signal of her arousal...but got nothing. Sarabi tried again; again; and again without luck. Shaking her head slightly, the queen looked up at Isha and looked into her eyes. "I'm sorry..." There was nothing anyone could do. On this afternoon Maloki; mother of Isha had passed on. She was called upon by the Great Kings to serve a greater purpose. One, I'm sure escaped those who remained below; but an important one nonetheless. Sarabi laid her eyes upon the lifeless body and closed her eyes in pain and sorrow. Wamase was the first; Maloki the second. How many more would there be?

Sarabi comforted the lioness as best she could but it seemed that she had been prepared for the worst. Isha would now join the ranks of the mourning for the loss of her mother. Sarafina, looking over the group had darted off. The pain of the tears welling up inside her was too great. The lioness ran off in an emotional state far worse than Isha's - the daughter of the recently deceased. But everyone knew why Sarafina reacted this way... she was still mourning the loss of Wamase. A loss that hit her quite hard. The dark furred lioness was about her age and the two became fast friends. Quite a hard relationship to forget - especially when it was robbed from you.

The queen took her leave of the lionesses and chased after her friend leaving them all with Scar. That thought almost made her smile. It would prove very interesting how Scar would handle the emotions of the pride. If he wanted to be their leader; he would have to put the lionesses over himself. Which was something of an enigma for him. Taka never thought of anything or anyone else but himself. "If anything good comes out of this arrangement," she said. "It would be good for comedic relief." In many ways it would be the perfect punishment for the

lion. Being King or Queen of a pride full of lionesses came with their responsibilities; ones the darkened maned lion was not up to par to handle.

Sarabi stopped to see she found what she'd been chasing. There amongst the rocks and bushes laid the lioness Sarafina. As beautiful as the morning sunrise this lioness succumbed to her condition and looked as terrible as she must feel.

"Sarafina..."

She answered her name, wiping the tears from her eyes, "Yes?"

"Don't do this to yourself," Sarabi started. "You can't change the past..." No, that is not the best thing to say here. "What I mean is... look. You know the things we face each day."

Sarafina nodded.

"And you also know the consequences involved."

She nodded. "I'm just confused Sarabi. Everywhere I seem to turn; I am reminded of Wamase. And to think earlier this afternoon she came to me in a... dream." It was just then Sarafina realized what she had experienced - it was only a dream. No! It had to be more than that!

"A dream?"

"Yes... quite a unique experience."

"Care to tell me about it?"

Sarafina shook her head. "Not yet dear friend... I have a lot of things on my mind. And I have to sort through them myself."

"Alright," Sarabi whispered. "But please remember that I am here for you. That I care about you."

Sarafina looked up through her tear soaked eyes and gave the Queen a smile. If she were anyone else; Sarafina would undoubtedly still be lying here alone. No one would have come over. But not Sarabi - she cared. For Sarabi was one of the best friends she had ever had - including Wamase. One was lost; Sarafina didn't want to lose the other. In time she would open up to her friend but today she needed her own inner self to try and work out the problems facing her. "I know you do. And I'm grateful. Soon I'll be my good old cheery self - just not right yet. Okay?"

"No problem," Sarafina grinned and let out the breath she'd been holding. "We'll take it One by One..."

"... One by One?" inquired Kichasi of her traveling companion Tshatshi.

"Yes my dear," he hissed as he looked upon the lands of the Pride. "We will win our battles one by one."

Kichasi smiled and looked upon the plains with her new follower. Khulo and the rest of the group had long set back to their cavern home while she secretly followed Tshatshi on his quest to investigate the lion's predicament. Ordered by Khulo, the male she followed would not let his superior down; but even she could see how dismayed the cheetah had become - the stalling was unnerving! So, with a bit of thought; Kichasi followed Tshatshi onto the plains of the Pride lands.

The sun above beat down upon the hide and fur of the female cheetah as she slinked her way through the grasses. Not even her natural protection would shade her from the menacing sun this day. A few times Kichasi thought about her idea to tag along and on occasions thought about turning back - but that wasn't going to solve anything. "It would only delay the inevitable. And time is not on our side."

Wandering for what seemed like the longest time; Kichasi stood over a small hillside with her tongue wagging with a pant. She had been beaten; Tshatshi disappearing from her capture. She had been ready to commend herself for trailing the male without being caught only to quickly withdraw any pat on the back after losing sight. She'd looked everywhere for him - he simply vanished without a trace! "What?! Where did he go..." Kichasi said, breaking her code of silence which only betrayed her position.

Tshatshi knew he'd been followed all along and arranged to be *lost*. This way he could observe his follower without provocation. The question of *why* she was tailing him was another matter. Yet Tshatshi believed it had something to do with Khulo... and the state of their mission. So, he leaped at the female below and took this opportunity to let himself be *found*. "Lose something Kichasi?"

She whirled around, surprise on her features. "Whoa! Tshatshi!"

He grinned, "Or someone?"

"Don't you *EVER* do that *AGAIN*!"

"Aww, why not," the cheetah chuckled. "It was so fun!"

Kichasi wasn't in the mood for fun; however, and made her intentions completely clear. "I need to talk to you... about us."

"Us?" he inquired cocking his head. "As in you and me?"

"No," she threw a paw at him. "Not 'you and I' you dolt... *us* as in the whole clan."

Tshatshi nodded with understanding. And with that, he finally got the answer he was looking for. He was right; she did want to speak with him about Khulo's rule. A rule that even he was now beginning to question. "I respect Khulo--"

"No one is saying you don't."

"And I support him."

Kichasi blinked, "You do? Why?"

Quite a good honest response Tshatshi thought. One he didn't have a direct response to. He'd known Mng'ariza for a long, long time - Khulo also. The two had served together on many occasions in the past; just like they had now. He never questioned the authority of Khulo before or now after Mng'ariza was slain. That male was always second in command; he was only a scout; but he would support Khulo no matter what masquerade they were up against. But this time...this time was different. "I support him because in some ways he is right. You can't go full force into a situation you don't know about. He is very wise for a young leader."

Kichasi growled a bit. "So you don't trust me..."

"I didn't say that." Which he hadn't. Kichasi was the niece of his slain leader Mng'ariza; but that entitled her to no special treatment. She was quite young to be in a position of power.

Such a position that could be easily abused. No, Tshatshi did trust her. He understood the point she was trying to get across to Khulo, only... it was a young gun against an older, wiser one who was unsure of himself. Sometimes violence was the answer... but in most cases it was not.

"I think you are a bit young to make these decisions on your own."

She growled again.

"But that doesn't mean I do not support your theory."

Kichasi elated, "So you see what I've been trying to say? Attack now before there is no tomorrow?"

Tshatshi nodded.

"Well Hallelujah!"

Don't cheer yet, he thought. Like he said, Khulo was partially right. And so was Kichasi. Those two would forever fight for power - a fight Khulo wasn't interested in. He understood what must be done; but didn't have the frame of mind to take the chance. The chance that Kichasi was willing to take. She was willing to fight for her future - a good quality in a leader really. There were so many other obstacles for her to overcome first. "I agree that something needs to be done. And the time to do that is now. If these lions *are* at their weakest... a strike should commence."

Kichasi smiled at the form before her. Tshatshi was a very loyal soul amongst the clan. He would defend Mng'ariza's honor until he was blue in the face. He'd even take a shot for Khulo as well. She knew how well he respected their current leader too. And in a sense, so did she. There was a lot she could learn from him... but if the time to act is lost because of Khulo's unassurances; it would be a crime to all who lived within the clan. And most of all... to those who joined Mng'ariza in his quest of survival. "Are the lions at their weakest?"

"From what I have been able to witness," Tshatshi plainly stated. "Yes."

"Then stand by me Tshatshi. And be rewarded for your loyalty."

He stood fast for a moment thinking over her offer and weighing the consequences of the actions he was about to take: Mutiny. A Mutiny was no laughing matter. It was the stuff that split clans and ruined friendships. A mutiny amongst Mng'ariza's clan? Unthinkable. Yet here it was happening... all for the sakes of survival. Tshatshi nodded in agreement and took his place beside Kichasi and peered over the hillside. The female cackled as the pair of mighty cheetahs looked on and saw their conquest.

* * *

Rafiki returned to his nest within the baobab tree he called home to still find Mufasa in slumber amongst its roots. He had hoped that while he was away, the lion would return to his natural habitat of Pride Rock and begin anew. Sarabi would be most pleased to see his return; especially after what he had seen of her earlier. Sarabi would have been overjoyed. Yet again her heart was broken and her hopes shattered. Rafiki resisted the urge during his observation of the hunt earlier to run out and tell Sarabi - to at least ease her pain and suffering and give her some ray of information to the whereabouts of her mate. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. The thought alone and the expression and tears made him think twice. For now, the mandrill would

keep his guest a secret. The knowledge of his locale would only suffice to tear the queen's emotional well being apart. Right now the pride needed her guidance and stability; in the face of desertion.

"Are you goin' to sleep all day?" the monkey asked breaking the silence.

"Mmmhmmph?" the sleepy lion returned in reply turning from his side. "Oh.. Rafiki," he yawned getting to all fours. "How was your trip."

"Disheartening."

"Oh?" he rubbed his eye with a paw. "How so?"

"I saw Sarabi..." Rafiki stared into the eyes of the lion as he spoke. "She misses you. Sarabi is under a lot of stress and pain." The old wise mandrill tried to hold back the anger he felt. Watching Sarabi like he did brought forth feelings from deep inside. Feelings he just assumed to keep locked away. She *needed* Mufasa.

"What does *she* know about pain."

"Plenty," Rafiki shot back. "She is without her mate; who I might add ran off without warning."

Mufasa growled, "How dare you. Sarabi can do quite well without me. She'll be fine. I have more pressing matters to attend to. I am--"

"You are a coward!" spat Rafiki fluttering his staff at the image of Mufasa. "You would rather sit there and think nothing but of yourself while Sarabi worries!" Shock and bewilderment washed across the face of the lion king; followed by a gasp of inquiry. "This is not the actions of the chosen one. This is an act of cowardice and an act of selfishness. Sarabi is your mate. Yet you ignore her and then run off because you can't handle the death of your father!"

"That's not true!" Mufasa roared. "The death of Ahadi has nothing to do with why I am here!"

Rafiki blinked. "Excuse me?" he simply stated having the eyes of Mufasa train upon him. "I never thought I'd see it..."

"See what?" Mufasa retorted sharply.

The mandrill let out a disappointed sigh. "I never thought I'd see the day you would flat out lie to me."

"I'm not ly--"

"Niet! I know bettah!"

Rafiki looked to his friend and saw the anger, sorrow and confusion within him. The death of his father was tearing Mufasa apart inside. A problem so grand that it forced the lion away from the one he loves; and the lionesses he swore to protect. And with the problems now facing the Pride - the future was again an unknown. "Da way I see et," Rafiki offered, placing his staff between himself and the angered lion. "You are running away from your destiny. Fleeing in fright is not the way of the Great Kings." He let out a breath. "I know his passing has created a great stress within you. But you must take charge of those feelings Mufasa... trust in those around you..."

Mufasa blinked, retracting all his challenging demeanor and backed away from his mentor, "You are right old friend. Cowering in the corner is not going to help... this simple problem.

"Innocence must not be lost. Focus on other problems facing the pride. Don't be selfish in your rule. Or you will be forever lost and doomed to desolation." Mufasa stared at the monkey in confusion. The wrinkled face the king offered made Rafiki chuckle and continue, "Let your fathers death go... and move on."

"It is... hard. You don't understand..."

"Oh but I do," Rafiki patted the lion on the shoulder. "I do."

He may be a wise old mandrill; but he did have one thing in common with the younger lion - he too lost someone near and dear to him. He had not seen his parents for quite a while when he set off across the Pride lands, but he had always thought of them. 'I'll get back to see them,' he thought. 'There was plenty of time.' But there wasn't plenty of time. Before he knew it, news of their untimely deaths were reported on the winds. Time had run out. So he knew exactly what Mufasa was feeling. There was one thing his father did teach him though: "Never dwell too much on the past. A heritage is a nice thing to have. But to live in the past, guarantees you no future."

"I should put the past behind me... and prepare myself for the future ahead."

Rafiki bowed slightly, "That is all I can ask. Do not loose focus on what faces you."

"What do you mean?"

"Look around you," he told him. "And tell me what you see."

He took a look around at his surroundings. The grasses were green but getting brown. The land seemed to call out for relief... a relief that Mufasa was not prepared to give. He turned to face the mandrill once more and sighed. "I am just not ready to go back."

Rafiki took up his staff and sighed a bit. "Soon my friend you must take forth your responsibility and claim your rightful place on the Circle of Life or that spot will be replaced with another." Using his staff as a hook, he grappled a low hanging limb and swung into the innards of his home.

The Pride

Chapter Sixteen

Stirring was about the only sound one could identify in the dark with clarity, and that was about all one could hear in the little hole the occupants called home. Oblivious to the outer world and the sights and sounds accompanying it, the call of the lands aroused the occupants into a state of alertness. Blinking, the gopher rudely awakened by the protruding ray of light, arose from his position and popped his head out amongst the grasses. Breathing in the warmness of the afternoon air, the brown furry creature opened its eyes fully and gazed across the plains looking for anything newsworthy. The sun would soon set and that would mean it would be time to get going for his reports for Zazu.

Turning to return to his nap for a few more minutes, the gopher was treated to a sight not seen on these lands for quite some time. Excited through and through, Zanti rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes and looked again, only to be shown the same view. "Oh my goodness," he held his raspy deep voice to a whisper. "It can't be," he let out once more against his better judgement. And there before his eyes grazing on the dew soaked grasses of the Pridelands, were a small group of sandy colored; facially streaked animals. "What are they?" mouthed his companion who'd popped up beside him.

"They're gazelle hon," he whispered to his mate. "See the red and white stripes on their face?"

She nodded, looking at Zanti. "What does that mean?" The small, graceful herd of miniature antelope continued to graze on the semi-green grasses of the Pridelands, unknown that two gophers were watching them this very minute. The gophers were of no threat to the band of Gazelle of course, but they didn't want to scare them either. The gazelle were too important a find and sheer silence must be maintained. "Where are you going?" his mate asked of him as he buried back down his hole.

Gone for just a few seconds, Zanti returned wide eyed and ready to travel. "I have to go get Zazu."

"Zazu?" she echoed back. "Why on earth would you want to get that idiot?"

Zanti chuckled to his love, "Because it is my duty to report to him. And with news this important, I better be on my way!" He eased his way out onto the plains as quietly as he could and headed south, towards Pride Rock. Traveling on the lands was not his normal way of travel, but one of his tunnels collapsed and there was no telling what other damage had occurred. Figuring he'd find an opening somewhere along the journey he set off in the morning sunlight hoping to catch the majordomo bird before he left for his morning report. At least for once during this cycle, he would have some good news to report to the King's advisor and Zanti was certain that this revelation would bring swift action from the Pride. Especially if they wanted to eat!

Racing now, as fast as his little legs would take him; the brown fuzzy gopher found his way into the earthen soil and tunneled within. The soil parted to and fro allowing the animal to push his elongated body through the lands, toward his goal. Sailing along at top speeds, Zanti was making great time until he slammed into something that stopped him dead in his tracks. He tried to tunnel his way through the barrier, but it was useless. Zanti was trapped. Rubbing his furry head and cursing a bit, he poked his head above ground to survey the land. Quickly and almost immediately, the dilemma of his abrupt stop was solved. Sniffing the roots and fallen leaves, the gopher instantly identified the obstruction. "Now, who put this Baobab tree here?" the little creature cursed again, punching the fallen leaves into pulp. "A fine time for something like this to happen..."

Swinging high atop the tree was a mandrill looking gleefully down at the creature below. Watching and chuckling through it all, Rafiki observed the furry check out the immediate surroundings then disappear almost as quickly as he arrived into the depths of mother nature. As the gopher continued on its trek, the blue-butt monkey peered out across the illuminated lands of the afternoon and wondered why such a creature would make such haste. Certainly nothing on the pride lands warranted such a speedy pace... or did it? The mandrill took a long look at the lion napping below and sighed. "It could be trouble... or it could be grand. But he'll never know, will he." Rafiki was disappointed with Mufasa and the way he handled his crisis. No great leader would turn his back on his subjects or himself. He swung down into the central cavity of his home and returned to consort his inner mind. There he hoped he could find the focus in Mufasa's life; and the answers to his questions concerning them.

Back on the track once again Zanti crawled, scrapped, shoveled, wiggled and tunneled his way to the pinnacle of the lion's den - Pride Rock. From many assets of the Serengeti plains, the mountainous promontory could be seen. It was the central figure of the surrounding lands - and rightfully so. Its tall plateau rose above the surrounding grasses to provide a stable point for the Great Circle of Life. But it wasn't of the Great Circle Zanti had come to inquire; it was of the bird - Zazu. Popping his head above ground, the furry looked around and eyed the blue form of a hornbill perched upon a nearby rock.

Sighing in relief that he hadn't missed the majordomo, Zanti made his way to Zazu slowly. Behind the feathered creature Zanti grinned knowing he had the step and decided that this would be the time to repay an old debt; one of prowl and surprise since Zazu hadn't noticed the gopher's presence and he then decided to continue as planned. Snickering ever so slightly, the brown furry arm of the gopher reached out upon the air and brushed against the back of the sitting bird. "Zazu," he called gently upon the breeze, breaking the silence brought on by the stillness of the winds.

"ACK!" the blurry blue form jumped up and squawked, fluttering about. "Put 'em up!" Zazu shouted before turning around and realizing who it was that had startled him so. "Oh," he raised an eyebrow, "It's you..." Zanti chuckled at the bird.

"What do you want?" Zazu shot back as he watched the gopher roll over onto his back in a hysterical fit. Watching the bird jump half out of his wits tickled the poor gopher into hysteria. "I... come... to... report..." he managed to get out before succumbing to the laughter.

"Report?" Zazu hrumphed, obviously perturbed. "Report what?" The beast before him continued basking in his spasm ignoring the majordomo's calls. Tisking, Zazu crossed his wings and blurted, "Oh, why do I have to be witness to this..."

Zanti looked up, blinked at Zazu then quieted down. It was apparent the majordomo didn't appreciate being snuck up on - but any retaliation paid in the future was well worth it! "A picture is worth a thousand words Zazu, and you have to admit, the picture you just gave me is worth a fortune!" Zanti's grin progressed from ear to ear; one of the widest he'd produced lately! "Oh all right you stick in the mud," he mouthed off to Zazu upon sensing his mood. "You're no fun anyway."

The hornbill raised his eyebrow once more this time uncrossing his feathered wings. "Now, what is so important for you to have rushed all the way here?"

"Oh that?" He chuckled and nonchalantly said, "Oh, there's gazelle on the Pride Lands. I just thought you might have wanted the knowledge that would save your job."

"Gazelle?" Zazu blustered looking a bit confused. "What is so important about Gazelle?"

"Gazelle?!" asked an approaching voice; a voice belonging to a male lion. As he approached the conversing animals, Scar saw Zanti back away from him, obviously spooked. Taka sighed slightly knowing full well he wasn't going to hurt the creature - why did everyone react this way!? "What Gazelle? Where are the Gazelle?"

Zanti gulped and mustered all his courage together to answer the approaching lion, "On the Pridelands!" Surely they were on the Pridelands. At least he thought so. Why yes! They had to be! He wasn't all that far away from Pride Rock! "What's so special about Gazelle?!?" Zazu looked strained wanting to know.

Malaika exclaimed jumping into the air, "FOOD! You dope!" Food, glorious food. Could it be? Could there finally be an end to this maddening situation? Malaika hoped so for the sake of the Pride. She wasn't a clueless lioness; she could see the devastation across the lands: the browning grasses, the drying water holes, and the famine followed by the lack of herds. But this, this presented a whole new field to play in. If a herd of gazelle did exist on the Pridelands - the possibilities were endless!

"OHMIGOSH!" Zazu vociferated, fluttering to and fro; finally realizing the significance of the gophers words. Zanti ran and withdrew down his hole; frightened at the lioness who had come out of no where and the frantic displays they possessed. He disappeared and hurried as fast as he could to safety. Zazu's fluttering he could handle; but to stay and watch a jumping lioness was a health hazzard!

A herd of Gazelle would prove to be a humongous find indeed. Something the huntresses would be looking forward to hearing from their majordomo. The news was certainly better than past morning reports. The queen will be ecstatic! "Yes yes! What do we do?!?!?"

The lioness wrinkled her nose up at the shouting bird. "Well, duh!" she shot to him wondering if the hornbill had any sense at all. "Must be those feathers", 'Malaika chuckled to herself. "Where you going?" Scar remarked watching the lioness bound off steadily away towards the promontory. But she didn't answer him. She kept her speed as the excitement built - the Pride were going to hunt today and be successful!

Scar watched as Malaika happily darted into the chambers of the pride. Excitement like hers would be needed for a successful hunt today. A hunt that he would lead. "You?" Zazu interrupted.

"That's right. I intended to lead this hunt."

"Why you?"

"Because that is what a leader does; he leads."

Zazu blinked at the words spoken before him. "Leader?" Scar couldn't be serious. He couldn't lead this pack of lionesses if he wanted too! They certainly didn't approve of him; and he they. And Sarabi would be searing mad! She wouldn't let Scar come anywhere near her - best of all lead a hunt she was well capable of doing on her own. Zazu didn't know who the dark maned lion thought he was; but a leader was not one of them.

Inside the lions den everything was quiet; not even a lion was stirring. Malaika entered the cavern so excited she could hardly contain herself. The urge to bellow was overwhelming. She just wanted to yell the good news at the top of her lungs - though she dismissed that idea almost immediately; rudely awakening the queen was not what she wanted - far from in fact. But, she couldn't help chuckling at the possible sight she would witness: All the lions jumping up, confused and ready to fight one another. Who knew? From what she witnessed last night, something like that was bound to happen anyway so why not now?

Still, the sharp utterings from Sarafina and Kolo brought her back into reality. It was that very noise that had awoken her in the first place. SNORING! "Oh I don't snore!" quoted Malaika of Sarafina. "Yeah right," she giggled witnessing the truth now. Even her friend seemed to have picked up the knack as well. "And if she doesn't stop..." Malaika whispered, "I'm going to plug a rock in her muzzle!" Nodding, she made up her mind. She had no choice but to awaken them. The young hopeful silently padded her way through the sleeping lionesses - noting Khemontu and Ishsana. Turning away from them, she continued tip-toeing through each of the sleeping forms until she reached her point: In the center of it all slept Sarabi - The queen of the Pridelands. Reaching down as gently as she could, she nudged Sarabi with her nose. "Psssst..." she called silently. "Sarabi, wake up." she nudged her once more, but she still didn't budge. "Boy, a heavy sleeper!"

"Alright," Malaika said to herself. "Some things just must be done." Breathing in as much air as she could; the lioness prepared herself for the onslaught of moans and growls she'd receive. Though the looks she'd get would definately be worth the price of seeing each and every one of her friends jump in fright and surprise. Hilarious... simply hilarious! Stopping her inward take of breath, Malaika braced herself for the loudest roar she could make. She firmly planted all paws down on the flooring of the cave and heaved the air out of her lungs as hard as she could. Only the sound emanating from her muzzle wasn't enough to wake any creature in slumber, instead Malaika found the paw of queen Sarabi embedded in it.

"Quiet you," Sarabi looked up to the lioness who stared back in disbelief. Moments ago, the queen was laying on her side as silent and quite unaware of her surroundings. Malaika wondered what alerted her to the roaring effort. "What do you want to do give us all heart attacks?"

Malaika blinked. "Well, no. That was not my intention." She smiled and helped Sarabi stretch the sleepiness from her muscles.

"Then what were you preparing for? That was certainly not a sneeze."

She laughed. "No my queen; It was not."

"So then you *were* preparing to roar?" Sarabi playfully asked.

Malaika nodded with a grin. "Okay, okay. I confess. Now are you happy?" Sarabi laughed aloud and looked the lioness over. In all her wisdom, Sarabi knew many of the younger lionesses like Malaika, Kolo and Ng'ara would carry this pride into the future. Amsit the problems surrounding them, Sarabi had no doubts about the survival of her pride - only if some stability could be brought to it.

"Well then. What brought you here?" Sarabi asked of her lioness.

"OH!" Malaika exclaimed, the news almost escaping her mind. She backtracked her steps into the den, remembered the news about the gopher, Zazu and the Gazelle and proceeded to tell all. "Oh Sarabi! Gazelle!! On the Pridelands!!!"

"What?!" Sarabi jumped up unsure of what she had just heard. Could it be? Yes! It could. It was true! By golly it was true! Excited as Malaika was, her voice echoed and bounced off the cavern walls. Her exclamations were loud enough to awaken everyone in the den - including one snoring Sarafina! All were alive now and buzzing about the news brought by Malaika to enrouse the lionesses out of their slumber. And as Sarabi strained to hear Malaika explain where she had heard the news; in flew Zazu to make matters worse.

"Sarabi! Sarabi!! I have something to tell you!" the bird flapped all around trying with all his might to gather the attention of the queen. She took a look about and saw utter and total chaos amongst her ranks. The lionesses had taken to a gathering of cackling and yelping while Zazu the domobird fluttered in adding even more to the disruption.

"Calm down!" Sarabi aled. "Everyone please calm down!" But no one paid notice. That in which she commanded was not being ignored; only overlooked amongst the excitement in the air. And though it was the queen who gave the order; it took what seemed an eternity for the occupants of the room to become sedate. Even Zazu abided by the rule this time. "Now, what was it you said again Malaika?"

"*FOOD!*" She spurted. "*WE HAVE FOOD!*" All the lionesses blinked in bewilderment then began rejoicing around her as the significance of her words sank in. Yet through the excitement, there was one question that still remained - location. Where exactly was the herd of foodstuffs located on the Pridelands. Malaika didn't know. But if it the gazelle were on the Pridelands, the hunting party should be able to find them without any problems!

Eh, but they weren't worrying themselves about that at the moment; for now was a time to rejoice and celebrate - there was food to be had on the Pridelands! Malaika who had instantly been surrounded by lionesses was being prodded for any information she had, and, of course, she had none. She turned to Zazu asking of him, "Where ARE the gazelle?" The smile she sported on her features began to slide as Zazu nervously chuckled and shrugged before the audience. "I don't know."

"YOU DON'T KNOW?!?" shot Kolo. "What do you *mean* you don't know?"

"I don't know..." he stated flatly.

Kolo screamed, "Well find out!"

"Who would know?" Isha got in.

"Come on bird," Ng'ara poked.

"I DON'T KNOW!!!" Zazu squawked frustratingly at being surrounded by a bunch of lionesses. "But I know who does..." he allowed as it got so silent one could drop a pin and hear it a mile away. "And he's right outside--" being tossed around like old garbage, "What...who.. Ack!", the lionesses trampled over him and shot outside to hopefully interrogate the one who was knowledgeable enough to know the location of the gazelle. Sarafina smiled at Sarabi who was standing in an almost disbelief kind of state... "Are you alright?" Shaking her head and nodding, "Just overjoyed!" Sarafina grinned to her and they both left for the outer reaches of the cave where Zazu recouped from the lioness' interrogation.

Outside all serenity was lost as the escaping lionesses spilled onto the plains in search for the one creature responsible for the uproar...and thank it! Zanti blinked as the ground around him began to rumble. He returned to the surface from the scare moments ago hoping everything had returned to normal when all of the sudden he caught wind of something out of the ordinary. This new sensation bewildered him so the gopher put his ear to the ground to absorb the shockwaves from this bizarre event. "Now what?" he mouthed aloud and tried to concentrate on the vibration of the noises. And just then, the corner of his eye caught a plume of smoke approaching -and Zazu fluttering to keep in front of it. The sight struck terror in the little furry and in a last ditch effort he dropped back down his soil aperture and disappeared from sight completely.

The rumbling became worse as whatever was approaching, did so quickly. And then, as if someone stopped the river from flowing; the noise was gone and everything was silent once more. Piqued by the sudden change, Zanti poked his head out of the hole and found himself surrounded by the airborne dust and debris that was caused... "At least I didn't imagine it."

"Hello?" Zanti heard and opened his eyes wider. Coughing as the winds carried the last bit of dust away, he was left staring right in the eyes of..... "Aaaaaaaack!" He screamed as loud as he could and dropped back into his abyss once more. A LIONESS!

"Hello?" a female voice called again.

"Don't hurt me..." the gopher whimpered curling himself up.

Malaika laughed, "We have no intentions of hurting you." She smiled to her friend Kolo who was just as anxious to get underway. "We just want to talk to you."

Zanti shuttered, "We? There are more of you?"

"Zanti." now there was a voice he recognized. "The Queen is here and she definatley isn't going to hurt you."

"Sarabi? Ooooh!" the frightened gopher slowly popped his head up and quickly surveyed his surroundings. "Your majesty... excuse my behavior," he said with a chuckle and a sigh of relief. Still, the many pairs of eyes focused on him were unnerving. Choking down the feelings inside he asked the all important question: "What can I do for you?"

As quickly as she could Sarabi calmly answered him, "You can help us by directing us to the general location of the gazelle."

"Ahh..." nodded the brown furry. "The gazelle... lets see." Gathering his self confidence a bit more he decided to toy around a bit if only to break the ice... as it were. "Now, where did I see those beasties..." Zanti looked all around making like he couldn't find them. However, the fun quickly ended as he detected a twitch from one of the lionesses who were obviously not amused.

"Well, are you going to take all day?" Scar hissed. "This is very important to us you boob!"

Shrugging, the gopher let it out. "Northwest--" and Scar charged forward... "Oh my!" the gopher exclaimed covering his face.

"Come on!" the dark maned lion roared to the pack. "What are you waiting for!"

"Oh um... Scar? You're leading?" Ng'ara asked of the King's brother, running after him. "Leading us? On the hunt?"

"Of course I am." He stopped and grinned cunningly at the young lioness. "I wouldn't miss this momentous occasion for the world." He winked at her then flicked a look at Sarabi. The queen scowled. She couldn't object; especially with all that is at stake. And she didn't want to draw speculation to herself neither. The last thing she needed was Scar bearing down on her.

Isha and Ng'ara both looked back at their queen who simply stood with all eyes afixed on the black maned lion. Sarabi looked so stern; if fire shot out of her sockets neither of the two would be surprised. "Sarabi?" Isha broke the quick silence.

"Yes," she flatly stated. "*Scar* will be leading."

Sarafina and Malaika threw surprised faces at Sarabi. Why Scar? He is not in control over this pride. They turned and frowned upon the lion. "Um, no objections. But I don't feel comfortable with him," Malaika offered.

"Me either," said Kolo.

Isha stated as she stepped forward, "Same."

Sarafina nodded in agreement.

Sarabi smiled a bit knowing that her lionesses still felt the same as she. No one wanted Scar in their lives. He was cunning and rude and... "He is in the lead," Sarabi answered their hails.

"The lead... as *in control*?" echoed Sarafina.

"Yeeeeesssss," Scar answered for Sarabi. "I am in control here. And we better get moving before we lose our catch." He let out a devilish grin as he laid out the orders for the hunting party to follow.

Scar coaxed the direction to travel by gazing up at the afternoon sun and aquired his sense of direction; projecting the course necessary to get them to their desired location. Once determining that, he launched himself towards that goal with all his heart. This hunting opportunity was exactly what he needed to secure his spot as king of the pride... it was if all his

hops and prayers were answered! As the "king" raced off followed Sarabi, Ng'ara and Isha; Malaika turned to Kolo and shrugged, "Hi ho... Hi ho... It's off to hunt we go!" and took off after Scar with wild interest in Scar's attitude. Maybe he was committed to the pride? Only time would tell. It would definately be a first.

* * *

Tshatshi and Kichasi roamed the outer banks of what they knew was the boundaries of the Pride Lands. As they looked upon the plains; the pair relished in their thoughts: Soon those grasses would be theirs to roam and to conquer. The lions and their upstanding ways would be forever flushed from the Serengeti. "It will be nice to finally see Mng'ariza's vision come true."

Tshatshi grinned, "You talk as if he had some kind of sacred vision." He stopped to take a cool drink of water.

"Yeah I do," the female replied standing beside the pool of water. "It was his great vision that lead us out here."

"True," the cheetah said as water drooled from his jowles. "But I don't see him as a big visionary." Tshatshi took his paw and wiped his muzzle, clearing away the droplets that still lagged behind.

"Maybe you just don't see the real truth." She bent down to lap up some of the cool liquid herself.

"Truth is in the eye of the beholder Kichasi. One can't cloud what is to be and what is by simple emotion."

"Oh no? Then why are we here?"

"We are here to survive Kichasi, not to wage war."

Kichasi moaned at Tshatshi's comment. "So you would rather not fight against the Lions?"

"I would rather see it not come down to that, but you and I both know that it has gone beyond that decision already. A second fight is enevitable." He paused for a bit. "The question is here... is one of achievement."

"Oh we will prevail. When I lead us into the battle... that is something you can place a bet on."

Tshatshi stopped and pondered the younger females' words. If he didn't know better, Kichasi was becoming more delusional every time she talked of Mng'ariza and what she had planned for the lions. He understood her passion to hurt the lions for what they did to her uncle - how they humiliated him and the clan he lead; but she was no Mng'ariza; and their target would not go down without a fight. "Kichasi, believing one will prevail against all odds is assuring; but making that an absolute..."

"Is insane?" she quirked.

Tshatsi nodded in agreement. "Yes."

"Well I haven't gone insane..."

"Yet." the male added.

The two smiled to each other as they slowly made their way around the boundary and back in the general direction of their layer. Soon Kichasi would have another fight on her hands. Upon their return to the Cheetah's cave, the female would start a mutiny attempt against Khulo

and woo the clan to follow her and her visions for their future. Tshatshi wondered as he walked by her side, how he would play in all this. He was Khulo's number one. Could he bear to look at his friend again? And if the attempt failed would Khulo trust him? Or was it something else that bothered the cheetah. Only time would tell he figured. So precious time was these days to him and his life. The choices were very tough to make.

"Whatcha thinkin'?" Kichasi hailed breaking the silence.

"Oh," Tshatshi relented. "I'm thinking about things."

She broke her stride just a bit but never let it show she understood what was going through his mind. "You're wondering if you've made the right choice?" She didn't even have to see his answer to know it was true. And sometimes even she questioned her motives - but always seemed to come to the same conclusion: Act now; question later. And that was her look on her forthcoming mutiny attempt. The time was to act now. She required help. Help was available in the clan. Now the only task that lay before her is to convince the clan that she was the right cheetah for the job. Kichasi must gain the respect and the right to lead from them. If they were not willing to follow her... then they might as well lay down and die. This is how she saw it at least.

"I understand. But you are making the right decision."

"Am I?" He questioned. "I'm turning my back on a good friend. I've been as loyal to Khulo as he has to me. We've been through a lot together. To simply turn my back on his leadership and his friendship would only serve as a slap in the face. I would never be able to recoup the trust that would be lost. Again I tell you that I am not proud of the choice I've made to you today. So don't sit there and tell me you understand what I'm going through... because quite frankly you don't."

Kichasi stopped and looked at him while he continued. "Loyalties run deep Kichasi. They're not given; they're earned. You must trust the people under your command and respect them. Because the instant you don't it opens up a flood gate of problems. What you are attempting is a coup - a mutiny. You are trying to gain control of a clan that is not rightfully yours. Prepare for a fight because the members did not swear to live and die under your command. They swore to Mng'ariza and his number one; Khulo. You may be able to win their support at the spur of the moment. But get it through your head that your vision of glory may be very short lived."

"You can sit here and tell me everything that you see in your vision. But it all comes down to winning the support of the other clan members. If you can do that; then you have a slight chance. You are young and very inexperienced. You have no refined leadership skills and you have very little respect for the people you will potentially lead. So please... do what you will; but don't make this a glory fight. Fight for what you think is right. Fight for our survival not for your just dues."

Tshatshi having said all he needed to walked away from the female leaving Kichasi standing in awe at the speech that her second in command had just given her. Maybe she didn't understand what went on inside the mind of her clanmates. Maybe she didn't have leadership

skills. But she did know that it only took one person to stand up to an ideal; to make a change. It only took one person to stand and fight for what they thought was right. And she was that person. Kichasi would stand up for their survival; something Khulo would not do. She would be successful too - this of herself she commanded!

* * *

"Shhhh," Scar ordered. "We're real close now." The scent of gazelle was all over the plains. Downwind from the potential kill, the lioness hunting party headed up by the most despicable lion - Scar; edged their way closer and closer to their target. "They're just passed that tree line..."

Malaika and Kolo were anxious as ever. Action hadn't been plentiful around the Pridelands as of late; and this was a welcome distraction. Finally a worth while hunt! Isha too was itchy to sink her claws into some prey as she became just as restless as the others. "What's our plan of attack?" she wanted to know of him. If Scar was in the lead today he is sure to have an attack plan; or at least it would be wise to have such a plan.

Sarabi pulled along side the trio and smiled slightly, "Well, I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Excitement?" Kolo asked of the queen.

"Yeah," Sarabi grinned. "Silly isn't it?"

"No, not at all" offered Ng'ara.

Malaika thought, "Then there is no plan?"

Sarabi was about to answer when in came Scar, "Shhhh... What is this? Gossip hour?" The lionesses chuckled slightly at Scar who wasn't all that amused. There was still work to be done and no one had a plan on how to attack the problem - let alone how they were going to attack the prey. "Do you have a plan of assault... Scar?" Sarabi just looked at her nemesis and remained silent. The eyebrows of Mufasa elevated to their highest positions possible as he gazed back down at the queen. "What?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out right now," she said a bit short; but let out a tight smile. "Unless the mighty *Scar* here has a strategy." Sarabi knew she had him now. By the look on the dark maned lions face there was no formulation going on - just a blank stare into the unknown. Scar was no hunter. He didn't understand what to do on a big hunt such as this. But to gain the confidence of the lionesses he needed to shine; he needed to produce; and he needed to lead this hunt to the end. Sarabi wasn't helping the situation any. Scar knew she was trying to get back at him for this intrusion; hunting was the lionesses jobs. One they relished and enjoyed. *No matter*, Taka thought. *I will not let Sarabi get the best of me!*

"As a matter of fact," the leader offered. "I do." Scar grinned as Sarabi lost her balance; completely surprised by the notion of a plan. She looked over the small group of lionesses who were eager to pounce on the gazelle. They were primed and ready. Sarabi felt that the hunting party would rather jump now instead of waiting to devise a plan. But then again they had to ensure complete success or the distance they traveled this day would be meaningless.

"Well smarty," Malaika cautiously stated. "Spill it."

Scar grinned and leaned into the group as Sarafina joined them from the rear. "We're going to surround them."

"Gee, why didn't I think of that." kidded Isha
"Yes..." Taka grumbled. "Then I'm sure you won't get it wrong."
"I dearly hope not," Ng'ara poked in.
"I always knew Isha was the dumb blonde of the pride," Malaika giggled.
"Alright... enough."

All kidding aside, dead seriousness resided over Mufasa's features as he began assigning positions for the lionesses to begin their attacks from. Being very adamant about each direction and placement, Scar was very determined on getting it right. Their well-being depended on it. One wrong move could open up a hole large enough for the gazelle to flee - which is not what one wanted the quarry to do; escape. Strategically positioned around the area would guarantee a successful hunt. "And where do you play into all this?" Malaika wanted to know.

"I'll be stationed on the forefront, here." he pointed to the grassy line ahead. "That should give me enough cover. When you see me charge out from behind into the arena," Scar began. "That'll be your cue to enter the chase; coming at them from all sides will most likely spook them into hesitation. Which in turn will give us enough time to seal off their chances for escape."

Malaika was in awe. The plan seen in its perfection and the lion who created it. Maybe Scar wasn't so bad after all. His plan was simple enough. Anyone within the pride could have conjured it up. But Scar brought something to his words that seemed focused and demanding. It appeared that he wanted to succeed no matter what. Malaika looked toward the ridge they would be encompassing soon going over the thoughts that ran through her head. Some were uplifting, others were not; but it would all be put aside once the thrill of the hunt was upon her... and her other pride members.

"Are we ready?" Scar asked of the pride. Through their nervousness, they all nodded one by one: Sarabi, Malaika, Kolo, Sarafina, Ng'ara, and Isha - poised and ready for the pursuit of their future. This one hunt in all its glory, will come down to be their most important no matter the outcome. It will either save them or break them; the future of the pride rides on the importance of this one chase. As well as the future of Scar's bid for the crown.

"We're all ready...Scar." Sarabi answered.

She too knew the consequences of this hunt. The Pride hadn't had a decent meal in days; a decent water supply; or a decent place to live. It was all falling apart before their very eyes only now becoming stable. And this, the first gleam of hope; hope these lionesses seemed to have given up on. Sarabi just hoped they could reap the rewards and not have to worry over the consequences.

"Positions please..." The order was short, yet to the point; the hunt would commence - now. As always, Malaika and Kolo paired up and wandered off in the direction of their assigned point; giggling and yakking the whole way. Ng'ara and Isha went off in the opposite direction while Sarafina stood firm with horror struck across her features.

"What's the matter Sarafina?" Sarabi inquired of her friend.

"I... I..." She stuttered, trying to coerce the words from her mouth. "Nothing. I thought I saw something. " Through the confusion and excitement surrounding Zazu and the gopher, everyone sprinting off and through the plan that was formulated - Sarafina felt there was something shadowing her. Something she couldn't quite land a paw on. No matter; Sarafina shrugged it off and looked poised to take charge.

"She'll be fine." Sarabi told the others who had turned back and nuzzled in close. "Come on, we should be getting into our positions." Taking off now, Sarafina tried desperately to clear her mind off everything but the gazelle and the plan to trap them. The instant she'd spot the massive lion racing in; there Sarafina would be to pounce. And that she promised.

Watching Sarafina take right flank a few yards away from her and Scar; Sarabi nodded slightly before padding away slowly to the left. "We're ready." Winking at her, Taka smiled as he watched the lioness bound off. The best hunt of their existence was about to begin. Tensions ran high all around because with something of this momentous there would only be one shot... multiple kills - very important.

Just over the ridge, unaware of the half-compass enclosure of lionesses, the meager pack of gazelle were content on grazing on the dew enriched grasses of the plains. Mufasa eyed cautiously as he counted four amongst the ranks. All unaware of what was yet to come, lazily bending down and grappling the grasses as if there were no worries in the world. For them at this moment, no; but for Scar - the integrity of his bid for kingship was in jeopardy. Already witness to his mother turn her back on him; putting Sarabi in an unbelievable position; and even trying to discredit his own brother. If he were to fail in this it would be... Scar shook his head fitfully trying to clear his brain of unneeded thoughts, instead focusing his vision on the quad-formes of the gazelle ahead.

The black mane of the lion flipped in the air as he raised his nose to toward the sky. First taking shallow sniffs of air, then following with a large gasp; Scar sensed the winds beginning to change. Any minute now, the gazelle would be able to pick up their scents and become alerted to their presence. If the hunt didn't go forward now they would lose the element of surprise. He looked to his left, then to his right, a flash of hopeless thoughts ran across his head. "I hope they're ready," he muttered and unsheathed his claws as he began an all out charge towards the incognizant idleness of the prey ready to pounce at anything in his wake.

Tasi had been awaiting the return of Zanti all morning. After his hurried ejection from his plush hole, she'd been worried. Soon enough she had a new problem to worry about; the ground, walls and ceiling around her began to shake and rumble. "Oh my!" She exclaimed trying to scramble for the sunlit hole that was their only nearby exit. "What is going on?!" Chunks of rock and soil were dropping on her from all angles. "ZANTI!!!" she cried out, wanting the protection of her mate; alas he wasn't around to help her.

Making her way as best she could to the opening she would call her savior, Tasi poked her head up and became witness to a sight she thought she'd never see in her entire existence - a charging lion. But not just any common lion; it was Mufasa's brother! And he was on a collision course with her! Paw after paw collided with the soil and grasses of the Pridelands sending out massive shockwaves. With each approaching rumble, the massive form closed in on the gopher who was all but shocked into the frozen form she was. The only thing that she could do was gather herself up and disappear into the depths of her subterranean home, and hope that she could ride out the storm.

Malaika was the first to reveal herself upon seeing Taka lunge out onto the open plains. Soon after that, out came Kolo and Sarafina - invading and attacking. Before the gazelle realized what was occurring, all six snarling lionesses headed by one male were quickly approaching them. And as instinct prevailed, they darted off away from the male. But that avenue was soon cut off by Malaika and Kolo who had run off upwind. And soon, their easterly route was vanquished by Sarafina and Ng'ara. The plan unfolded and was rapidly becoming a success; the gazelle were startled, but not enough to give up. With Ng'ara and Sarafina coming at them from the east, and Kolo and Malaika from the north; the muscular gazelle darted off southwest towards Sarabi and then cut sharply northwest away from her and Scar.

As quickly as they could and as agility would allow, pursued Malaika and her companion. "Oh, no... You're not getting away from me!" But as it seemed, that was exactly what they were doing... getting away! How could this be! Scar swiftly took his semi-muscular body and gave chase to the others... by falling back. He'd seen Malaika and Kolo flank north and west and with Sarabi following them straight up, the game would be afoot - trapped amongst three hungry lionesses.

Converging on the gazelle seemed to spook them into sprinting off towards Ng'ara and Sarafina which brought them within striking distance of Scar. Crisscrossing in front of the king of the Pridelands was not the most wisest thing to do as Scar snarled and launched his darkened body at the mass of blur he came to know as the enemy. Straining the elasticity of all his muscles, he aimed his fully extended claws right for the massive leader of the small herd. The lion let out a mighty roar as he felt his claws sink deeply into the flesh of his enemy and the warmth of its blood splattered on his paws.

The sandy furred creature collapsed under the weight of the king as both bodies sprawled into the path of the oncoming creatures. Scar blinked as he hit the ground and instantly was enshrouded in a cloud of smoke that the fleeing gazelle generated. Sarabi screamed as she witnessed the scene unfolding and was powerless to stop it. She may not have liked Taka much; but she didn't want him to die - especially since he seemed to have the Pride's best interests at hand. In shock, she bellowed a mighty "SCAR!!!!!!!!!!!" as the gazelle trampled over him and the catch he had locked in his claws.

Malaika and Kolo followed by Sarafina, Isha and Ng'ara took after the other three while Sarabi hung back and watched Scar as the plume of dust and debris settled around a form, lying in the center of the most horrid calm - Taka. Sarabi was oblivious to the hunt now as she was undividedly called to her mate's brother. Lifeless as can be, Mufasa didn't stir as he sported a noticeable stench of blood. Reds, greens and browns intermixed on the Pridelands as the blood entangled itself with the lifeline of the Pridelands. Death was in the air as Sarabi examined the body of the fallen lion. trampled and broken by escaping prey. Again she would be responsible for drawing the blood of a member of Ahadi's royal family.

Sarafina was on on the trail of one that seemed to have veared off the rest of the pack. Alone as the creature was; the mighty paws of Sarafina were not giving up the chase. Over hills, through the grasses and flying over rocks; the lioness tracked her prey with precision. The gazelle never got more than a few strides away. But with reserves beginning to wear down

Sarafina wondered if she'd ever catch up to it. And then out of no where someone else joined her race. She caught a glimpse of the other persuer to her right coming at light speed only to loose sight of the form. What ever it was must have decided to stay away.

Then like a strike of firelight; a black form jumped with a snarl and bore its claws into the side of the animal Sarafina gave chase and wrestled it do the ground. Unable to stop her persuit; the lioness plowed right into the gazelle and who ever had brought it down sending her body sprawling though the air. Landing on her side with a moan; Sarafina succomed to her fatigued and layed there to catch her breath.

"Hello Sarafina," said a voice.

The lioness perked up and looked astonished at what she saw. "W...Wa... Wamase?"

"Yes Sarafina," the black lioness nodded.

"It can't be... you're..."

"Dead?" Wamase finished for her.

Sarafina nodded.

"Death is only the step to a higher existence Sarafina."

Sarafina got up and brushed shook her fur ridding herself of the dirt that gathered amongst the strands of hair. She rubbed her head with a paw and felt a slight bump welling up. "Uh... I must be dreaming."

"No Sarafina. This is not a dream."

She blinked and put all fours back on the ground. "How can you be here if this is not a dream?"

"Don't you remember what I told you before? That I will always be with you..."

Sarafina blinked. "Yes, I remember. But that was in a dream!"

Wamase shook her head and walked up to the lioness that she came to know as a friend. Oh if things had gone differently; these two would be as stong a team as ever. Their friendship was building to last an eternity. Unfortunately for the both of them; one fateful attack layed their two lives in suspense. Their paths no longer known. But Wamase had made a promise to Sarafina that she would never leave her side - in life or in death. The dark lioness reached out a paw and touched the shoulder of her friend and reassured her that life was not a dream.

"B-bu-but." Wamase's touch was something she never expected. Up until now Sarafina had convinced herself that she was dreaming; or worse halucinating. But that was all laid to rest the instant the warmth of Wamase's paw reached the internal soul of the lioness Sarafina.

"Don't be afraid my friend."

"I... I'm not." But she was. Sarafina was frightened to death. Mere hours ago she was dreaming of hunting and a vision of Wamase appeared. Now she *was* on a hunt and here before her stood Wamase again. But this time the black lioness before her was not a figment of her imagination; she was real. "But how?"

Wamase giggled. "How is not important. I needed to remind you that I was here for you my friend. And will always be here to help you. But you have to do something for me okay?" The lioness nodded. "You have to let me go..."

"No! I couldn't!"

"You must. You mean a lot to this pride Sarafina. More right now than you can even guess. The magnitude of importance to the Pride is staggering. But in order to grasp your place amongst the Circle of Life; you will have to let me go."

"Sarafina?" someone called from beyond a hill and Wamase looked saddened. "It's time for me to go my friend. Think about what I said. I will be with you....."
Sarafina turned to a shadow form who had approached overhead. It was Kolo.

"Are you alright Sarafina?"

The lioness turned her gaze back to Wamase and blinked suddenly. She was nowhere to be found. Sighing she got up and checked her kill. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"Alright!" bounced Kolo, "You got him!"

Sarafina giggled and nodded. "Yup," she let out keeping the full secret to herself.

"C'mon. Lets go get Sarabi!"

* * *

Oh how it saddened her so to see the lion laying - blood amassed on his paws, face and mane - in the awfully twisted form it was in. "Oh Scar..." Sarabi managed to breathe as she laid by her slain love and nuzzled him gently. The one thing that no one could prepare for was becoming a reality... Scar was dead - the pride now without a male. Beside herself, the lioness stepped back and allowed herself an unqueenly gesture - to cry into her paws.

"Sarabi?" said a weak voice which made her jump up and gaze in all directions. Sarabi didn't see the hunting party anymore, or the gazelle for that matter... only the one Taka managed to bring down before...

"Sarabi?" the voice called again, a little louder. Sarabi blinked at the corpse that was before her, thinking she heard a little voice of hope indicating that the dark maned lion was still among the living.

"Taka?" she said aloud to calm her fears the first time she'd called the lion by his real name since their incident together. But, it turned out not to be... as Malaika and Kolo came over the ridge calling the queen's name. Bearing grins from ear to ear, they approached Sarabi, "We got 'em. All of them."

"Oh? Good..." but her mind was elsewhere.

Kolo gasped, seeing Scar for the first time sprawled out on the savanna floor. "My god Sarabi, what on earth..." Malaika too grimaced at the sight as the two stood dumbfounded.

"What are we going to do now?" Malaika called.

Sarabi looked out upon the grasslands of the pride lands. "I don't know..." and sat back on her haunches.

"I'll tell you what we're going to do," came over the winds. "We're going to have one great feast!"

Sarabi looked up at both Malaika and Kolo who stood watching over the body of their leader as smiles slowly crept up on their faces. "Man you can't keep a lion down these days."

Sarabi laughed aloud. "Scar is tough. Aren't you?"

"A regular frontier lion..." he said. And if the stampeding gazelle had gotten any closer he would have been a defeated lion - a life, forfeited. Luckily, it wasn't the worst case scenario at work. The earth below him was tarnished in blood - that of Taka and the gazelle. He was lucky in his daring endeavour to come out with only a superficial scrape buried somewhere in his dark mane, yet it bled... and bled. "Hey everybody!" spoke Isha, who approached the scene in good spirits; but her heart dropped at the sudden onslaught of blood. "Oh my!"

Scar reassured, "I'm okay Isha, really." He looked at the carcass that had belonged to a lion. "Though he is not." Ng'ara laughed aloud as she approached the court of lions.

"That is a funny way of putting it." The lioness grinned as she sported some blood on her muzzle. "Isha and I got one too..."

"So did we," reported Kolo of the efforts of her and Malaika. Scar seemed pleased and commended everyone on a job well done, they certainly earned it. "Did we get the forth?" he wanted to know as he rubbed the wound on his head fitfully trying to dull the pain emanating from the fissure. The lionesses looked at each other and seemed to shrug as none of them knew. "Well..." Scar started to say before spotting something.

"Yes," mouthed Sarafina hauling her catch. "I got the forth." The gazelle slipped from her grasp as she collapsed to the hard soil below, exhausted.

"ALRIGHT!" rejoiced the hunting pack of lions who were followed and joined by a loud and powerful roar from their leader - Scar; to indicate the hunt's prosperous closure and to signal the rising of a more thriving future. A future that would provide Scar a firm place to continue his kingship ideals.

* * *

Outside watching the sun slowly set was Khulo; pacing back and forth. He'd worn a path in the ground just worrying over Kichasi. She hadn't returned with the group earlier and hadn't been seen really since he ordered Tshatshi on that recon mission. "Maybe I should take that as a blessing," he thought. "It would be one less worry for me..." if she ran off. Though he didn't say it aloud; he was thinking it. Khulo would be better off without Kichasi. Unfortunately right now he needed all the bodies he could get. If he was going to keep the clan alive he would need the support of everyone. There was no time to waste with someone who couldn't put the clan before their own agenda.

"Ahh, but that's the way of Kichasi," Khulo mouthed. "She wants everything to go her way and she wants it now. It's though she is taking matters in her own hands... trying to put forth an agenda for the clan that she isn't prepared for."

"But she won't back down," Khulo turned and began walking the other way. "It's like she wants a confrontation with me." He sighed. "Either way I'm going to have to be on guard. You never know with a conniving one such as she."

His thoughts soon wandered from the female to his scout, Tshatshi. He hadn't returned yet so he must have found something of interest to keep his attention. Either that or he was

detained by Kichasi herself. "Heh, no matter what I do I can't stop thinking about that female!" And he didn't even like her! No worries though. Soon Tshatshi would return with news about the lions and only then would he make a decision on which direction the clan would go in; and what to do about Kichasi.

"What are you doing out here?" came a voice from behind.
Khulo jumped a bit startled, "Oh... Tambulo. It's just you."
He giggled, "Yeah, who did you think it was?"

Khulo shrugged. Who knew? These days it could be Mng'ariza's ghost for all he knew. He sat and looked at his friend Tambulo and shook his head. Why was he so jumpy these days? "I dunno... I must be getting punchy in my old age."

"Old age!" laughed Tam, "You? Never..."

The other laughed, "I don't know Tam. Sometimes I feel like an old fool to be out here in the middle of the Savana."

Tambulo chuckled.

"I think my bones are becoming brittle! And my muscles; oy! I wouldn't want to assess them at this time."

The two laughed at one another.

"Well, maybe if we had soem action around here; your *old* bones and muscles would shape right up."

Khulo looked at his partner and sighed a bit, "Not you too?"

Sensing a bit of hostility and undoubtly some misunderstanding; Tambulo held up his paw in defence to silence the barrage of comments he knew was ready to dive out of the leaders mouth. "I don't want to resort to violence. But I believe the time is now right to act."

Maybe he *was* becoming an old fool, Khulo thought. It seemed to him that everyone was on edge and itching at the chance to fight the lions these days. The clan wanted to fight instead of coming to a compromise; albeit its been tried before. But that shouldn't mean giving up on diplomacy was the way to go. Instead they would rather fight than try to work together for a commong goal. Maybe as the leader Khulo should show off his claws and charge into a battle of supremacy. But what would that serve? Anyone who stoops to confrontation only looses in the end. Weren't they, as a clan and as cheetah's, better than that? Apparently not though; maybe the time is really right to fight for what you want even though its not really yours to take. And maybe, just maybe things aren't what they appear to be. Right now with everything hanging in the balance; one just can't rush into a situation without knowing all the facts.

But what if the facts weren't enough? What if there was something more and everyone was missing it? Drive perhaps. Something that could be missing was the drive that would be necessary to do what must be done; only it could not be reasoned logically. And logic! There were just too many things--too many possibilities that could not be accounted for. It would not be safe for the clan to attack now and Khulo knew it. It would be a suicide attempt and there was nothing worth risking their lives over at this point. No, fighting now would result in chaotic events that the cheetah clan could not afford.

"Why do you feel now is the time to act? When we know so little about what is really going on within the Lion pride?"

"Because," Tambulo swallowed while expressing his thoughts knowing full well that he was about to step on very muddy ground; a ground Khulo would like to avoid at all costs.

"We've waited for a day like today. Where there was no sign of hostilities from the lions. We've obeyed every command and followed your lead; as you are the second to Mng'ariza. But with what we were offered today; instead of challenging our position we turned and faltered back. How many times can we afford to do this?"

"What would you have us do? Go to their pride rock and stake claim?"

"Yes!"

"And what of their lion king?"

"He wasn't there!"

"That's the whole point Tambulo!" Khulo huffed and rose to pace back and forth. "The whole reason I sent Tshatshi out there to keep an eye on the situation to confirm whether or not Mustafa was around or not!"

"Mufasa!" Tambulo corrected allowing himself to yell at his leader before calming down to a more civilized tone. "Alright, so you have the scouter check. He comes back and confirms that *Mufasa* isn't in control. Then what? We wait?"

Khulo was being backed into a corner by a very good argument which presented quite valid questions about their futures. An argument that was presented well. And Tambulo presented a very good question indeed: what *would* he do if the lionesses were found to be defenceless. Would the order to attack be given? If so, could he in good conscious give such an order? Those questions were the most puzzling to him. In all his knowledge of leadership; his apprenticeship and later missions under Mng'ariza, he still did not understand why so many wanted to be in command. He could not fathom why anyone would want the job to be the leader of a clan. The stress was too much to bear at times! Mng'ariza's vision was grand and bold. A type of vision a great leader would make to rally his troops. But it wasn't necessarily the smartest thing to do; to envision something so big that it couldn't be done. Then again its unrecoverable odds that motivates the smallest of creatures sometimes. Unfortunately though, not every great leader knew when to say when and stop their conquest.

Many times within their own histories had many great leaders rose to power offering a great many things; only to fall down because they didn't understand when to call it quits. They didn't grasp the concept of turning away and letting things be as they should. Or for the most part; learning when to quit. Futility sometimes can be the most important lesson of all when studying command. If one can learn the concept of futility; he or she is truly a great leader.

"Then?" he asked to no one. "I don't know Tambulo. I just don't know." Khulo sounded beat. "There are still many factors to consider. One has to weigh all the facts. There *are* two males in that pride. One of them was responsible for the death of Mng'ariza while the other hasn't been seen since our last attack. Whose to say where he is and if he isn't still around; lurking in the shadows awaiting for us to trip up and make the most fatal of mistakes. Mufasa might be there for all we know... that's what--"

"He isn't," hailed a voice just beyond the visual range of the pair. "Tshatshi and I were on the plains all day. We saw hide nor hair of him."

"And the other?" Khulo questioned as the male and female crept closer.

"The scarred one is there," Tshatshi reported. "He will be no threat."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes Khulo," Kichasi stated flatly rolling her eyes. "Its so peaceful out there its unbelievable."

"There is no sign of hostility," Tshatshi offered. "We are clear."

Khulo looked at Tshatshi with an unwary eye. Was he too falling for the dribble Kichasi has been muttering all over the clan as of late? Was his confadont and friend joining forces with another? One who is clearly not capable of command? Surely not. "Why are you acting like this Tshatshi?"

"Acting like what?"

"You sound as if you're ready to attack."

"I am," he coldly replied. "It has come to me Khulo that the more we wait, the less able we're going to be."

Khulo moved to interrupt.

"I don't know if you've realized," Tshatshi continued. "But were not getting any nurishment here. Soon we're going to be unable to fend for ourselves."

The leader shook his head and watched as the rest of his clan exited the confines of the cavern they called home and errupted into the discussion.

"What's going on out here?" someone asked.

"Nothing Chal," answered Khulo. "We're just having a conversation amongst the sunset."

Chal hrumphed, "With all the noise you're making out here it sounds more like an argument." and then he saw Kichasi and instantly knew what had caused the ruckus.

"Yeah, can't you at least enjoy a good sunset?" Bhutai questioned with a smile knowing that was the reason Khulo wandered outside in the first place.

The one in charge grunted. Here they were rallying around him wondering what he'd do next to thwart the charges by the female Kichasi; whose only claim to fame was being the niece of Mng'ariza - their natural born leader. And it seemed she wanted the leadership more than he right now. And if it meant that she would lead the clan into battle so be it. He was tired of fighting with her around every turn. And it was time he let her know it.

"Look Kichasi I'm not going to place the clan in any kind of danger just because you are restless for some action. I have a greater responsibility to them then you can even fathom. They trusted Mng'ariza with their lives and subsequently with me. If I fail, they feel it even worse. This is not a game young one, this is for real; with dire consequences if you screw up. You can't play around with lives--"

"I know that you fool!" Kichasi yelled. "I'm not as naieve as you think I am. I know what good leadership takes. It takes results. And you are not producing any results. We are tired and we are restless." She looked at each and every member of the clan. "And we want results. We want what was promissed to us by Mng'ariza long ago! We want our lives back!"

"Fine," said Khulo. "You want what Mng'ariza promissed you? Well there it is," he pointed out to the serengetti plains of the pridelands. "Go get it!" and he started to huff off.

"What? That's it?" Kichasi wanted to know.

"You got it," shot Khulo. "You want it so bad you can taste it. But what you can't see right now *girl* is the unkown danger that awaits you. Alas you'll learn and come to understand this danger; albeit a bit too late."

She sighed heavily.

"Mark my word Kichasi. If you go through with your plan you are sentencing yourselves to death."

Khulo took off into the wooded area to look for solitude and hitting himself over the head for not seeing something like this sooner. Kichasi was a pistol; one hard to contain, but he never thought she'd overstep her bounds and plan a mutiny. Let alone act one out. 'But that was okay', he thought. He wasn't going to argue with her anymore; it was time for her try her plan and when it failed; Kichasi would come crawling back to him showering their leader with apologies. What hurt Khulo the most was how Tshatshi took to the girl abandoning all rational thought. "Pah," he sorted. "To all of ya!" He didn't need this; he didn't want this but it was thrown in his lap. Yet this little mutiny would serve a purpose. he thought "We will all find out how competent of a leader Kichasi really is." He looked up to the glowing sky and smiled. "Indeed."

The Pride

Chapter Seventeen

Scar sat happily amongst the lionesses watching them dine with a grin of satisfaction on his face. He knew he was finally in control of this pride. He achieved such recognition by claiming the rewards of the capture today; solidifying his bid to the throne as he leveled his plea to the huntresses. Skeptical in nature as they had always been of him, they did not argue with his logic. The form Scar had presented to them was unflawed. He would take Mufasa's place and lead them to new strength and new stamina. His words were only strengthened by the catch he helped make tonight. The future for him was now solid; in firm control of the Pride just like he promised he'd be.

The dark maned lion looked up briefly at the stars that shined above and spat at what he saw. His mother was up there somewhere undoubtedly watching over his every move which only served to unnerve him greatly. "I hope you are burning with rage Akase," He spoke into the night air. "I have achieved my goals... without your guidance." Scar then turned away from the night sky in disgust. In ways he was glad his mother turned from him as she did. It only served to enrage him more; to strive for this day ever more; to make his kingdom a reality. And here it was - reality. "Well I hope you are happy."

"What's that Scar?" Isha asked of him, mouth full of gazelle.

The lion was taken aback; surprised that he had murmured loud enough for anyone to hear. Obviously he had or Isha would not be inquiring on his comments. "Don't worry yourself with such trivial things my dear." He felt embarrassed. If she had overheard what he was saying... "I was just thanking the Great Kings for our fine catch today."

"Ahh, yes!" Exclaimed Ng'ara. "We were blessed from the kings!"

"Sure," he said to please the younger one. "But aren't you glad I went along?"

"Oh yes," Ng'ara nodded. "Quite happy. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have successfully driven down the hunt!"

"I appreciate your kind words," he smiled to her. "Enjoy yourself."

"Don't you want to eat?" Isha asked of Scar.

Taka smiled to her with knowledgeable eyes. "You need your strength. I'll eat when you are done." The pair looked ultimately amazed. Usually the king ate first; tonight Scar relinquished his position for the sake of the Pride and it was then Malaika thought that maybe he wouldn't be such a bad apple after all. "I must take my leave of you. I shall return after awhile." The lionesses nodded while Scar turned and fled from their sight.

He made his way through the semi-star lit skies of the plains to a place very few have ventured. Travelers were turned away by fear or shooed away from the place by its inhabitants. Either way the darkened area was no place for the faint of heart; for it was a place of the dead.

The bushes rustled ahead sending alarm to Shenzi who watched on. Her senses erupted ten fold as they heightened her limits; not expecting anyone put her on edge and she was a bit frightened as to how the events might unfold. "Shh," she called to her companions. "Some one is coming!" She watched as the grasses swayed to and fro, parting for who ever was coming their way. Even the bright silvery light above was in no way helpful to identifying the approaching form. Yet, whatever or whoever it was, kept advancing closer and closer. The trio of hyenas were poised and ready for anything. Completely surrounded by rocks, bushes and other flora there was only one way in - and it was heavily guarded.

At the left, sat Banzai crouching behind a rock. The male took his job seriously, being as silent and as still as he could, while keeping an eye on the intruder. He looked askance and found Ed, crawling in a bush. "What the..." Banzai muttered, turning back to Shenzi who was crouched behind him. As motionless as he could, he tried pointing out the fumbling idiot climbing in the bush.

"What's he doing!" Shenzi almost said aloud as her eyes spotted the male. Shrugging, she held up her paws; it was too late to do anything about it. Hopefully, Ed wouldn't draw attention to himself, but she knew *that* was impossible. Ed was never one for self reassurance. Even he knew he was a screw up. In any case, Shenzi hoped he didn't mess this up, because if he did...

Rustling of the grasses once more called her attention to focus on the plains ahead. Who or what was encroaching on their territory was getting dangerously close. A bit too close for comfort. Banzai turned to her once more glaring back a questioning look on what to do about Ed. Shenzi held her darkened paw up and crouched down, waiting to pounce.

Finally the silvery lunar light washed over the intruder and revealed the dark mane, and fur of a lion. And just as Banzai was ready to surprise the attacker, Ed fell out of his tree in a laughing fit. "ED!" screamed Banzai, losing their element of surprise. The form jumped back, startled but soon recovered enough to allow a smile to spread across his features.

"Aww," it spoke. "Did I ruin your fun?"

"S-Scar?" asked Banzai staring into the darkness. "Is that you?"

Shenzi giggled and came out of her hiding place. "Well of course it is fool. Who else would come all the way out here!" She recovered her self quickly; relinquishing the hold she had on her fight - something she was not about to share that weakness with her companions. Especially how it was around the graveyard these days. A power struggle was in their future and Shenzi wanted in on the action!

Banzai asked of Ed, "Ed! What were you doing!" He didn't get anything intelligible back, but it was apparent Ed was apologizing; even if one couldn't understand the uttering of the speechless hyena. "It's okay Ed. It was only Scar... but next time do as told!" He sat, saluting Banzai with his tongue hanging out.

"So, Scar." Shenzi interrupted. "How did things go back at Pride Rock?" The lunar light highlighted all that was evil in the lion. And as the light caressed his face emphasizing the lines, he spoke: "It is all going along..." Scar erupted in a shrill of hysterical laughter as everything was working out. Shenzi, Banzai and Ed all joined in the fun as soon everything that was promised was to be fulfilled. "It is going along as planned."

* * *

In the branches of the hollowed Baobab tree sat the meditating mandrill gazing upon the darkened plains. The winds ebbed across the lands bringing Rafiki much news from the far plain reaches. He sat, balanced on a thin branch allowing the gentle breezes to flow through him. Like any night, he'd use these same breezes to calm himself. Tonight however, the winds weren't much comfort nor were they any helpful for his meditation. The focus just wasn't there tonight. Maybe the thoughts of Mufasa were clouding his mind enough to escape the Great Kings, but that he wasn't sure of. The lion had wandered off for a bit to search for food, so at least it wasn't his big roar off kiltering his meditation practices.

Rafiki rumbled under the starlight, unable to make the connection to the Great Kings of the Past. "C'mon Rafiki, you can do et!" The winds however were not yielding the information he requested, leaving the mandrill to ponder his vision and thoughts alone. But these were such thoughts he could not sort out alone which is why he sought after guidance. Mufasa was breaking every rule he knew and it would only take a matter of time now before the Circle was broken. And if that occurred, the consequences would be very disastrous.

Yet, his vision, not unlike all the previous visions, consisted of the Pride. Rafiki, like his ancestors before him, served the Pride in any way they could. For the current wise one? He holds a magical existence over the lands, keeping them in check. The vision he now harbored in his brain held no meaning for him and apparently wouldn't anytime soon. That was unless the winds would change for the better; instead they stood still for the monkey. "Dat does et," He let out a brief sigh and swung from branch to branch into the center of his home and sat undisturbed in front of his newly painted portrait.

Breathing out and picking up his tortoise shell; Rafiki continued to stroke the colors on the blurred image before him, hoping that he might recognize the blur of line and color soon. And if he did recognize the picture - try and rectify it's meaning. His fingers and thumbs stroked the color over the image, refining it. And as he put the final touches on the work before him, he sat back gazing with his big brown eyes, pondering the image before him. The picture held no meaning for Rafiki as countless others he had created. Perhaps later the full truth would come to bear from the fruit he created.

Many of the images encompassing the surroundings of the Baobab tree Rafiki called home were events, dreams, or thoughts he had while listening to the wind. Many he left incomplete as he began to learn of their meanings; providing no need to finish them. Some of these were painted over to make room for new images, while others were just never completed. Even Rafiki loses his visions now and again. Throughout his artistry, one thing remained certain: most, if not all of the images surrounding his being, were of lions of the Pride. He sat back admiring his creations and chuckled as he remembered some of the stories behind them. Each one had their own separate tale. They were not always amusing, nor were they always disastrous - but they always seemed to depict life on the Pridelands and its inhabitants with pinpoint accuracy.

Rafiki smiled at a painting that caught his glance, as it was a scene of Zazu and Ahadi in one of their moods. Like everyday, Rafiki remembered, those two were always arguing at or about something. They never really saw eye to eye, if a bird and a lion could EVER see eye to eye. Still, those two managed to always come out laughing in the end no matter how intense things became. Zazu was, of course, Ahadi's majordomo and his confidant. Who better to argue with the king and live to talk about it later!

The mandrill knew that the rights passage from Ahadi to Mufasa wasn't easy. Zazu himself voiced many times before Ahadi's death that it was very likely advising Mufasa would be much different and harder. Sure, Mufasa was taught the ways of the Circle, but would he uphold them? Would he abide by the rules of the Great Circle laid down by the many kings of the past? Though depicted as cubs in the image Rafiki now regarded, he had full confidence in Mufasa; if only he would see what he must do.

The mandrill grinned at the memory of the picture as it really represented the scene on the Pride lands very much during Mufasa's childhood - cubs at play. He'd kept his distance when observing, of course; but he always found it enlightening to see a bird on top of a lion's shoulder having a conversation! As well as little Mufasa, Sarabi and Taka pouncing and tackling one another until they were huffing and puffing - completely out of breath. He remembered it intently, painting it when he returned home, fitfully trying to preserve its hilarious nature.

The wise old monkey shined at his recollection, "Ya. Dose were da fun times," Rafiki noted as he glanced over Mufasa and Sarabi's coronations. As cubs, Rafiki blessed them both when born. Back then, he knew the two of them would one day become the Pride's future. Preserved for all time in his paintings are the King and Queen's marks. They were young then, the two of them; full of life and without a worry in the world. How that has changed.

Rafiki averted his glance around to an image he would never forget: Ahadi's death. It was a sad day for him indeed; an even bigger one for the Pride. They had lost their King, and possibly all their hopes while Rafiki lost a dear friend. It saddened him immensely to think of how this image came to him just hours before the event happened. Still, even though he had advanced warning, he was unable to stop it. All the wisdom, magic and strength of the Mandrill was unable to stop the inevitable.

A tear, clear as crystal glistened from Rafiki's eye and dangled upon excitement, awaiting for its release. The mandrill allowed the drop to dampen his cheek as it slowly slithered its way down, falling to the ground. The last thing he saw before the tears became too profound was the painting of Mufasa taking his place beside Ahadi in the Great Circle of Life. It was a proud time for he and the Pride. Rafiki had known Mufasa since he was a cub, and his family lines before that! He knew that the two of them would always have a special bond... as would Mufasa's cubs. Unfortunately that special relationship was faltering now and all Rafiki could do was frown; the lines upon his face growing thin and tight.

He shook his head, whipping away the tears from his eyes. Dwelling on the past too long could cloud a wise man's visions. So, he sat admiring his latest work; which was beginning to prove to be an enigma. There were no clues to its cause or the consequences it represented. Nor, were there any understanding of the ordeal it illustrated. Many thoughts ran through the wise old brain; a few of them were bringing some of the aspects of his painting mystery to light: First off, he mumbled to himself; recognizing a few markings in the picture! They were of lions; that he could definitely make out; but of who and what?

"For instance," he allowed himself again as he pointed to the image of one lioness on the left side of the image. Most of his works sustained only one body; or sometimes a small duo. This monstrosity had many beings within it. Perplexed by the markings he gave the lioness he pointed out to himself, Rafiki blinked. Those markings were unmistakable; the lioness depicted there was none other than Sarabi! On the right side of the drawing were images of other lions. But, those identities escaped him. They bore no markings at all. "Strange," he thought and then caught a glimpse of the figure in the middle. It screamed out to be looked at; though it was only a blurred figurehead. Even more drawn in at this new found image, Rafiki focused intently on its locale and noted that it... somewhat resembled a lions face--

Rafiki jogged his walking stick and reached up, lightly touching his creation in observation of the markings on the central icon. Those marks were like none other he'd seen before. "It couldn't be a coronation mark," he whispered to himself pondering the area. With eyes closed and pressed hard against his skin; Rafiki focused all his might on the image before him to concentrate enough energy for contacting the Great Kings. He would need their wisdom now more than ever. If the Shamen was unknowledgeable in such matters, undoubtedly they would be. And as if something rammed into him; Rafiki jerked back and his muscles relaxed.

Things... many things rushed through his being; and it seemed for the first time that all his questions regarding the image before him were being answered. The strange markings on the face of the lion he painted wasn't a mark; it was a scar! And it belonged to the king's brother Taka! The feeling of eternal knowledge was overwhelming and it made its retreat quickly; "What!" he exclaimed forcing his eyes open on the erasing truth. The truth was now in the eye of the beholder. Rafiki was the beholder and the truth was becoming more profound, and its meaning clearer.

He blinked, clearing his mind of the flooding thoughts of Taka, Mufasa and Sarabi. Slightly overwhelmed by the whole incident, Rafiki sat motionless within the confines of his tree; looking up at the rustling leaves. He took one more look at the painting he drew before grabbing up his staff with the utmost urgency; jumping up as high as he could to a branch above.. Swinging upwards from branch to branch, Rafiki emerged from the tops of his abode with a new sense of purpose. Glancing at the dying sun, Rafiki dropped; the winds greeting him instantly upon his arrival on the plains. Sniffing the air involuntarily, he could sense something was brewing - something horrid.

Upon reaching the upper stage of his kingdom, Rafiki sat perfectly perched upon a branch and observed the sky - one by one the stars of the kingdom showing their power. But even on a night as clear as this, he could not seem to focus enough to conjure the image of Ahadi. Far too many troubling thoughts were protruding into the mandrill's conscious mind. It was all he could do to focus on his meditation; trying to ignore the problems he saw. The Pridelands's problems were so paramount, there must be a solution, and quick because if one did not have haste, all would be lost. Rafiki would not be the one to stand by and watch as it all unfolded. As good as the Shamen was, tonight he would require some guidance from the only wise ones he knew; council only themselves could give; the Great Kings. Only they could understand the predicament... no one else.

The breezes blew lightly, wisping the leaves atop his tree. Gentle as a early morning awakening, the wind tugged gently on the foliage; ruffling them in the most pleasing way. Rafiki focused on the sound hoping its constant clamor would clear his thoughts and allow him to focus with all his might. Closing his eyes further, he held out his nimble arms holding his thumb and index finger together in a circular pattern while protruding his other members straight out from him. One ear twitched. Then another; the leaves began to tremble. Visualizing the best he could, Rafiki's mind watched as the leaves trembled upon the air. He heard every sound; saw every grass blade; and felt every grumble on the Pridelands - now, completely intune to the life force of the Serengeti.

"Rafiki..." boomed through the meditating form.

The white chinned monkey strained to heed the call; but his visions were rapidly going astray and becoming cloudy.

"Focus Rafiki... we are here to help you."

It was the voice of Ahadi. The mandrill opened his eyes looking straight up at the stars and watched in amazement as they began to swirl before him creating the brightest light any creature had ever seen. The winds picked up even more, plastering their cool form upon Rafiki's face; sending a chill through him. The stars were beginning to waver as the coolness got to the mandrill and in a last bit of effort, Rafiki closed his eyes gently and focused on all that was around him. The pressures slowly wore off and the monkey sat straight up in the seemingly calm night and opened his eyes. There before him was the image of his friend, Ahadi, conforming into view. Shielding his eyes from the blinding light, Rafiki welcomed the Great King. "Good evening old friend," the apparition stated. "What can I do for you today?"

Rafiki chuckled, "Et seems I come to you a lot lately doesn't et?" The ghostly form of Ahadi nodded in the sky which provoked a sigh from the mandrill. "Da Pride," he let out. "Et's in terrible danger and I can't stop it."

Ahadi answered, "The drought will pass on," but said no more. As in a limited form as he was, Ahadi knew that the drought was a far cry of the troubles facing the Pride. A new King; his son - in command would be one thing to overcome. But still, that shouldn't hold the Pride down.

"Et's not that my friend. Et's your son, Mufasa." the baboon breathed.

"Mufasa?" Ahadi inquisitively asked, "What about him?"

Rafiki turned from the apparition, almost ashamed to look it in the eye. "A great many things have occurred surrounding the King." He paused, trying to find the strength to continue on. Rafiki stated, "I didn't believe he was capable." He knew full well how his next sentence would affect Ahadi, so as quickly as he could he mouthed the words. "He has given up on his responsibilities and ran away from the Pride."

"He what?" thundered across the starlit sky.

"Dat's not half of da matta," calmed Rafiki. "He is here... with me. Mufasa is so unsure of himself that I don't think he is stable enough to be king of the pride lands."

Ahadi sighed, "Oh dear..." That was a problem indeed. Ahadi himself trained the lad to be a strong ruler; to never run away from that which would face him. Unfortunately that training must have to pass. "What else has happened?"

Rafiki conjured up all emotions and images he could from his experiences with the tribunal only a few short hours ago; and illustrated them for Ahadi. The Great King frowned upon the news, unaware that such treachery could happen amongst his Pride. "How are you handling all this?"

"Quite well considering..." Rafiki let his sentence trail. He didn't want to get on the subject of Mufasa running from his responsibility again. It was a sore subject between both of them. "Considering all his other worries," he finished at last. "But it troubles me Ahadi, to see the Pride lose such a promising leader. Mufasa must forget the past and move on or--"

"He will Rafiki," Ahadi interrupted. "For the sake of himself and the pride, he will soon have no choice but to heed your advice."

The wise mandrill nodded. "What do I do until then?"

"Keep them going in the right direction for their time will come upon the setting sun." Rafiki nodded and then watched as he saw Mufasa creep up upon the Baobab tree with his eyes firmly set upon the ghostly form hovering above it. Rafiki himself had disclosed the whereabouts to his sanctuary only to an elite group. Ahadi knew the locale; Zazu was aware and the third? That was Mufasa himself. Standing outside the massive tree sent shivers down his furry spine. The starlit sky gave away nothing; flooding it with white, ghostly light. As inanimate as its surroundings, the great tree stood lifeless and vacant. Mufasa sighed in shock looking up at the image of his father.

The massive king turned and sat, unaware of what to do next.

"Now, what do we have here?" The king jumped in a startled move not expecting the break in silence. Mufasa looked up and smiled tightly at the baboon hanging upside down over him while balanced on one branch only.

"You never cease to amaze me," he said to the monkey who turned upright and fell down to the savanna floor.

"Of course not!"

Rafiki looked the troubled king over. As good as Mufasa was at not disclosing his feelings visually; the wise one could still sense the awe that was struck into him. "So..." but he said no more. Mufasa squeezed closed both eyes allowing a tear to pinch its way out and down his cheek. The mandrill watched the drop glisten in the starlight and nodded in recognition and confirmation. What he'd seen in a vision was coming true and if that were to be the case, the mandrill understood the emotion.

He had seen many kings go through hardships, but none as much as the son of Ahadi. And through trying times, the mandrill took an oath of allegiance to serve, protect and to help in any way. "Father..."

"Yes, my son..." a voice thundered above. "It is I... your father."

Shock and bewilderment washed over Mufasa's features as recognition of the voice that called of him set in. "I...I can't believe it."

"Believe in it son," the voice of Ahadi boomed.

Mufasa was on his paws; eyes wide open as he witnessed a most awesome sight. Set in a whirlpool of whites, green, yellows, reds and blues in a backdrop of the blackness of space and the stars that occupied them, was Ahadi; wed to Akase, father of Mufasa and Taka - a great leader. "It is I."

"But... but... how?" half terrified and half excited, he managed to get his question out.

"I am here because of you my son."

"Me?" Mufasa frowned.

The apparition nodded, "I have been witness to the events that plague you my son." He left it for Mufasa, but he said nothing. "You have faced quite a many challenge. The King of a lion pride is no easy going... and your toughest test lays ahead."

"They do?"

Ahadi ignored the direct question. "Running away from your problems won't help you solve them. You must learn to face them my son. All obstacles can be overcome. You must know where to turn and how to proceed."

"No... They can't. I miss you! I can't go on without you. I alone can not rule this land."

"You must believe in your abilities Mufasa," the first Ahadi had used his son's name.

"You are the king now... not I."

"Listen to him Mufasa," Rafiki added.

He was listening but none of it made sense. He'd come to ask the help of a friend to somehow put order to his chaos; not to be lectured. And why... "I am doing the best I can father. What more is there?"

"A decision must be made my son... a decision that you have been pondering for days past; You must let me go... forge your own kingdom. Go back and take charge... move to another location if necessary."

Finally, it started to make a little sense. "Yes, that is a burden of mine. One among a sea of others."

"Make the decision Mufasa... it's a simple--"

"It is not a simple decision to make!" he interrupted his father. "Generations upon generations of kings have called this place their home. How can I just abandon it?"

"You are proceeding under the supposition that history is the prime objective here." If that were the case, the pride would have been long since deceased. "As king, your first and primary responsibility is to make sure your pride survives. No matter what. If that means relocating - permanently or temporarily - then that is what should be done."

Mufasa fell silent, taking in the words of his father. He was the one who broke all the rules. A stickler for tradition he was; but only as far as it suited him. Sometimes unconventional in solving dilemmas, Ahadi always had the pulse of his lionesses and the Pride lands. Ahadi understood what must be done. "But abandon our past? Abandon all that we hold sacred?"

"Pride Rock is just a staple my son." The winds picked up again. "You will always have the past..." so strong now they whipped the grasses and entangled in the king's mane. "But the past can't help you now. You must look to the future by saving your pride. Even Sarabi understands this..."

"Sarabi?" Mufasa asked in shock. "What about Sarabi?"

"I know a great many things," Ahadi stated after an unsettling quiet. "I believe in you Mufasa... Just remember that no matter what happens... I love you."

The son of the apparition king looked at the ghostly silhouette and sighed. "Believing is not going to help father. I..." and he broke into tears. Rafiki humbly walked over to assist the sobbing king. It proved unnecessary as Mufasa continued, "I need you and love you so much."

The rainbow of colors began to swirl in the night sky, as it watched the king of the Pride lands weep. "I love you; I always will... and you know that." Ahadi watched as Mufasa strained to look up, tears rolling down his face. "I can no longer be with you in physical form, but I always will be near."

"How?" Mufasa murmured through his wavered voice.

"Look hard enough, my son... and you shall find. Remember who you are... take charge of your kingdom. Obstacles can be resolved - if taken One by One." Ahadi had vanished before his son's eyes leaving him with a lot to think about; hopefully it would all help to set him on the right track. Pride Rock was just a plateau from which the lions reside. It was just a home; a home they could make elsewhere. It might not be as majestic, but the pride would be alive and perhaps, one day, could return to their glory.

But Mufasa would have to return to that plateau and take charge - only then could the Circle of Life go on.

Mufasa sighed and blinked, frozen into position with tears still hovering in his eyes. Sniffing slightly, he looked over at the mandrill who was pacing about. "Funny weather..." Rafiki reported. "Very peculiar..." he chuckled.

"Yes..." was all he could say and then finally, "I came here to ask of your help... and I got much, much more."

"Well," the mandrill said with a laugh. "You never know when dese fronts will move in..."

"What I am interested in right now my dear friend is how to get myself back on the right track." One at a time, Mufasa thought. He had to solve the problems One by One. There was a lot of truth in what his father had said. Taking all the problems head on at once, can seem overwhelming. By solving the minor problems first, you begin to eliminate the iliacus noise they produce, allowing yourself the energy and concentration to battle the whole. Thus, Mufasa would heed his father's advise and return... but only when he felt one hundred percent sure he could handle it.

The sun had risen and fallen since Mufasa had last seen Pride Rock. Now he paced back and forth under the starlit skies of the Pride lands without a home. Out amongst the great kings; Mufasa paced worrying over a world of new problems. It was bad enough that he had to realize his fears and deal with them; then to have Sarabi get slapped with worries of her own. Add that on top of the degrading lands and then his running away from it all. But, it was all too much to bear! As if the Pride were not already on the face of extinction, here came another disaster in the wake of an accomplishment. And as he stood watching over the darkened lands gazing back to the plateau that was Pride Rock, a sharp thought surfaced: In all the lands there was only one creature that could possibly help him - Rafiki. The mandrill was his friend and he did understand what he was going through. Rafiki has been a big help to him; what else could he do now? Dissappoint his mentor?

"Alright," he muttered under the stars. "I am the king... no one else. I can't run from this. I must fight this to the end." Mufasa had made up his mind. Future's uncertainty lay ahead only this time he wasn't going to run from it. Now, he would embrace the challenge. Not looking back, Mufasa set his stance and agreed that he would take his place within the Circle of Life as King of the Pride Lands - just as soon as he got some sleep.

* * *

The night was very crisp and clear. Overhead was a vast array of starlight which fluttered down through the opening of the Cheetah's new found cavern. From there they would settle down for the night; to sleep; to think; and to put forth a paw into the future. If they could. Kichasi was sitting at the entrance to that cave with a worried look about her as the white light from the stars danced off her features throwing a shadow of despair on the wall. Many thoughts were going through her head at this time. What to do next? How to accomplish that feat? And what strategies to take?

Those thoughts and more were harboring inside her brain. She knew she was right to take control over the clan. That much she was certain of. Yet, Kichasi hoped that its members would stand by her no matter what they were faced with tonight. Sure Tshatshi was her second in command now; but even he voiced his reservations about her and her leadership abilities. "I may be young, but I'm not stupid." Kichasi saw that the pride lands were not as devastated as their home was; and that it appeared as if what ever was happening on the Serengeti was showing signs of reversal on those plains much more quickly than anywhere else. In order to survive they would have to live off the fruits of the lion's land.

Unfortunately those lions didn't want to share their spot in nature. The one called Mufasa fended them off when Mng'ariza tried to reason with him the first time. Because the lion failed to yield; the Cheetahs were left with many dilemma's. It was a vision that killed its creator - Mng'ariza. But death was something that would not overcome Kichasi. One way or another the clan of cheetahs would be the reigning chiefs of this land. That Kichasi would see to. "No," she whispered. "I can't let this become a fight of revenge."

"It would only suffice to destroy you," added Tshatshi who wandered to her side. A fight for revenge sake would only lead to certain failure. Many wise creatures knew this. Though to fight for revenge was much more appealing; it was not a suitable cause. An avenger always faltered because of their lack in logic or their lack in understanding. "We have our goal Kichasi. The lions will not see our logic. Instead we must show force. I see that now."

"Tell that to Khulo, would ya?" Kichasi quirked. "He's been sitting back there like the stubborn animal he is."

"He is a proud male Kichasi. He may be back there bruting now; but that doesn't mean he won't fight with us."

"Puh," she sighed. "He won't fight. Khulo is too stubborn. You heard him earlier..."

"I did. I also understand him, and what he thinks." Kichasi made a move to speak but was cut off when Tashatshi continued. "He is as proud as he is stubborn... he just doesn't trust the situation."

"What is there not to trust? Their lion king is not there... they are weak and vulnerable. Now is the time to strike!"

"Yes," nodded the cheetah as he laid a paw on hers. "But you must understand he has a wealth of battle knowledge. Knowledge that you do not possess. He has faced something of this situation before and when he gets a funny feeling - don't knock him for it."

"I am not an idiot. I can fight!"

"Yes... you can; but the art of fighting is not the end all of knowledge. There is much more that one needs to know before he *or* she can become a great leader."

Kichasi sat motionless as she stared out the entranceway wondering if the mutiny she started was really the answer for what ailed them. Certainly it was better than wandering around aimlessly; looking to-and-fro examining the different areas of the plains. And it was definitely a better thing to do than sit and wait. "I don't blame him really. He was after all the leader. A mutiny is very hard on a leader."

"No," Tshatshi corrected. "Though it may be hard on Khulo... it is much tougher for the rest of us. We didn't form this clan to serve you; we formed to serve Mng'ariza and his second in command Khulo."

Kichasi did not like the sound of that and started to rise in disgust only to be held down by the force driven by the appendages attached to her. "Then you do not agree to serve me."

Tshatshi shook his head. "For this campaign; my allegiances lay with you. But my dedication lies with Khulo. He is a great friend and a wise leader..."

"Then you are stuck between loyalties?"

"That is correct."

The female nodded and turned to face the group who restfully awaited inside. "And them?"

"No doubt the same."

"Will they follow me?"

The male smirked as he looked at the cheetahs in light slumber. Sure they would follow Kichasi. They might be just as loyal to Khulo; but they too know the value of *fight first ask later* assessment. Itchy claws make for good followers in a crusade such as this. "Sure they will. Because right now they have no where else to go."

"Good," said Kichasi. "Because I will need them."

She entered the cavity with a new step in her stride; a new attitude about her. Under the cloak of night they would attack the lions while they were unprepared. Some would call such an assault an act of cowardice. Kichasi did not believe this. Attacking when one had the advantage was a sure sign of an achievement. And tonight; this clan would do something no one else had attempted, she thought: They would attack the king of beasts with all they had and dethrone them from the pride lands once and for all.

Mercy be damned!

Kichasi yelled, "Alright! Listen up!" pausing to allow the echo to subside she giggled at the startleness of her troops. Fumbled around as they did trying to get up; each one of them voiced their opinions on the technique of choice by the current leader to arouse the sleeping masses. "It is time we took our place."

"Our place?" Khulo piped up from all the way in the back.

The ousted male had been sitting in the back going over the events of Kichasi's movement; a rather skilled and well thought out elation. He came to wonder how long she had been planing it out. And whether she was prepared to play her cards on Mng'ariza himself before his untimely demise. Ahh well, those thoughts were useless now weren't they? She never got the chance to use them on him... "only I am the victim of her greed." Who was to blame for all this? He was of course and he was self aware of that fact. He let his own disillusion get in the way of his duty to the clan. Khulo reasoned that he should have followed his mutineers suggestion that they do invade while they could. But that has come to pass now. Somehow Khulo would move on and reclaim his honor. "Our place in what Kichasi... the ground?"

Kichasi looked from face to face before focusing on the one hiding in the back of the cave. "Yes Khulo. We're going to take our place in the circle of life and reclaim these lands for all."

"I think you are making a grave mistake young one..."

"Think all you want. Our vision is at hand. The time is now!" She felt reassured that what she was setting forth was the right destiny for them all. Kichasi wouldn't ask the others to trust her otherwise. "Alright! Let's moooooove!"

The clan of cheetahs sprang up as if their own mother commanded them to follow. Times were definitely confusing. Today they were following Kichasi into battle; tomorrow they might be dead. But, one can not live for tomorrow until he lives for today.

"Are you with me!"

"I can't speak for the rest of them," spouted Bhutai. "But it appears I'm with you." He got up and joined the female at the head of the den.

"As am I," followed Tambulo.

She grinned at the ones joining her. "What about you Khulo?"

Should he go or should he stay? Ever since Kichasi leveled the clan to join her in her cause to fight the lions; he wondered if it would come to pass that he would have to make a decision on whether to fight with his comrades... or sit in the face of honor.

He hoped that day would never come; and he hoped he could live with his decision if it did.

"Well?" echoed Kichasi pushing her point.

He just couldn't go. Khulo stood up and shook his head. He couldn't go. Every fiber in his being told him it was wrong and that he shouldn't be apart of it. And so he walked up to Kichasi and told her what was to be what. "I will go. But I do register my reservations."

"Dearly noted."

"I don't like this Kichasi..."

"That is why you are no longer in control," she icily stated. "But I think we should know whether you intend to fight or watch."

Fighting was another matter. The cheetah did not believe in fighting the lions. At least; not this early. There were too many variables to take into account. Why Mufasa was missing? Was only but one of those. But the fact still remained that he was part of this clan if not still her leader - he owed it to the others to fight for them and what they believed as the truth. Then maybe... just maybe he could regain his control. "I will fight Kichasi. I am no fool."

"Then let us go." She turned and headed straight out for the darkness of the outer world. What lay outside? Conquest. Beyond the bushes and the hills lay a land; a plains full of potential and full of life. A life that everyone could share - peacefully. If and only if the lions who ruled those lands would unleash their ungodly hold of the Serengeti and allow them to survive. No longer would these cheetahs be asking; they would take what they wanted.

* * *

Sarabi sat amongst the bright lights in the sky and watched with amazement. How could these brilliant dots of white light exist amongst the black of space. The concept boggled her mind but she held true to a passage she remembered Mufasa had said to her one night while the two were alone. "The great kings of the past live up there.. Did you know that? And they are always looking down upon us. There to guide us when we need it..." Sarabi looked to those stars now; to the Great Kings in search for some guidance - and answers.

She got none as there were none to be had. The questions on her mind were far above the capable reaches of past rulers; no matter what wisdom they contained. "I guess you are just as uncertain as I am." Sarabi had hoped to see some vision of the future. Some sign that she was doing the right thing by allowing Scar to rule in Mufasa's place. Mufasa had said he had great reflections while talking to the Great Kings; why didn't it work for her? "Come on... answer me!"

Scar had exactly what he wanted and she cursed herself for giving it to him. It never occurred to her how badly he wanted the position. And now that Taka was signed in, Sarabi could sense him wallowing in his ingenuity. Damn him and damn her! "How could I be so foolish! How could I let him take advantage of me!"

"What's that Sarabi?" Sarafina asked her from behind.

Startled, the queen turned to greet her and with a tone of voice unbecoming a queen, she asked. "How long have you been standing there?"

The tone lingered of anger and confusion.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude."

Sarabi blushed. "No, you didn't. Excuse my mood. I'm not in the best as you have witnessed."

Sarafina nodded.

"What were you talking about?"

"Oh," shoot... "That was nothing; just nonsense. I've got a lot on my mind too."

"Like what?"

Sarabi sighed, "Mufasa..."

But that wasn't all the lioness had on her mind. Many questions about her future worth have littered her mind on many occasions since Scar's intervention. "I just don't think I am going to be able to go on Sarafina. I feel this weight on me; and it's not lifting. Nor is it able to lift any time soon."

"It will," said Sarafina. "Having lost someone you love or were close too is not easy. I bet he'll be back any time now."

"I wish I could believe that."

Sarafina grinned, "Keep an orderly outlook on your thoughts; anything can be done. You taught me that."

Sarabi smiled, "You know what. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Likewi--"

"SARABI!!!!" a familiar voice yelled across the darkness of the night protruding into the silence that prevailed. That voice belonged to none other than Zazu and whatever the problem he seemed to be quite worked up. "SARABI!!!!" the hornbill fluttered about with such urgency that one would think the would was about to die in a crash of flame and power.

"Here!" the queen yelled back for his attention.

Zazu caught the sound and flapped his wings as hard as he could; harder than he ever remembered doing in the past. When the hornbill arrived within the vicinity of Sarabi he let his news be known. "CHEETAHS! ON THE PRIDE LANDS!!" The blood from Sarabi's face drained. The one thing she had feared; had begun.

The Pride

Chapter Eighteen

Sarabi looked up in horror at the words she never thought she'd hear again. Those words of horror and suspense were now suddenly free-flowing in her presence and it was not a welcomed sight. She tensed raising to all four paws and turned her eyes to look at Zazu-the deliverer of the warning. He too was completely unnerved by the sudden turn of events and knew that right now the Pride was very vulnerable. "Cheetahs!?" Sarabi blurted out at last. "On the Pride lands??" Even as she questioned the hornbill, thoughts of hope danced through her head. Sarabi hoped this was one of Zazu's jokes; and almost begged for it to be. Only the look in his eyes betrayed those feelings. Zazu was no more teasing than he was calm, and then the queen began to wonder if these intruders were the of the same clan of Cheetahs they fought before. Surely they learned their lessons the first go around. Without relent, Zazu fluttered back and forth hurriedly announcing their upcoming doom.

"Is it the same ones Zazu?" Maliaka inquired.

"I dunno! I dunno!"

Kolo yelled, "Well then, where are they!"

"Not far," he announced. "Just over that ridge!"

Sarabi followed Zazu's wing as he pointed out the precise destination in which the trespassers would soon rise over. With her sharp sight she took up the search for any thing out of the ordinary. But the eye was not going to be enough; so she called up the other techniques learned from her beloved and slowly let out her tongue to taste the air.

To complete the process she took a deep breath in and analyzed for any foreign scents she might pick up. Yet, she only found the crisp and cleanliness of a normal Serengeti evening; one of calm and uneventful. Out among the stars and wide eyed moon, who could have guessed that somewhere out there calm was going to be disrupted by a band of cheetahs somewhere on the horizon. Through the harboring silence Sarabi searched... and searched... and searched hoping to evade the very foundation of secrecy the cheetahs were now under - to no avail.

"Alright everyone," she snapped up. "Listen up!" Her orders were brisk and true; everyone came to attention at a moments notice. "We're about to have company; get into your pos--"

"Too late..." said a menacing voice from behind.

Sarabi turned at the hiss-called voice and shook her head slightly in disillusion. The voice belonged to a female - the scent now unmistakable. Their cheetah foes had now arrived and it bewildered the lioness to be faced with a danger that was allowed to sneak up on the Pride.

"Company is already here," Kichasi toothily grinned as she licked her chops.

The lioness in charge tensed up, unsure of what to do next and hoping beyond hope that Mufasa's despicable brother was around... somewhere watching the scene with a careful eye able to lend a hand to the situation at a moments notice. And as her claws extended to meet the

posture of the one before her; Sarabi thought it impossible to fight without Scar's presence. To do so would be a futile attempt. The memories of the last encounter were readily at hand; and she did not want the horrors of the past resurface.

"Aww, what?" Kichasi let out in a teasing voice. "Weren't prepared for us?"

"What is it you want?" Sarabi scowled at the cheetah while carefully watching Malaika, Ng'ara and Kolo fan out slowly into a defensive posture. It was then she realized how dangerous her predicament really was and how inevitable some kind of conflict would be to avoid. Scar; however, was no where to be seen. Just like the lion he was - useless.

"Why... your land," the female intruder plainly stated. "Of course." Sarabi betrayed a loud audible gulp which instantly caught the attention of Kichasi. "You see," the cheetah began again with a smile on her features. "We tried to be nice and peaceful about it earlier." Much to Sarabi's distrust; Kichasi confirmed her intentions and took up pacing about her. "You repaid our kindness with death." Kichasi smirked the last statement and reached behind to stroke at the Lionesses tail. The growl she received in response only enticed the other clan members to act. "Now, you must pay."

Sarabi jumped back and bared her teeth, "*We* must pay? This is not *your* home - this is *our* home and we clearly reserved our rights to defend it."

"You did eh?" was all the cheetah replied with. "You couldn't have shared with your neighbors? Allowed us to survive in peace?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sarabi's head snapped back.

Kichasi grinned, "You don't understand our predicament... do you."

Sarabi shook her head slightly.

"But Scar did."

The blood drew from the Queen's face upon hearing the name. "Scar? What does he have to do with this?" And she definitely didn't like her use of words. 'Did?'

"He was the one who killed Mng'ariza," said Kichasi. "For your information, Mng'ariza was our leader. But before his death; I believe Scar was informed of our reason for being on the Pride lands and instead of trying to help; he only made it worse by taking matters into his own hands. Making for a very bad day for all of us."

Sarabi frowned, "We're perfectly able and prepared to defend Pride Rock. I don't know what you're trying to do here, but your treachery will not work!"

Kichasi chuckled as she took a gander around at the staring faces that littered what the lions referred to as Pride Rock. "Oh... you are prepared; are you? Take a look around my dear. All I see is you... and your lionesses. From my position, I see no males present - which means you are quite vulnerable... and surrounded."

Damn, thought Sarabi. How did she know about Mufasa's absence? And what did she do with Scar? 'But Scar did...' Did what? What did he do? What did he understand? And there was that *did* word again... was it already too late for him? Was he already welcomed by the wrath of the Cheetah clan? Now more than ever she wished Scar were here; they would all need his help tonight. Kichasi certainly had them all in a predicament. The pride *did* have two males to its

compliment; only now they appear to be lacking. But she wouldn't let that stand in the way of what she knew to be the right thing to do. "We are supreme huntresses," said Sarabi at last. "We will fight if provoked. Revenge is ours."

"Revenge?" shot Tshatshi from Sarabi's left. "How can you of all beings claim revenge? You have killed a great member of our clan - our leader! What have we done to you--?"

"You've killed my friend!" exploded Sarafina with all her anger.

"Regrettable... I'm sure," sighed Tshatshi. "The situation was a must. We were looking for a compromise - a way to coexist and live. A compromise that you lions rejected!"

"Her young life was taken because of *your* anger?" Sarabi wanted to know; finding a new pocket of strength to pull from. "Our lands have been ravished by drought... only now are they returning to their once splendor - but that change will take more time. There is no where else for us to go and we will not be bullied from our land."

Kichasi growled a low growl, "Think for a moment why we might possibly come all the way out here. In the natural flow of cycles our lands dry up and shrivel into nothingness leaving only disaster and despair. We are forced to find other means to sustain ourselves. Usually those who make it find salvation amongst the plains of the Pride lands. This is because as normal things would have it... you too move on to another location where your hunting would not be interrupted. Only this year you did not chose to follow your path. For some unforeseen circumstances your pride remained on the plains far too long."

"That is our choice to make," spat Sarabi. "With the drought worse than normal Mufasa thought best for us to remain where we were. And I agree with that decision one hundred percent."

"That decision was a mistake. A mistake that has cost, and will continue to cost lives. Yet you still will not compromise?"

"I'm sorry," said the lioness. "After what you've done to us there can be no compromise. Our land is ours and I suggest you go back to yours."

"We can't..." Chal said from a place not seen.

"Perhaps," said the Queen to the winds. "You must go elsewhere. Your salvation will not be on our land."

"Then..." breathed the female Cheetah. "If you will not allow a compromise; we will resort to force."

Sarabi growled and extended her claws to their longest possible length and prepared to pounce. "We repelled you before and we're prepared to do it again!" The queen let out a horrible blood curdling roar as she leaped toward the female cheetah who was more than ready to meet the charge. As the lionesses all leapt at their cheetah counterparts with teeth bared and snarls at the ready; the sun finally dipped behind the mountain range leaving only its retreating light to cast shadow upon the scene.

* * *

Scar sat and watched the last sliver of the fireball sweep behind the rocks of the mountains... his mountains. He couldn't believe that he pulled off the biggest coup in ages past. He, not his brother Mufasa, was king of the Pride. And there would be nothing anyone or anything could do to stop him. In the process Scar had made a few new friends on the southern border of the Pride lands. Repulsive and repugnant they were; yet, the Hyena's seemed to be the only creatures that could understand his feelings and want to help him realize his potential.

"Watcha lookin' at Scar?" Shenzi asked.

"Yeah!" hollered Banzai. "You've been out here for an hour! What gives?"

Ed grunted and whined his question too.

The lion continued to watch the light slowly dim out of existence without paying attention to the three interruptions at his side. He would answer them if and when he was ready. Right now though; all he had on his mind was the conquest he had made. How sweet it was... how very sweet it was. "You know something," Scar muttered at last. "You three are the only creatures I know that could ruin a moment of solitude and really not have one care about it."

Shenzi looked up with a slight frown, "Now you know we care about you."

"Yes," hissed Scar. "So you keep reminding me." But deep down he knew they meant well and wanted to in some way to share in his victory. "So, what shall we do now?" he asked of them.

"I dunno," shrugged Banzai. "We was hopein' you'd know."

"Well I for one don't want to sit around here and sulk," Shenzi slapped the lion with a paw. "We should be out celebrating!"

But Taka did not feel like celebrating because even though his battle had been won; his crowning achievement was not accomplished without regrets. He'd risked a possible relationship with Sarabi; one he knew didn't have much of a chance to start with. And if Mufasa were to ever come back... there'd be a lot of explaining to do: the relationship with his brother could turn sour. Yet, the biggest grief was the fact that in order to achieve the attitude that was needed for his conquest; Scar had to alienate his own mother. Though he wouldn't admit it then... her breakdown was the saddest point in his life. Taka never wanted to hurt her - ever!

"Yo Scar?"

"Hmm?" the lion mumbled. "Wha?"

"You phased out on us there again. You okay?"

Taka growled as he rose to all fours. "No, I'm not all right." He started off in a direction away from the pestering hyena's. Not only did they not get the hint, but they took up after him.

"What's eatin' you?" asked Shenzi. "You've won! You have everything you've always wanted so what's gotten you all upset? What's the big deal to you now?"

Scar sighed, "Because I don't have everything I always wanted my dear. At least... not yet."

"How so?"

The lion chuckled. "You wouldn't understand... to get where I am today I had to go through many self defeating events. I had to watch my father show Mufasa the lessons in kingdom. Many times I sat there and cried because he was not paying any attention to me."

The hyenas snickered.

"Soon my tears turned to rage and the only beacon in my life turned out to be my own mother. Akase seemed to understand the plight I was going through. She seemed to be able to look through all the special treatment and somehow comfort me the only way she knew how."

"And the problem?"

Scar sighed, "The problem now is the rage built up inside has totally consumed me. I have turned that frightened angered little cub I was into a mean and cunning-- oh what am I saying. I did no such thing. I'm nothing but a weak, pathetic fool..."

"You're the King of Pride Rock now... isn't that something?" said Shenzi.

"Puh!" Scar gurgled. "Only a fool would alienate his own mother... the rage is so much apart of me now it has become me--"

All three became silent as their ears perked up sensing and then finally hearing a loud lion roar off in the distance. "Heh, somebody's having fun," spouted Banzai. "Maybe we should go join them!"

But Scar's stance was not one of calm; he knew that roar and its significance. There was something wrong at Pride Rock. "Hey!" shouted the male again. "Where ya goin'?"

"To Pride Rock you nincompoop."

"Why?"

The lion did not hear the final words from his hyena companions. Instead he outstretched his paws drawing himself closer and closer; back to his kingdom. The roar upon which he heard could only signal one thing - the Pride was under attack... and he had a very good idea by whom.

* * *

Kichasi was on the move quicker than Sarabi had ever seen a creature scramble and it surprised her to no end. The expression resonating from her muzzle was no doubt exhilarating to the female attacker as the Cheetah bore a big smile as its paws bore sharp claws deep into the hide of the Queen. Sarabi let out a yelp of pain before pawing off the attacker.

"Did that hurt?" Kichasi teased.

Sarabi growled, trying to regain her senses.

"You haven't seen the half of it yet!" and she lunged again.

Tshatshi snarled as he was cuffed by the paws and claws of one Sarafina. This lioness was the second one to join the fray and she wasn't going to allow anyone to get the best of her and wasted no time getting into the act. The cheetah retaliated with a snarl and launched the full length of his slender yet muscular body straight for the female. The weight of the attacker guided the stars above into blackness as her body was thrown against a rock and fell lifeless into the dirt below.

"Pathetic," spat the cheetah. "You are weak."

Slowly life began to return to the lioness as she shakily rose to all fours. Sarafina eyed her prey and looked him over carefully just like she would do if he was about to be lunch.

"That," she said "was a mistake." Tshatshi turned back around and smiled from ear to ear.

"And dumb too," he said. "I'm going to enjoy digging my claws into your tawny hide lion." He jumped and their paws locked.

Malaika and Kolo were holding their own against Khulo who had them pinned up against the cliff base of Priderock. It seemed quite an interesting strategy for one to pin prey against a trap instead of fighting; Malaika couldn't understand it. Yet he was quite adamant on keeping them at bay as every once in a while they'd try and jump away from him only to have his skillful techniques keep them in company.

"What, are we going to stand here all day?" Malaika asked.

"If that's what it takes."

"Takes for what?"

"For you to realize you're no match for me," he grinned.

Malaika studied the cheetah who stood before her. There was something about him that puzzled the mind. Here every other cheetah in the vicinity was fighting for what they wanted except this one... he was more pleased to have his prey alive rather than dead. Such a concept completely puzzled the lioness. Why would he do such a thing? It was obvious the clan of Cheetahs would fight to the death over the lands of the Pride - except for this one! "It seems you are no match for yourself. A conscious matter?"

Khulo tensed up for a brief second then scowled at the lioness. She was good... she was very good. "Shut up." Shaking off ill feelings, Malaika had almost made up her mind to pounce when her plans were interrupted from a sign above - literally. The sharp claws of the cheetah who'd jumped onto her back from above scraped down her back drawing thick dark red blood as they dug in. Yelps of surprise and pain littered the chilled air adding another sense of cold to the acts that were being performed.

The lioness fought as best she could with help from her friend Kolo. Unfortunately though, Kolo was kept occupied by Khulo. Malaika swung her paws around to try and buck off the Cheetah only to be rewarded with deeper grasps - her attempts at escape were futile. Kolo tried to help out by grabbing the tail of the cheetah and clamping down with her jaws; swashing her head back and forth hoping to jar loose the animal's grip over her friend. His yelps filled the air but when Kolo let go she was immediately bucked away herself with still no sign of relentment. Before long Khulo got a hold of Kolo and threw her to the ground a few feet away; leaving Malaika alone to fend with two attackers.

With fire and pain in her eyes; Malaika lurched her body in the direction of Khulo as a last ditch effort to free herself; the claws of Chal digging in ever so deeper within her flesh. Saliva drooled from her muzzle as the life was being drained from her; trying so hard to concentrate through the cloudiness of the pain. And as she reached within striking distance of the cheetah named Khulo; the one on her back retracted his claws and pulled back - freeing her for the mighty paw of the cheetah before her. Her inertia carried her directly into the face of danger which was met on by full force.

The powerful cheetah looked the lioness straight in the eye sensing the deadly fire of rage that burned deep within her young soul. She was now consumed by it; the rage had become her. Khulo raised his paw to meet the wide eyed gaze of surprise as he teased her with it. Malaika's rage turned to surprise and fright as the massive, burdened claw reach off the ground and slowly swipe itself across her muzzle sending her young form sprawling into the air towards the rock laden grounds in which they fought.

"Despicable lioness," spat Chal. "that's what you get. Feel the wrath."

"Good work Chal," Khulo praised his younger companion as he approached.

"They're easier than I thought."

"NOOOOOO!!!" came a blood curdling scream from a few feet away belonging to Kolo herself and she came charging at the pair with all her rage boiled up.

Khulo chuckled. "Don't count them out so easily." He saw the lioness charging him and immediately put up a paw. Instantly Kolo came to an abrupt stop and blinked at the furry before her. "Don't be stupid," he tried to reason. "There's no need for this rage!"

The lioness disagreed. She looked into his eyes then down at the lifeless body of her friend and frowned. "How can you say that! Look at the pain and suffering you've caused!" Kolo regarded the red-soaked form laid out in the dirt plains of the Serengeti and cried tears of sadness, anger, and rage. Never did she think anything this devastating would effect her so closely. Sure, she was close to Wamase; but not nearly as close as she was to Malaika. They'd become more than friends - like sisters - looking out for one another. Only this time... Kolo was the one who failed and because of it a dear friend writhed in pain. The image of her fuelled the rage which began to boil deep within her soul. "Now... there is." and she charged at the pair with all thoughts cleared from her mind.

In no condition to fight, the pair of elder lionesses had fled to a safer distance away to watch the horrors before them. As helpless as they were frail; they couldn't help but feel a need to act but what could they do? Their bodies were not in the best of shape like the other huntresses. Their entrance would only suit as more flesh for the attackers to ravish. Of course, as the flesh of the Pride was beginning to wear down... maybe new targets were in order. Still, as they looked at the fights between Malaika and Kolo; they thought there was at least *something* that they could accomplish.

"My god, this is a disaster," said Khemontu.

"And we're powerless to stop it."

"I still wish there was something we could do."

Zazu fluttered in, "Maybe there is Khemontu.... maybe there is."

The hornbill's presence frightened the duo who'd taken refuge in the bushes; hiding like little children. Choking back their fright; the two acknowledged Zazu who seemed knowledgeable in a way for them to fight back... in some form or another. "You can care for the wounded."

"What?" flashed Ishsana.

"That's right," he folded his wings. "Malaika is going to need attention and soon. And the way things are going; I'm sure she won't be the only one. Somehow we're going to have to get her out of harms way and tend to her!"

"And how do you suspect we do that without putting ourselves in the same position of danger!"

Zazu sighed and hung his head. "Think of them for one minute, will you! They are fighting for freedom - yours and theirs! Now, you wanted to help; here's your chance!"

"You're right Zazu," said Khemontu with a sorrowful tone. "Forgive me. Do you have a plan?"

"I'm glad you asked," he grinned and began to divulge his entire operations.

His plan was not totally foolproof or without its problems but it would serve to be quite helpful. He knew Kolo would not be able to survive for long unless one of those cheetah's was given something else to train his attention on. And while one was detained... Kolo would certainly be able to keep the other's attention and be able to hold the line long enough for Khemontu and Ishsana to come to the aid of the young Malaika. Hopefully they'd be able to get her to cover or at least be able to help her in some way. There was nothing to lose. If the trio did nothing; Malaika would die. But, by chance, if they did enact the plan... she stood a chance. A big chance.

"What are you going to do if he comes after you?" asked Ishsana of Zazu.

"Don't worry about me my dear," said the bird. "I have wings... he does not. I'll simply fly higher."

"Of course, the usual retreat by good old Zazu," replied Ishsana warmly. "Just do what comes natural eh?"

"Oh, it's that easy is it," smiled Khemontu.

"It's that easy," he smiled.

"Alright then," said Khemontu with a gleam in her eye. "Lets do it!"

Sarafina was handling Tshatshi pretty well; both bodies were ravished beyond belief. Their wounded flesh trickled with splattered blood. And though she was growing a bit fatigued Sarafina could tell her nemesis was too and picked this as a good time to play with his mind a little. "Had enough?"

Tshatshi chuckled through his panting, "I was about to ask the same to you."

"Don't worry about me," she grunted taking another swipe. "I can go forever." But that was a lie and they both knew it. Neither one would last much longer. And when she'd he'd heard a scream of defeat a bit ago and thoughts rushed through her mind wondering who it was to had fallen first; and she hoped whoever it was... was still with them. It wasn't before long Sarafina had thought of her own demise that way... that is, before she caught her first glimpse of Isha and Ng'ara who'd taken up fighting a duo of cheetahs.

The pair looked like they were holding their own against the fighting lionesses. Looking back at herself and at them Sarafina had a streak of brilliance which she acted upon instantly: She would join them. She would because in her mind numbers meant strength. And since it was usually the norm for a hunt; so be it for a fight as well. And so, Sarafina came to her senses and buddied up with her two closest peers and joined forces together. It would still be three against three but at least this way one could help the other if something were to happen. The only downfall to this marriage was that the enemy would also be equally strengthened. It was a risk that had to be taken in this stage of the game. The two were quite surprised to see her flee from Tshatshi and run towards them; but Isha and Ng'ara were quite receptive and actually very glad to see her!

"Hey!" exclaimed Isha. "How's life treatin' ya?"

Sarafina chuckled, "Oh, just dandy. How 'bout you?"

"Just great! Couldn't be better," said Ng'ara taking a swipe at the cheetah in front of her. "I'm really glad I'm getting this workout. I was afraid I was loosing some muscle tone. And I can't have that!"

The other two chuckled as they paired up back to back to back circling around one another keeping a close eye on the quarry who had them surrounded.

"Give it up," ordered Kichasi of Sarabi who she had pinned to the ground. "Relinquish yourself to me and I'll let you live."

Kichasi certainly had her in a tough position. Sarabi had been foolish enough to attack her right flank when her body was out of position and now she found herself in a most compromising position: lying on her back with the female cheetah straddling over her holding her body firmly into place.

"Why don't *you* give it up?"

"Because," Kichasi chuckled. "I'm the one currently holding a claw at your throat." The cheetah smiled so evilly because she knew with one swipe... the lioness would be history. "So you see I have the unique ability to ask for whatever I wish."

"I will not surrender."

Kichasi's eyes flashed, "So much the better... then you will die!" She pulled her paw back then swashed it back over Sarabi's neck. But her swipe was target less as Sarabi was able to work her back haunches against the belly of the beast. Kichasi's eyes opened as wide as the moon as Sarabi kicked her away.

"Get off me!"

Kichasi got up and licked the blood from her muzzle and growled.

"Come on!" yelled Khemontu, "Zazu's almost in position!" The hornbill fluttered his way across the night sky into the fray hoping to complete his task. Thanking the Great Kings; Zazu saw that Kolo was still holding her own. How she managed that was unbeknown to him but he only knew that he was happy beyond words and soon he would even up the odds for the lioness.

The elder lionesses watched with care as their hornbill bravely went into the battlefield and flew into harms way. "Ooo, I hope he is careful; the little rat. If this doesn't work out..."

Khemontu slapped the other, "Hush you. Lets concentrate on our objective here. We must get Malaika to safety."

"Right," she nodded and turned to the scene before her.

Zazu was into position; hovering a few feet above the carnage below. Where he sat was a safe place; for below him a fight to the death enraged between two cheetah's and one lioness. Kolo was a good hunter; properly trained and marvelously skilled, but she insufferable odds against her. If there was any time to act it would have to be now. Not only for Malaika's sake, who'd fallen in battle; but for Kolo's as well. Perhaps his act of desperation might save them both.

In a flash he dove into the muzzle of the cheetah marked as the target package without further thought and squawked into his eyes before flying beyond the deadly pawswipe range. If he hadn't gotten away, or waited just a second longer... the show would definitely be over. The swipe would have come so quickly; like would be expunged with ease. There'd really be nothing to worry about then. Except this time there was something to be worried about. Zazu

shook his head and focused on Khulo, who as expected, became enraged for the hornbill and chased after the bird with claws dancing in the air leaving only Kolo and Chal to battle it out amongst themselves. Khemontu and Ishsana saw their chance and lunged from behind their safe haven of bush and rock, dashing into the heat of the battle. Their primary mission's selective target was simple: rescue Malaika and do what ever was necessary to keep her alive.

The elder duo moved with lightning quick speed doing everything they could to avoid being swiped at by the cheetah Chal. That turned out to be a real adventure in itself: double backs, growls and snarls. But when they reached the fallen lioness their worst visions had come true: Malaika was lifeless. Quickly assessing her; to their sighs the elders were able to determine she was still alive... but just barely. Time was of the essence now. If Malaika were to live past the next few minutes she would need to be moved; her wounds disinfected and provided a healthy supply of water.

"Great Kings..." gasped Ishsana. "She looks awful!"

"What do you think?" asked Khemontu. "Can we move her?"

"I don't see how we can. Most of her wounds have stopped bleeding... but those injuries look pretty bad."

"Not all of them have sealed," uttered the other elder with a sigh. "These claw marks are in deep and they are still seeping fluids." Khemontu was overwhelmed at the sights she witnessed. Never before had she'd seen such latent disregard for life in all her existence. Even the kills she made in her younger years seemed pale to this tragedy. "Ish.. Ishsa.. Ishsana; I just don't know what to do."

Chal and Kolo were snarling, clawing, biting, and batting each other to death as the two elders checked over the only lioness to have fallen so far. They watched over her broken form and curiously pondered her future. Her wounds were dangerously critical and their only dilemma now was whether or not to move her. If the two of them did try and relocate Malaika's frail body; her massive wounds could reopen and upset the balance. If the decision was made to leave her be and care for her there; they risked even more. Yet if something wasn't done... and soon; there wouldn't be much left to fuss about.

Just then Kolo burst onto the scene.

"Whoa!" they both exclaimed as the two were plowed over by the flailing body. "Ooof!"

"Sorry," laughed Kolo as she got up. "I'm a wee bit busy to look where I'm goin'."

Khemontu laughed, "quite all right young one.... but you better get moving because here he comes again!"

"I'm not worried," announced the lioness. "I may not look in the best of shape. But I think I have him beat." She sighed and pondered going at it once again with the cheetah. "How is Malaika?"

Khemontu looked up with a saddened expression. "She's alive... for now."

Kolo breathed out and nodded. "Take good--"

"We'll do the best we can."

She nodded before returning to her fight, "I know you will. Oh, and thanks for that diversion!"

Ishsana chuckled, "Welcome!"

Chal came running after her with fangs bared and eyes enraged. He wasn't about to let a female beat him in combat; especially not some lioness. If there was one thing he would like to accomplish this night, it would be to teach this creature a lesson. No one, and he repeated, no one made a fool out of him. Chal's fierceness was met head on by that of Kolo. Their heads butted and bodies collided as shockwaves energized their beings through their interlocked claws. Both jockeying for position, Kolo and Chal stood, neither relenting their position until...

"Damn you!" cursed Chal as he was swiped on the muzzle by the outstretched talons that belonged to the lioness. "You will pay dearly for that."

The female chuckled and wiped her face clear of the splattered blood. "That's one." Definitely one back for Malaika. She backed up as the cheetah growled in rage. His face became flustered and his jaw was set. "Now, you die."

* * *

The blades of grass slipped by the body of a running lion as he raced across the fields of the Serengeti. Many thoughts raced through his brain as he ran. The roar Taka heard was definitely one of distress... and attack. But what could be going on at Pride Rock at this hour? Certainly the lionesses weren't foolish to attempt a hunt at this time of night. "That would be utterly idiotic," he said. Then again, he already felt the answer to his question and what it could be. The cheetahs. That was the only other alternative explanation. Somewhere among the vast plains of the Pride lands... the cheetahs must have lurked and finally made their way to Pride Rock. But why?

Scar looked up at the towering form of Pride Rock that was still far in the distance and wondered. "The why isn't important right now. Only the means in which I defend my kingdom." If there really was an attack; the lionesses would be overwhelmed. The possibility of nothing to return to definitely crossed his mind. But Scar had to give it all he had... because if not; the Kingdom would fall and he with it. Taka chuckled and sarcastically remarked, "History recorded that the lion king Scar was the one who let his own pride down and fall victim to a horrible attack..." He growled, not liking the sound of that. Taka picked up his own pace in response and hurriedly made his way through the thick underbrush hoping he'd get to the tower of rock in time.

Ng'ara jumped into Isha shoving her away from the oncoming pounce; taking it herself. It may not have been the smartest thing for a creature to do, but it was the right thing to do. Isha had been injured on her left thigh on the last pounce and could not afford another swipe - the wound she received was bad enough. Luckily Ng'ara's position created enough of an awkward zone to grant her only a small scratch no deeper than a centimeter. She wailed at the sudden sharp abrasion as Bhutai's claws grazed her fur.

Meanwhile Sarafina took a slash from Tambulo directly on the side and stumbled to the ground barring her teeth as the pain shot through her entire body. She was beginning to lose control over her muscles - their power spent. She suspected that many of her compadres were also beginning to take notice to their afflictions. Even their last meal was not enough to nourish them back to complete health... and it was affecting their performance. Sarafina grunted as she got up; but she did, and turned sparing with the cheetah once more.

Isha had taken a tumble down a small slope after the effects of Ng'ara's shove and was followed by a cheetah she knew as Tshatshi. Now all three had been separated once more and Isha knew she'd have to act fast or she'd become the next meal for the cheetah! But as she got up Isha howled in pain and collapsed back down. Tshatshi heard this and quickened his pace. It wouldn't be long now and he'd be right on top of her. Isha held up her throbbing paw and gave it a lick; confirming that she did in fact, injure her right front paw. This was a devastating injury to her; as she fought most keenly with that paw. It would also limit her movements... and seem to confide her away from the friends she loved.

But they too heard the cry of pain and instantly relinquished their battles and rushed down the hillside where Isha stood. It was quite a sight finding a lioness standing on three of four paws; but funny or not Isha was all about concentration and very serious. She was not about to go laying down. In a strike so powerful, Sarafina leaped into the air and pounced on Tshatshi crushing down on him with all her weight. His legs immediately buckled sending him to the Savanna floor yelping in distress. Sarafina held him with all her might until Ng'ara was at Isha's side.

"You alright hon?" inquired Ng'ara.

"Yes!" yelped Isha as the other grabbed the paw. "Oh my..."

"What is it?" Isha wanted to know.

"I think," gulped Ng'ara. "You may have broken your paw."

"What?!"

Worst case scenario was that the lioness Isha had broken her paw and the continual use of it could make the injury hard to heal. An injury like that could seriously impale a lioness' ability to hunt; fight; or sustain herself. So, an impairment of that nature could be devastating to her. The best case, Ng'ara figured, was that Isha's paw was not broken; but only sprained. If this were the case she'd make a full recovery in no time. However, time was of the essence and they needed Isha's fighting skill because All three Cheetahs had surrounded them once again.

"Bravo!" said a voice from the top of the hill. Everyone gasped in surprise as they turned and looked in the direction of the announced. "I see you're doing a good job here."

"Khulo!" the trio of Cheetahs cried. "Glad of you to make it to our little party down here."

Khulo chuckled at the creatures below. "Yeah, I left Chal with some lioness. After we took care of the one; I figured he could finish the job with the other."

The lionesses weren't happy; in fact they trained their eyes on a feathery substance clinging on the edge of Khulo's muzzle. It was a strange blue and white... feather! They gulped. Only one bird in this vicinity had feathers to match those colors - Zazu. And now, not only Zazu was down... but there was a mention of a lioness! Who? They heard the horrible roar of pain and anguish earlier. But who could it be? Sarabi!?

And as Khulo joined the trio of Cheetahs they had already fought - for the first time since the battle began... the trio of lionesses started to fear for their lives.

Ishsana and Khemontu hurriedly worked around the body of Malaika. The big gash on her back side was still seeping fluids but luckily the wound was closing. The two licked her wounds to clean them as best as they could; but she was still in bad shape. "She's got a couple broken ribs..." announced Khemontu at last.

"How do you know?"

She pointed, "Because I can see the bones sticking out here; much more than normal."

Ishsana moved to investigate; placing a paw over the area. Khemontu was right... Malaika had broken ribs. Suddenly the lioness' breathing became erratic; her heart rate jumped and her muscles tensed in waves over her entire body - Malaika was waking up! The two elders went to her muzzle and nuzzled it; hoping to get her to open her eyes. Low moans of pain and agony filled their ears as Malaika fought for consciousness.

"Come on Malaika," Khemontu said as she threw her tongue across the younger one's nose. "You can do it."

"Fight it!"

They watched intently as Malaika's eyes began to flutter more and more violently in tune with their insistence. Slowly coming around she was; then without warning Malaika's body spasmed and her eyes flung wide open. "Where... where..."

"Shh," Khemontu whispered. "Don't try to talk."

"What happened?"

"You were attacked," announced Ishsana. "Don't you remember?"

She blinked a couple of times and rose her head in a gesture trying to rise to her senses.

"Nono!" said Khemontu forcefully placing a paw on Malaika's shoulder. "Take it easy. You have a big gash on your back; and I think a couple of broken ribs."

Malaika moaned and fell back down.

"Just rest a moment and get your bearings. Then try and get up in a few minutes."

"Hey!" said Kolo as she waltzed in, "is she awake?"

Khemontu nodded, "but very weak."

Kolo sat looking at her dear friend as she smiled relinquishing the story of her battle with Chal. As rough as it was; Kolo was finally able to get him on top of a small rock precipice and take advantage of his misfortune. Though she had the cheetah right where she wanted him; he didn't go down easily. She took a couple quick slashes across her chest before gaining the upper paw sending the disgrace over the edge; plummeting to his doom. When it was all over Kolo was exhausted and splattered with blood - hers and Chal's. If there was anything in the world she wanted right now; it was a good bath!

"Wow, sounds like you had a rough time," coughed Malaika. "Sorry I let you down."

"No..." breathed Kolo scooting to the lioness' side. "You didn't let me down one bit."

"Heh," she chuckled and groaned at the pain her laughing produced. "Look at me. I'm tattered and torn."

"Oh, we'll have you back to your good old self in no time."

Ishsana and Khemontu shared the smile with Kolo hoping it would raise Malaika's spirits. But the truth be known that the lioness had a long road of recovery ahead. And there was a possibility that she would never fully recover from her massive injuries. "Have any of you seen Zazu?" asked one of the elders.

"No," frowned Kolo. "I've not seen him since your well planned diversion."

Khemontu chuckled. "Brave bird... he came up with the plan all by himself."

"Zazu?" blinked Kolo in surprise. "Our Zazu?" She just couldn't believe it.

"Yep, our little hornbill decided he wanted a piece of the action," said Ishsana. "And he dragged us into it!"

Malaika gurgled a weak laugh. "I'm glad he did. I owe you two my life."

The two elders beamed for a moment, "Our pleasure dearie... we're glad we could help out."

"Maybe I should go look for the bird?" asked Kolo.

Khemontu nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," affirmed Ishsana.

Kolo looked around at the battle grounds and could still hear the roars of engagement that ensued on. She hoped that no other lioness had met the same future as Malaika; but she thought best to find out. "See if you can't get her up... I'll go check on everyone else and see if I can't locate Zazu in the process."

"All right!" exclaimed the elders as they watch Kolo trot off to find the others.

Kichasi and Sarabi were still battling it out on the precipice of Pride Rock. Hit after hit by paw after paw; these two warriors fought. Neither one was willing to yield - there was just too much at stake. Each bore the contusions of their agendas and each one suffered the pain that was inflicted. Sarabi fought long and hard and came close many times to knocking the cheetah from the ledge to no avail. And it almost seemed she lost the will to fight after her last brush with the female - holding her hostage with a claw. But she still fought as well as she could; there was no disputing that. Yet the more she raged on the more tired she became and sooner or later someone would have to give. Sarabi never thought it would be her.

"Do you know I can snap your neck where I stand lion?," Kichasi snarled keeping a firm grasp of Sarabi's neck.

"I would imagine so," breathed out Sarabi. "I suggest a quick clean break. Leave anything else and I will turn and kill you."

"Nooooooooo!" screamed Kolo approaching the rock face taking notice of the grip Kichasi held over her Queen. Still a bit far off in the distance Kolo was, but she could still see the white of Kichasi's fangs as they dug into Sarabi's hide. "Get away from her you witch!"

"I suggest you stand back lion; you wouldn't want your actions to become a catalyst... now would you? This is between this one here and myself. It has nothing to do with you."

"Back away Kolo..." ordered Sarabi under distress and watched as she slowly obeyed her command.

"No! Stay," spat Kichasi. "You can watch your Queen die."

"Go Kolo... go--" Sarabi yelped as she tried to get the order out; but the sheer force of Kichasi's jaws closing around her caused the air to escape.

"Stay. I insist." Kichasi grinned evilly with her eyes as they looked over the lioness Kolo. "Why don't you call the other lionesses over here... I want them to see this too."

"No," Kolo blandly stated.

"Do it!" grunted Kichasi. "Or I snap her neck right now!"

Kolo watched as Sarabi gave her the nod, to do what Kichasi bid while letting a small tear drop from her eye. Reluctantly as she was in performing the task she'd been ordered to do by

the whims of the cheetah; she turned and roared - calling the other lionesses to her locale. She watched in disgust as Kichasi drooled while laughing at who knew what. "What's so funny?" Kolo asked of her.

"You, my dear."

"Me?"

"That's right," Kichasi said. "I know you want to jump me and rip me to shreds. But while I have your queen here; you're going to do exactly what I say."

Kichasi too let out a snarl to call her troops to her then turned back to Sarabi. "Stop your struggling... you'll be put out of your misery in a few moments."

Kolo began to cry, "You leave her alone!"

"What's all the fuss about?" asked Tshatshi as he hurriedly scaled the precipice sporting a grin when he saw immediately what the summons was for. "Why Kichasi... you never cease to amaze me."

"Or me," said Khulo as he approached along side Tshatshi.

The other three lionesses arrived with their tongues sticking out - panting.

"I just wanted to let everyone witness this event."

"Which is?" asked Ng'ara.

"Quite obviously. I'm going to let you watch your Queen here... die."

Kichasi was surrounded by her crew: Tshatshi, Bhutai, Tambulo and Khulo even though he did not approve of such a display. Joining them were the lionesses of the Pride: Kolo, Ng'ara, and Sarafina while Isha limped in on her paw and Malaika brought up the rear with the support of the two elders; Khemontu and Ishsana. The notable absences were of course Chal and Zazu. The mood was rather tense and dark - only the light from the moon and the stars in the sky illuminated the rockface. Standing in silence as they were; the entire compliment was on the verge of attacking one another.

Only the sheer power of Kichasi and the sudden overwhelming shock of Sarabi's position kept them from focusing on anything but the spectacle before them.

"You... let her... go..." mumbled Malaika with all her strength speaking from the bottom of the precipice. The compliment turned to look at who was the one to first break the silence. Khulo too looked and obtained a good look at this lioness and cringed at the blood still dripping from the gash he gave her. It was then he realized what he did to that poor lioness. His disregard for living creatures was not why he came out onto the Pride lands in the first place - far from it. And for the first time he began to regret his decision to embark on this mission in the first place. Letting down Mng'ariza was not something he was prone to do; but look at what that mission had become. It has turned into nothing but a full-fledged nightmare. Khulo was devoid of power and now of dignity. He was no better than Kichasi herself; all because he did what he was told instead of following his instincts.

"Now why would I want to let my prize go?" Kichasi asked knowing she had everyone right where she wanted. Sarabi was at her bidding now as was the rest of the pride. Coupled that with her cheetah clan and they would all live and die by her next commands. Besides, she loved being the one in power; it fueled her soul completely. "She's much too precious to allow her to live."

"No!" bellowed Sarafina pushing aside bodies in a rush to Sarabi's side but Ng'ara and Kolo were able to keep her in place. There was no reason to act foolish now.

"Kichasi," Khulo stepped forward and spoke. "The battle is ours. What more is to be done here? What would be accomplished if you killed her?"

The female looked at her once commander and studied him. Taking command from him might have been the best thing to happen to the poor man - the best thing in his life; or the worst humiliation. Either way she was in command now and would not be dictated to by that humiliation. Right now she had the lions in a bit of a spot. A spot in which she could demand almost anything - so long as they valued their Queen's life. Which each and everyone of them did to the highest extent. And it occurred to her as her fury began to subside that Khulo had a valid point too: an action of death would very likely be met with an equal force. "Alright boys, what do you think I should do with her?"

"Snap her neck!" said one.

"Yeah! Show them!" added another.

"No..." whispered Kichasi with the lioness in her jaws. "I will do one better."

Kichasi pondered her decision with much haste feeling that because of the present circumstance, it was best if she let the lionesses go and wallow in their embarrassment. She and her clan were the ones who won the battle; not them. Kichasi had nothing to fear and they would now think twice before attacking her clan again. So, without further delay she told the compliment around her what exactly she had in mind; and how it would be carried out: The lionesses would be escorted away from Pride Rock and if they returned; they would be killed on site - no questions asked. Quite a simple strategy, thought Khulo but one that surprised him to no end.

Sarabi began to sob, "Where do you expect us to go?"

"None of my concern lion! Anywhere but here. The Pride lands are no longer your concern..."

She was about to lurch back but was stopped by the female cheetah's words, "I'm doing you a favor... don't destroy my good faith." They stood looking at one another for a brief second; both understanding the fire which burned inside them. "Now get out," growled Kichasi.

The Queen took a good look around and wiped the tears from her eyes. This was her home all her life; and now to be forced from it! How could this have happened? But it wasn't her lionesses fault; they were in very bad shape as it was; they would not be able to withstand another battle. But as she turned from Kichasi's grasp there was one thing Sarabi promised to the victors: They would return. "Let us go..."

"But Sarabi!"

Sarabi shook her head and walked diligently down the slope of Pride rock; passed the entrance to her home and padded out onto the grounds of the Savanna; this becoming the saddest day of her life. One by one the other lionesses reluctantly followed suit; growling as they walked by the cheetahs who clearly won the battle. But there would be another day - another battle. Their home would not be lost to them forever and they would once again be among familiar surroundings. The cheetahs watched with smiles on their faces as the lionesses slowly sauntered their way across the plains. Isha, the last to leave, hobbled down to join Malaika and the elders who were having trouble helping her due to the injuries sustained. And as Sarabi turned watching the last of her lionesses leave the shadows of Pride Rock; she sighed, "May the Great Kings forgive us. May they give us strength." And then turned away in moonlit tears.

Scar watched in horror as he approached the grounds of Pride Rock apparently too late to stop whatever conflict had arisen. Blood stains were everywhere and the scents of battle still raged on. An ear perked up as he heard the cheetahs gathering around the entrance of the sleep chambers and strained to listen. But it wasn't safe for him here; and he needed to catch up with the rest of his pride - what was left of them. What ever happened here this night would have to be justified and he was sure his name would come up often during the discussions on who to blame. Shaking his head he warily wandered off in search for his subjects.

Kichasi looked at her troops as they all assembled before her. Their bodies were tattered and torn but none the worse off; they all would recover in time. She looked at them all and saw the pride within them. They beat the odds and forced the lions away from their lands. Mng'ariza would be very proud of her. "You have all done well," she announced into the still night. "I am proud of you... all. The victory is our success. For tomorrow brings another day - and a new life. Now it is our turn to take our place on the Circle of Life. *We* are the leaders of the Pride lands!!" They all cheered her on as Kichasi turned to make her way up to the tip of Pride Rock. With her features illuminated by the silvery light from the heavenly body above she reached the top of the precipice and looked out over the lands - tail slashing too and fro. A wide grin of satisfaction protruded across her features as she reveled in her conquest... and soon that grin turned into an evil menacing laugh as she gazed across the kingdom; proclaiming herself Queen of the Pride lands.



Part Three

The Pride

Chapter Nineteen

The lionesses wandered through the darkened skies with their backs turned to the awful sights behind them. Never in the history of their existence had they ever been chased from their home - Pride Rock; ever! It was an unprecedented time in their history and some found themselves worried about how their own lives would turn out now that this catastrophe occurred. But even in the light of failure, some good fortunes, like those of Sarabi, keep looking forward. Sarabi is looking forward because the future is all she has left to look forward too - her existence depends on it.

"Keep going," ordered Sarabi.

"Where *are* we going?" asked Ng'ara lending a helping paw to Malaika.

Sarabi took a look around and sighed, "I'm not sure. Out of the sight of these cheetahs."

Malaika moaned.

"Sarabi," murmured Isha. "She's not gonna be able to move much longer. We're gonna have to keep her still! Or she'll bleed to death!"

Zazu fluttered nearby, "I'm sure she is aware of that." Even in this predicament, Zazu could not resist the urge to assert his authority. "What other alternative is there? It isn't like we can retreat within the confines of Pride Rock."

Kolo fumed, "Really Zazu? I think *that* has been established."

"Why don't you go fly off and brut. We don't have time for your nonsense," frowned Isha.

"Well I never!"

Sarabi growled lowly, signaling her annoyance with the whole conversation. "This is getting us no where."

"You're right Sarabi," said Isha. "I apologize."

"Quite right," added Zazu.

"ZAZU!"

The hornbill ducked within its wings and fell to the ground, "Yes ma'am?"

"Shut up!"

If there was one thing her lioness didn't need right now was a badgering hornbill at their throats. Protocol of a majordomo declared that he must keep the order; but hadn't the pride enough to worry about right now? Hadn't they been through enough suffering without having a bird boss them around and snap snide remarks at them? Of course they did; and Sarabi knew this. "You're not helping the situation any Zazu. These lionesses have been through much agony and torment. We don't need you adding to the pot."

"I... I'm sorry Sarabi. I was unaware."

"Make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, your highness."

"Good."

Sarabi ordered the pack of hobbling lionesses to stop for a moment and collect themselves. This gave pause for Malaika to regain some of her strength. She did not know exactly where they'd end up before the night was over, but one thing was certain, wherever they ended up she hoped it was far away from the cheetahs. Sarabi had her fill of those vile creatures and wanted nothing more of them. But what would they do now? Certainly they'd find some kind of shelter tonight; but what of tomorrow? What of the days that follow when they will become deathly hungry again. Where will they hunt? What will happen and with Scar missing, how would they survive without protection?

"Ng'ara; Isha," announced the Queen. "Follow me."

"Where to?"

"We are going to look for a place to rest for the evening."

Survival. Sarabi was determined to put her pride's survival in front of all else. A hunt was pointless if they did not survive the night. Even if Scar did not return, they could still stand a chance to live until help did arrive. And who knew, maybe Mufasa would somehow come back to the lioness he loved; and a pride he swore to protect. "Kolo, you stay with Malaika and the others. We'll be back shortly."

"Yes, my queen."

Sarabi knew that Malaika was hurt the most from their encounter with Kichasi and her clan. But that far outweighed the fact that everyone else had wounds as well; wounds that stung in the evening air. There would be time later to tend to those wounds, for now, survival was the top issue. To confirm survival would require safety: safety from the elements and safety from recurrence. Still, there was slim chance for the lioness Malaika - her live giving blood draining from her. With multiple abrasions, fractures and breaks, it was surprising to Sarabi that the pain did not keep Malaika from walking. Then again, as determined as she is to live; her will may be the hardest to break.

"We're going to go ahead and scout around. Hopefully, we'll find something soon. Keep tight and we'll be back."

Kolo nodded.

"We'll be right here," said Sarafina.

"Do you want me to--"

"No," replied the queen to the bird. "Stay and keep watch."

Sarabi and two of her lionesses followed as she led the way away from their group. Zazu stayed behind to circle and keep an eye on the situation from above; under orders of Sarabi of course. If any predator came their way; Zazu would be the first to know and could notify someone immediately. It also allowed him to keep track of Sarabi's whereabouts as well; even if that task proved much more than he could handle. This whole ordeal was very stressful on his well-being too, and no one seemed to care. He'd lost his king, angered his queen, put the lives of the pride in danger, and has allowed Scar to seemingly take over without one iota of confrontation. A lot of things did not add up and he seemed to be in the center of it all only completely unaware of the day to day activities that went on. A very stressful situation for a majordomo.

Sarabi, on the otherhand, took Ng'ara and Isha out beyond the safety of the tall grasses to look beyond the plains for some place they might be able to investigate as a safe spot; only to return to the bushes once more. With all the creatures that lived on the Pride lands, she couldn't fathom where they all went at night. She scanned the lands and found no discernable place for her pride to stay the night; or for that matter, any creature to call home. Yet, for all the herds that usually called the Pride lands their home; there seemed to be a lack of abundance of liveable space.

The wind whistled through her fur as she watched the lands for anything of value while letting her thoughts wander to the lion she let run her pride. For the first time in her existence, she wished he was around. His presence durring the attack would have been greatly beneficial *if* he were by their sides. If Taka were among them, maybe she and the others might have made it out with more than their lives; the pride might have held on to its dignity. Sarabi couldn't help but be angered over the fact that the lion wanted the crown, but didn't have the audacity to stick around and fight.

"There's just nothing here Sarabi," said one of them.

"I know," she said to Ng'ara. "But we have to keep looking for the sake of the others. They are depending on us."

"I'd hate to return and tell them the bad news."

"Especially Malaika," added Isha. "She's in real bad shape."

"Do you think she'll make it?" Ng'ara asked of the other young lioness.

"Too soon to tell, but it doesn't look good."

"Shh," she whispered to them. Part in because she didn't want their voices to give away their position; and part because she didn't want to hear about Malaika and her condition, it saddened her too much. The pride could ill afford to loose another skilled huntress.

Sarabi stopped suddenly as her ears picked up a rustle directly in her path. Who ever it was, decided to spring on the wrong creature. She and the rest of her lionesses were not in the mood to be messed with. Quietly as she could, Sarabi alerted each of the two members of her lioness team and prepared them for anything. In a split second everyone became still as the evening moon and stood awaiting the next movement that would give the creature's position away. Soon the bushes rattled once again at just the right point in time; not letting down Sarabi's predictions.

The lioness growled and announced her presence just as a form emerged from the foliage. In an instant she stopped her display in order to look over the intruder. Who ever it was had a familar form, tint and hue. Every muscle in her body twitched as the greenness of the creatures eyes jolted from the moonlit saturated area; and danced upon the furs of the trio of lionesses watching. Ng'ara, Isha, nor Sarabi could move; their beings frozen solid; the eyes before them haveing the power to subdue. And just when the silence was too much to bear, the eyes spoke. "What a pleasant surprise to find you all out this way."

"Who is that," mouthed Ng'ara.

Sarabi shot the lioness a look for speaking out.

"Aww, don't you recognize the voice?" the form breathed before stepping into the moonlight.

"Scar," spat Sarabi.

"Exactly," said the lion. "Who else could it have been?"

Sarabi lowered her eyes at the dark lion in annoyance who now fully showed himself. "It could have been Kichasi; or any one of the other cheetahs you boob."

"I am not a cheetah."

"That is obvious," Sarabi growled. "Where were you--"

"I do believe we have a place to stay for the night," said Scar cutting the queen's question off.

"Really?" asked Isha in surprise

Scar nodded.

"Where at?" Ng'ara spoke up.

The lion pointed to a place not far from their position; the target was across the plains into the forest. There, they could find a small cave in which to reside for the night. If all else went as planned, the lionesses might be able to claim the cavern as their sanctuary for the next few nights!

"You two run along and go fetch the others. Sarabi and I will be waiting for your return."

"Yes Scar!" the two rejoiced and turned and trotted as best they could, back to the small secluded spot in which they left the others. With news this grand, Ng'ara and Isha could not wait to share it with the rest of the pride!

This left Sarabi and the dark maned lion together and alone. Sarabi started pacing back and forth in front of him; trying to find the right words to express her anger. Eventually she found them. "Do you know how much this pride lost tonight?"

"I do," he replied.

"Do you even care?"

"What kind of question is that! Of course I care."

"Do you really?" she shot back. "It amazes me that you do. You use me to gain power for reasons only the great kings know; and you can sit there and say you totally care about the welfare of the lionesses?"

Scar nodded.

"I don't believe it! I refuse to believe it! We could have used you in that battle Scar!"

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help out."

"*Where were you?*" she wanted to know. "I want to know what was *more* important than the security of your pride!"

Scar stepped back; certainly he couldn't reveal that he was in the graveyard. So far, he was the only one aware of his visits with his friends the hyenas. If anyone else found out about that, it would cause a credible loss of trust. Possibly forcing him to return any gained power back to Sarabi. Trust was what he was trying to gain from the pride; and so far he'd done just that. The lionesses had already accepted him as ruler. That was something that could change with a blink of an eye or a twitch of a muzzle.

"Well, aren't you going to answer me?"

"I was tending to other duties Sarabi," he said at last.

"Please, don't give me that old excuse."

"What would you like me to tell you? That I was lounging around?"

Scar put up such an argument; so defensive. Maybe he was just lounging around and was so far off that he was unable to return to help fend off the cheetahs. Maybe he was out defending the pride against the hyenas or a number of other things. But those were only excuses to what Sarabi knew to be the truth. The lion was hiding something and Sarabi wanted to find out just what that might be. She would not allow any lame excuses to cloud her thoughts. "Were you?"

"Gods no Sarabi."

"Then what *were* you doing?"

"That's none of your business," shot Scar.

Sarabi turned in disgust. How could any being be so stubborn? What was it he was trying to keep a secret? He'd just about let her know everything else that was bothering him. Many of his other secrets were being put to the test right now.

"Don't fight me Sarabi," he said at last. "You know where that'll get you."

"Do I?" she turned quickly. "How can we be sure *your* crimes against me will not be persecuted?"

She had him there. One of the many things he was worried about during the enacting of his plan was how Sarabi would act thinking back to his behavior that day at the waterhole. Certainly those actions would place him in discontent with Mufasa... if he should return. Yet, his crime against the lioness, in his mind, *was* superficial. Scar couldn't help being drawn to the scent which she produced. In mating season; nothing is sacred - nothing. But the situation that arose from that fateful day put both parties involved in a bit of a spot. And Scar figured he got the better end of the deal right now.

"You can't put nature on trial Sarabi," said the lion. "I could not help my reaction."

"Neither could I," spat Sarabi.

"Unfortunately yours can not be so forgiven. Besides, the lionesses have accepted me. I have... given them new hope."

Sarabi growled.

"Besides, anything you try now will only be met by opposition within your own lionesses. Face it Sarabi, the Pride has benefited since I've been the chosen leader."

"That is so outrageous!"

"And so very true."

The lionesses of the pride rushed onto the scene finding Sarabi and Scar in a heated argument. Each in turn looked to them then each other before deciding to stay out of it. Unfortunately they could not wait for long. In order to assure Malaika's survival; they would need to get a move on. The lionesses' eyes were glazed over now. Her pain too much to bear. Even if she was being supported by Kolo and Sarafina now, her strength was leaving her post haste.

"May I ask what is going on here?" spoke one of the elders.

"It is obvious that we're having an argument," said Sarabi.

"Apparently," mouthed Khemontu. "Why?"

Sarabi shrugged, "Nothing important."

"Then may I suggest we get on with it?"

Yes, thought the lion queen, the pride should get on with their task at hand and turned her gaze from the lionesses back to Scar; without missing a beat, she inquired about his new found abode. Speaking as if nothing appeared to happen between them; the lion voiced his knowledge of his find and exactly how to get there.

"Follow me," he said to them. "I'll lead the way."

Without one morsel of remorse, the lionesses turned their attention to the dark maned lion and followed his backside through the grasses and across the plains toward the forest. A place that possessed the promised salvation.

"What awaits for us Scar?" asked Isha.

He turned to her and smiled; his teeth glistening in the moonlight. "I have located a small cave a few paw-lengths inside the tree boundary.

"A big cave?"

"Not as big as the one at Pride Rock," he stated. "But it will do."

Within moments, Scar and the rest of the lion pride arrived at their destination. Before them was a quaint, well hidden cavern - and by the looks of it; it had been recently occupied. Most of the light from the moon was cut off here; and the area was as dark as any African night anyone had seen before. For the time being, this small cave would become their home away from home. That is, until they could recuperate and amass a counter attack that would remove the cheetahs from the Pride lands forever.

"This place reeks of cheetahs," grated Sarafina.

"Let this be a lesson to you," the lion said. "A constant reminder that we are not above the law and that we lions can also fall from grace. Let this stench burn into your mind; think of it, and call to it when the time arises."

* * *

Kichasi laughed aloud, "I must congratulate you all on a job well done." She sat back and took in all that was around her. For the first time in all recorded history; a clan of cheetahs were successful at pushing the lions from their land. It was funny really, somehow thinking back to only a few hours ago. Kichasi never thought the clan could come through and actually fight for what it wanted. Khulo was a big worry because of his voice against the campaign. Though she did not entirely trust; she was amazed at the victory. A sweet victory on an enormous scale.

"I have to hand it to you Kichasi," said Tambulo. "The plan was fantastic."

"Unbelievable," said Bhutai.

"I couldn't have done better myself," Tshatshi chimed in.

Kichasi nodded to each on in turn; thanking them for their loyalty. If it wasn't for their effort, no one would be in the position they are in right now. There wouldn't have been a conquest of the lions; only a whimper as the cheetahs withered from existence. Now, they stood a fighting chance and could survive! The next order of business would be to find food; first thing in the morning.

"Curious Kichasi," announced Khulo. "How do you plan to defend your prize?"

The female sighed at the question. If any one voice could ruin a hard days work; it was Khulo's. He was always there to poke in senseless reality questions. Right now, she didn't care how the defense would be picked up. On her mind now was the victory she fought for and the relevance and power she now had. Creatures from all around would now live and die at her command. What more could there be? "I'm not worried Khulo."

"You should be."

"Why? Because you tell me I should be?"

"No," he shook his head. "Because I know from experience that this is only the beginning."

Kichasi growled. "Would you stop with your worrying. Can't you enjoy what we have here?"

"Which is what exactly Kichasi? A prize that we almost lost our lives over; a prize that will be very hard to defend come tomorrow?"

"Why do you care Khulo?" asked Bhutai. "You abandoned us."

"I did no such thing."

"Why then, did you not support the right initiative," asked Tambulo, his number one.

"I could not support a failure."

Kichasi took a quick look around and chuckled, "I definitely don't consider this a failure."

"No? Look at Chal," he pointed. "He's bleeding to death. Look at Bhutai and the rest of *your* clan. They possess wounds that will last a lifetime. This is no clean cut victory Kichasi. Bloodshed is not a victory." Khulo sighed. "You may have one this first battle; but the real test is yet to come."

"And how do you know all this?" she asked.

"I have experienced it. I've lived it."

The campaigns he had with Mng'ariza taught him many valuable lessons when it came to battle tactics. To be the best, one had to learn from the best; and in within most clans: Mng'ariza was considered to be the best - paws down. He knew from experience; an experience handed down from master to student. Now, Khulo was the master, not the student, and he had a unique perspective on Kichasi's campaign. Sure, she may have one this one battle; she may have won the hearts of his clan, but the time will come when that trust is put on the line, shattered by overzealousness.

Besides, Khulo did not want her to make the same mistakes he did when he was younger. He may not have made the mistake of mutiny; but he did make a couple bad command decisions which cost the lives of many. Because of which, those unpleasant mistakes will be forever burned into his memory. Even though he disliked Kichasi, she was still young and had much to learn. Perhaps one day becoming a good leader. "So, excuse me if I sound a little more experienced here."

"I think you're jealous."

"Jealous? Ha!"

"Yes, jealous," she repeated. "You've done nothing but dismiss this victory at every turn."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Khulo replied. "I feel no more jealous over this than the next cheetah. I'm just being cautious Kichasi like any good leader would."

"He's right," said Tshatshi. "This victory has cost us much more than we want to realize. Lets keep sharp and ready for anything."

Kichasi hrumphed and trotted off away from them all. She needed to be alone right now; sitting in solitude. She thought the clan would be grateful for what she had done for them. She gave them something to believe in; something to conquer. She's provided everything she said she would. So what was the problem? Why were they weary of what has been given them? Males, oy!

"I still believe what we've done here was our best option," said Tambulo. "Our future seems a little more brighter."

"Brighter perhaps; but not stable."

"How come you are against fighting?"

Khulo wasn't against fighting and made that clear some time ago. What he had trouble with; was forcing the lions from their land before exhausting every other alternative to them. While fighting may have been inevitable; all other options should have been explored first. Who knew, perhaps a reasoning could have been reached eventually. Now, any hope of a compromise was washed away in the blood of the wounded. Once a group sheds blood; blood will be all that is thirsted for.

"I told you before that if we had to fight the lions, I would. But you could not be happy with that. You all wanted action; and you wanted it right then. You just can not do that, and you all are aware of that. Have you forgotten all that Mng'ariza has taught you throughout the years?"

"No," answered Bhutai.

"I think you have," added Khulo. "How else would you justify going against your leader to attack against his will."

"Because it was the right thing to do."

Khulo blinked in amazement. The right thing to do? Mutiny is the right thing to do? How could that be? *I should leave well enough alone*, he said to himself. *I don't belong with this clan anymore*. Khulo shook his head in disappointment and wandered inside the cavern the lions previously called home. He hoped to get some much needed rest and use the time to think of some way to regain control over his destiny.

"I can't help it if he does not think what has transpired was the correct way," said Tshatshi.

"He's not the only one right now," Tambulo commented. "I understand his concern. We are in grave danger here. But that is something we'll have to worry about when the time comes. The deed is done - we need to look to the future now."

Tshatshi nodded and agreed.

* * *

The rest of the pride had retreated inwards for the night; leaving Sarafina to her lonesome amongst the bark and leaves of the forest. The lioness wanted to stay out in the night air needing

the freshness to shake the scars of battle that were still active in her mind. Unable to rest, Sarafina looked up to the stars and wondered how the Great Kings could allow such a tragedy to happen to one of the Serengeti's most beautiful plains. Where was her friend Wamase when she needed her? Before long, she heard someone creep up behind her. Believing it was Sarabi, she ignored the approach and kept silent. When the approaching body was not to be recognized, it spoke.

"Sarafina, I sense your worry."

The lioness turned sharply and regarded the voice she knew so well. A voice she knew could not exist. "Wamase?"

"Yes."

"It's awful," was the only thing Sarafina could think to say.

Yes, the one agreed. What had happened was awful. But what now could be done about it? Certainly the lions would need to regroup and heal their wounds before trying anything heroic. That wasn't to say leave well enough alone and take what has been dealt to you. Still...

"How come you didn't help me like you said you would," said Sarafina.

The question had been asked.

"There are many reasons why..."

"Which are?" she looked up.

The form of Wamase stood silent as she looked over the tattered body of her friend. It was clear that this creature had been put through misery - many times over. She knew how Sarafina felt about her death; and how much she was missed. Through all the disarray Wamase could not seem to comfort her. Maybe she was trying to comfort her too much? "I can only help you as long as you believe in yourself."

"I do believe in myself."

"You do, do you?" questioned the lifeless lioness. "If that were the truth; I would have come to you."

"It is the truth!"

It wasn't, and they both knew it. Sarafina couldn't help but wonder how her friend played into all this; but there was one thing she did know and that was she was glad the spirit of Wamase hadn't passed on. Wamase still cared for her and would until time itself ran out; only if Sarafina could believe it.

"You said you'd help me," she said at last.

The form nodded.

"How come you did not? When I needed... when *we* needed help the most."

"Because," was all she could muster. "I can only do so much to aid you Sarafina. I do what I can for you and the Pride; however, you must have faith in yourself. Pick yourself up from the despair you now live in and look to the future. That is the only way I can help you Sarafina. You must live for the future." sensing she wasn't getting it, Wamase backed up and tried a different route. "What was the first thing that crossed your mind after I was killed?"

Sarafina frowned at the lioness and thought back. She felt utterly empty to be standing over her dead body; knowing that she would no longer have Wamase's company. Besides Sarabi,

the fallen lioness was the only other of the lionesses close to Sarafina. Sure, she was friendly with the rest of the pride; but Wamase really knew her well. "I was devastated."

"Go on."

"I didn't know what to think. I secluded myself away from the others. I just wanted everyone to leave me alone."

Wamase nodded.

"Then you came to me in... well... a dream. At least... what I thought was a dream. I was just getting over your passing until that day until your appearance sent my emotions into another spiral."

The lioness apologized; never intending to cause her any more distress. "As I recall, I asked you then to believe in yourself. Believing you could make a difference, one that would be what kept the pride healthy."

Sarafina nodded.

"But you did not keep up your end of the bargain."

"I didn't?"

"No," she shook her head. "During the hunt Scar led, you were focused and determined. The determination rationalized my help. Though during the conflict with the cheetahs, you were not focused on the task at hand which subsequently blocked me from helping you. Why?"

Sarafina had no answer.

"There lies the problem. You were not completely confident in yourself."

Sarafina groaned.

"Look, I will always love you; but I won't always be around to help you. For me to be of help, you must acknowledge your fears and confront them. Be totally true with yourself. And never, ever take your focus off the future. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Good," she smiled and nuzzled her friend.

Sarafina cuddled back losing herself in the touch of her friend. Her warmth felt good against the coldness of the night; a warmth she hadn't felt in a long time.

Hearing voices in the distance, Sarabi protruded from the small cavern to investigate; tired and weary. The nighttime air wisped by her fur nipping at her being, instantly bringing her senses to attention. Once fully engulfed in the outside air, the lioness made her way to the focal point of the disturbance wondering who it might be causing such a commotion. There she found her friend standing in the darkness, with the only light coming from the moon above.

"Sarafina?" Sarabi said breaking the silence.

"Yes?" she turned.

"Who are you talking to?"

The lioness turned back and looked dead into the pupils of Wamase; only to find she had vanished without a trace. Sarabi watched as her companion frowned in disillusion; lost in a moment of confusion. Sarafina padded forward and pawed the air as if checking the space in front of her for some lost companion before looking up into the lunar body; sighing... "No one, I was talking to no one."

Rafiki brought his eyes down from the moon above and focused his gaze on Mufasa; who was sitting below him. The mandrill was pleased that the lion had made the conscious choice to return to his pride by morning. The lionesses would be happy to see him; not to mention Sarabi. It would also mean that the Circle of Life was once again complete; and life could return as it should amongst the Serengeti plains of the Pride lands. Only... Rafiki grinned and focused on a few of the stars overhead. The stars stared back; sending chills down the monkey's back.

"Mufasa," said the mandrill. "I think you had better come heah."

"What is wrong?" he asked of his mentor.

"I sense something very wrong."

The lion sensed the tension and worry in the monkey's voice and rushed to his side. Something *was* very wrong; and it worried Mufasa to no end. He was about to question Rafiki, who was hanging from a branch above his mane when the baboon swung down sharply; coming to a halt in front of him. In a rush, the mandrill guided Mufasa around the backside of the baobab tree to an image he had just finished painting moments ago. It was that image that worried Rafiki the most.

"I've been sitting up there all evening pondering its meaning."

"What does it mean?" Mufasa asked, looking over the splattering of color.

Rafiki traced the image of a cheetah standing on pride rock in a posture of total exaction. Below that image were other Cheetahs mixed in with lionesses. The meaning of this had not become clear until a second ago; but the significance was now clear. "You must go back... now!"

"Why?" the lion frowned. "What has happened."

"A great many things... go, now; find your pride. You must hurry!"

Mufasa sat in silence looking at the painting; scared to determine the true meaning it held. He was prepared to return to Pride Rock in the morning; but now? Where would he go?

"Come with me Rafiki," he pleaded. "The pride may need your assistance." And he rose to all fours; setting his sights towards the precipice he called home.

The Pride

Chapter Twenty

The morning sun crested itself over the tree line and stretched its legs across the plains sending a wake-up call to all the creatures inhabiting. Whether anyone cared to notice or not, the darkness of the forest was quickly being washed away and replaced with a suspension of light and color. To the lions and lionesses housed in the cave just beyond the boundaries of the tree and grass; their worlds were still darkened with slumber. No matter how much strength the light had this morn, the lions were not heeding the call as they too did not possess the strength to meet this day.

Inside, the lionesses laid in slumber, huddled around one another; the life drained from their being. Sarabi was no different from the rest of her pride. She too was completely exhausted from last nights exertions. Unfortunately her dreams did not allow her to rest. Still haunted by the ghosts of Mufasa and those of the cheetah Kichasi; her mind was producing ghastly scenes well into the night. Most of the manifestations kept her from obtaining a sound sleep as her emotions were being toyed with. Grunting, groaning and moaning she was during the night; she finally was able to get to sleep. But that ended up being interrupted by a small stream of light leaking into the cave.

She turned over and moaned, hoping to chase away the morning. Only that was not enough. The morning breeze here was much more drafty than at Pride Rock; so Sarabi found refuse in a warm body and snuggled up against it. Sighing in content she breathed in and let all worries within her drain out through her now relaxing muscles. Resting now, in utter bliss; the lioness began to purr softly as she snuggled up to the scent she recognized. "Oh Mufasa..." she whispered. "I love--"

Something struck her soul.

"Mufasa?"

The lioness shot up from her restful position and planted all four paws on the ground so fast that it made her head turn with dizziness. Within an instant her muzzle was in the side of the form laying next to her. Breathing in all the smells she could; identifying each and every scent. Nudging the form as gently as she could, Sarabi called out to it. "Hey, wake up."

The lion mumbled and rolled over to meet the lioness eye to eye.

Sarabi gasped.

Mufasa sported a smile, "Yes, my mate. I am here."

"But... but--where did you come from?"

Mufasa could sense there were many questions Sarabi wanted to ask just by the changing expressions on her face. Slowly, he promised to answer them all; in due time. Right now it appeared that there was a lot to be accomplished yet, so the question and answers would have to wait. He'd only been away for a short period of time, but in his absence; what he feared the most happened: The Pride suffered. Not just a little; but a suffering that would take time to heal.

"I came from a dark place Sarabi. A place notorious for irrational thought. Thankfully I have returned from that darkened place before it could consume me." He looked over to Rafiki and nodded to him; silently thanking the mandrill for all his services rendered.

"Et looks like a stampede hit through heah," said the monkey glancing around the dimly lit cavern. "Did you invite some wildebeest to a fiesta?"

Sarabi smiled a bit, "Far more dangerous than that."

"What happened Sarabi," Mufasa wanted to know.

"We were attacked," she said flatly.

"Hyenas?"

"No," she answered in monotone.

Mufasa grunted, sniffing the air. "I gather the cheetahs returned?"

The lioness nodded.

Mufasa frowned and lowered his head in shame. Seeing Malaika with good portions of dried blood on her fur only made his shame harder to bear. He never intended for this to happen. At worst, the lion believed his pride would go hungry longer than expected; not be faced a battle for their lives.

"Malaika is the worst," she said to Mufasa knowing exactly what was on his mind. "But she is not the only one wounded. We all have minor abrasions; some more moderate than others. We will heal... Malaika? I don't know."

Mufasa nodded. "Rafiki," he called of the mandrill. "See what you can do for Malaika. She's in bad shape."

The mandrill complied and bounded over to tend to the ill lioness.

Upon hearing her name, the lioness raised her head momentarily and called for Sarabi. The royal pair instantly joined the mandrill at her side and awaited for her next calling. "Sarabi... who... who is that?"

Mufasa sighed and nuzzled in close. "It is me."

"Mufasa!" she tried to exclaim but couldn't muster enough energy for more than a whimper.

"Shhh, don't try to talk," he purred to her. "I am here; and with the help of Rafiki we'll have you as good as new in no time."

Malaika grunted and smiled back before her face twitched, succumbing to her pain.

"She slipped back unawares; her pain must be overwhelming," said the mandrill. "I can give her something for da pain; and a mixture to help her wounds heal fastah. But, she'll have to do the rest."

"She's a fighter," said a voice from behind. "If she made it through the night; I'd bet on her complete survival." The voice belonged to the very tired Kolo; the lionesses good friend who was kind enough to stay up with her the whole entire night. She was so tired; she didn't even recognize the significance of the male lion who stood before her.

"Good morning Kolo," Mufasa expressed.

"Good morning Mufasa."

Kolo passed by to ask the mandrill she saw about her friend; taking a couple moments before she realized just what it was she had said. "Mufasa?!"

"Shhh!" said all three: Mufasa, Sarabi and Rafiki.

"Quiet, or you'll wake up everyone."

Kolo blushed and whispered, "Sorry." Hardly able to contain the excitement in her voice. "Where on the pride lands did you come from? And when did you get back!?"

Mufasa chuckled at the lionesses enthusiasm. It was that kind of devotion which would be necessary to take back what was rightfully theirs. "I've been irresponsible," he offered. "No more shall I be."

"Oh," said the lioness. "Well I'm glad you're back." She smiled. Kolo was very happy that Mufasa had returned. Even though she had accepted Scar in the king's place; that lion could not replace the illumination that Mufasa produced when one stood in his presence. He seemed to lift everyone beyond life; and give them hope. That is the very thing the Pride would need to recover from their cheetah encounter. "Scar has helped us out a lot; but you're our King."

"Scar?" Mufasa echoed; recalling his brother's new nickname. "Interesting. He's never worried about anyone but himself before. Where is he now?"

Kolo shrugged. "I dunno. I haven't seen him since last night. Though he wasn't around for the attack; he did find this cave for us. After leading us to it... he seemed to disappear into the shadows."

"And Sarafina?" Sarabi asked nervously.

"She's outside - must have fallen asleep out there."

Sarabi blinked, "I'll go get her." Hoping to get away from all the talk about Scar.

"No," Mufasa boomed. "I'll wake her up."

He smiled to his mate and began walking into the light. He was looking forward to seeing Sarafina again. More importantly; he was looking forward to seeing her reaction. Sarabi nodded with puzzlement and watched as Mufasa left her side.

"She's awake," said another male's voice.

The king stopped dead in his tracks.

"You don't look like you're glad to see me," Scar said.

"Unexpected," was all he said. "In a few moments I would have sought you out. Now that you are here--"

"Yes?" the lion smiled.

"You can tell me why we are no longer at Pride Rock."

Scar narrowed his eyes thinking of a way to carefully word his answer. Confronting his brother was no easy task; but he usually escaped unscathed. Even if his dignity was slowly being taken away by Mufasa. Still, the wrong word or phrase could easily set off the lion because Scar did not know exactly what pressure he'd been under lately; or where he'd been. For now, the dark maned lion would not volunteer any unwarranted information, or pay for that violence with his life. "We were forced to leave Mufasa-- by the cheetahs. We tried to fight... but it wasn't as if it wouldn't have happened some time anyway."

"We? Kolo here tells me you were no where to be seen during the battle. So, tell me, what was so important to you that you could not protect the pride?"

Scar growled, "I was taking care of other duties."

Sarafina blinked and hurriedly joined Sarabi who had taken up residence a few paces from her mate. Mufasa was not very pleased with his brother. In his absence, though Scar was not king; he still had a duty to protect and serve-- just like any other member. "You wanted to be apart of this Pride Taka, you can't just denounce your responsibilities at any time."

"I was in charge Mufasa, I could do what ever I wanted."

Sarabi cringed.

"In charge? No, brother, you were not. In my absence, Sarabi becomes the leader. And if she told you to stay and fight; you must do so."

Scar chuckled, "Really... only if you knew." The lion shot a glance to the lioness who gave him the scar and grinned at her. "Only if your brain let you understand..."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"In good time brother... in good time."

The elder brother looked at his younger sibling with puzzlement. More and more, Taka was talking in rhyme and riddle. He never seemed to make sense anymore! Mufasa couldn't believe it; but perhaps Rafiki was right. Taka was different than the lion he used to be; different from himself with his own agenda to look after. By reflex he looked over to Rafiki and his attentiveness of the lioness Malaika and frowned. "Look what you've done." He said at last, turning back to the dark one.

"What *I've* done?"

Mufasa looked back with force and nodded. He certainly didn't run off and leave a pride of lionesses defenseless during an attack--

"I wasn't the one who *disappeared*--"

--then again, if he hadn't run off at all--

Zazu flew in, "Hey! What's goin' on here!"

The two lions stopped bickering between one another and looked up at the bird who fluttered in without so much as one iota of understanding about what was transpiring. Zazu had to do a double take and used his wings to clear the fuzz from his eyes before taking another look. Sure enough, there stood Scar *and* Mufasa: Head to head. And they looked as if they could rip one another apart.

"Well, I guess I can see what has caused the disturbance."

"I don't need this," said Scar and turned and headed off outside the cavern. Mufasa was about to give chase when Rafiki held him in place with his staff, shaking his head in disapproval which left Mufasa to stand in a sigh.

"How is she Rafiki?" asked Kolo of the mandrill regarding his patient.

"She's not out of da woods yet," he stopped suddenly. "No pun intended."

Kolo chuckled uneasily.

Rafiki patted the lioness on the shoulder, "but she'll be all right."

* * *

Mufasa stepped out side wondering what he'd do next. There were many in his pride who had questions; only he did not have the necessary answers to satisfy their curiosity. Still, the one thing he'd like to do is return everything back to normal operation; but that was far from reality. In his absence, Scar has asserted his power and the lionesses were thrown from their livelihood.

Too many obstacles faced him now and it made him wonder why he thought running away would solve any of them. It only brought in new ones! Before long he caught a glimpse of his majordomo, Zazu, fluttering in the breeze. Just as the blue bird was about to fly away, Mufasa intercepted him with a call. "Zazu!"

The bird immediately flew to his location and rested upon his shoulder; just as he'd done in the past. "Yes sire?"

"Do you have a report for me?"

Zazu hesitated just a bit; he didn't have much of a report to give. "Well, we're not at Pride Rock."

"I know that Zazu," Mufasa chuckled. "I can see that. Anything else of importance?"

Zazu looked at his king and wondered, "Yes, and no."

"Pardon?"

"Actually there is something else..." said the hornbill. That something else could upset the king; greatly. "Your absence."

Mufasa breathed out and nodded, "My absence..."

"Would you like to talk about it?" prodded Zazu fluttering to the dark ground at the lions feet. "That is if you want to."

Actually Mufasa felt ready to talk about it. He hadn't had the chance to talk to Sarabi yet. With the interruption by his brother and many other questions from the lionesses; there had been no time for he and his mate to be together--alone. Sarabi should be the first to understand, he thought, though Zazu was his confidant and was equally entitled to know the full truth. Besides, Mufasa wasn't about to tell his entire pride the truth about his true intentions that night.

"Yes, I would."

"Just start from the beginning," the hornbill ordered. "That is always the best place to start."

The king breathed in, smiled uneasily to himself then let it all out to his majordomo. "After our conversation, I ran out." He was running away. Away from reality and away from responsibility. He trotted off somewhere towards the northeast section of the Pride lands. "I did turn back to look... but the sight of Priderock was not enough to keep me in place."

"What exactly," asked the stunned bird, "made you give up on your Pride?"

"It was a combination of things Zazu," he said. "The food shortage; the way the lionesses were treating Taka; Wamase's passing; Sarabi; being King; everything! It was all becoming too much for me to handle."

"So, by running away you thought you were solving your problems?"

"No, of course not," Mufasa let out, but that's exactly how he felt. During that moment of release; running away and leaving all his problems behind seemed the right thing to do. But then, nothing seemed to be the right thing to do. "I could not handle the situation. I still can't."

"Mufasa," Zazu laid his wings on the King's paw. "Being king of the Pride lands is not easy. And the situation that brought you that position was not the best either. However, you are the king now and you have a greater responsibility to uphold than just yourself. You have a pride of lionesses to worry about now. Place their greater good before yours because they need you Mufasa. They need a powerful leader; one that can stand up to the problems they possess and fend off any enemy that tries to stake claim on their kingdom. Believe me when I say that such a job is not easy. I have witnessed many kings falter this way."

"I realize that Zazu," said the king. "And I already had a stern talking to."

"From whom?"

"Rafiki...." he allowed.

"Rafiki?" Zazu asked, confused. "The baboon?"

Who else? Who else would he meet on the plains to talk to? Only but Rafiki; The wisest of all baboons known. That particular monkey had previously been an advisor to Ahadi during his reign and countless other kings before that. Rafiki had provided a great service to them... and Mufasa. It was that great deed that stopped Mufasa from accomplishing his goal of running off and to focus back on his responsibilities and duties to the Pride to uphold the Great Circle of Life.

It was the Great Circle of Life that Mufasa knew of the most; it had become one of the most important visions he cherished. His father believed in it; as did Ahadi's father before him and so did he. They believed that they were bounded together in life, death and harmony. And if Mufasa had actually succeeded in severing his ties with Sarabi and the rest of the pride; disaster surely would have struck, and the pride would have perished. The mysterious Rafiki helped contain that outbreak; and in the process, saved the most sacred of places.

"MmmHmm, Rafiki," the king confirmed letting his eyes roam across the grasses he saw of the plains near the forest line.

"So, what did he instruct you to do?"

Mufasa laughed, "It wasn't instruction per se. I learned a lot of pertinent information about myself and how best to use my talents."

"I see..."

"How has Sarabi been?" Mufasa asked, changing the subject. He'd been genuinely worried about his mate ever since he ran off. She would take it the hardest; having gone through lot of expectations and let downs over the past cycle. Worried as he was, Mufasa knew she would survive and draw strength from any difficulty.

Zazu didn't know quite how to put it, but he knew both lions needed to talk over their feelings; for the sake of each other. "Sire... I know that she felt you were distant before you left; not paying her much attention. Your absence only confirmed many things in her mind. You need to talk with Sarabi and reassure your love for her."

"You're right Zazu," Mufasa sighed, face drooping. "You're right. I should talk with her more... about things."

"I could tell in her eyes that she is hurting Mufasa; even now. She feels neglected... by you."

"And how would you know?" thundered the mighty king.

"Mufasa," Zazu started. "I've been a majordomo to many royalty, most notably your father. And there hasn't been anything going on here that I haven't seen already. Well," he retracted. "Most of it; but that we can get through. Either way, Sarabi has hurt more than you; and you need to comfort her."

"I hope things work out..." He sighed. "From where I'm standing Zazu, it doesn't look good."

"It doesn't look good from where I'm at either. But a decision needs to be made and you're the one to make it. Take back your kingdom; before it's too late."

Zazu departed the presence of Mufasa having quite enough conversation; most of which needed to be told in the company of Sarabi. There is a great king in the lion Mufasa, only if he'd see that and be more than he has become. As Zazu soared higher and higher in the skies above the forest; the view towards pride rock was clearer than ever. He sensed that upcoming events would be the test of Mufasa's leadership abilities. He would either fail or succeed. Now, he needed to find Sarabi and get her to confront her fears.

* * *

Sarabi stood silently looking into the pool of water below watching herself staring back. Regarding her form; she wondered if there was something she'd done wrong this morning. Mufasa wasn't paying her much attention and quite frankly, neither was anyone else. The lionesses pretty much took center stage since his return; and for her... well, she had no one to talk to right now. Zazu noticed Sarabi around this small watering hole and circled around before diving down to greet her. "Good Afternoon," he said aloud, startling her.

"My apologies, your highness," he said, submersing a laugh. "I didn't mean to frighten you." He hadn't seen Sarabi so startled before and the sight of her jumping five feet in the air didn't help his control any.

"Oh Zazu...." she replied hearing his snorting chuckles, "cut it out!"

"I said I was sorry!"

Sarabi retracted her claws and returned to a more comfortable stance; the attack only being a false alarm. If it had been anyone else she probably would have swapped them with her paw. Zazu knew those sneaky ways though and he used them every chance he could get. "What can I do for you Zazu," she heaved through shortness of breath.

Zazu caught the quick rising and falling of Sarabi's chest before answering. Apparently he did give her a pretty big scare. "I saw you down here alone. It looked like you needed a friend."

"Yeah..."

Zazu hardly picked up on her whisper, but knew it was probably her way of agreeing, yet disagreeing that the hornbill tag along. "What are you doing out here all by your lonesome?"

"Trying to think," she allowed. "I can't think when I'm near Mufasa."

"Why not?"

Sarabi scowled, "Because..."

"Because?"

"Because he's not paying any attention to me!"

The majordomo jumped back; a bit startled himself. Surely the king wasn't ignoring his queen and mate? Was he? Other than running off a couple nights ago, but now that he has returned; Zazu thought everything was patched up between them. Apparently this is not so...

"What do you mean, not paying any attention to you?"

"You see me standing here alone, don't you?"

Zazu nodded.

"Did you see me with Mufasa all day?"

"Only this morning--"

"--right before Scar came in," Sarabi finished for him. "That was the first and last time we've really been together."

Zazu was quite appalled by this revelation. Of all the hurt he knew that Sarabi felt during Mufasa's absence; he thought that the royal pair would have immediately put their differences aside and work together now for a better future. It was a curious predicament indeed. Zazu would definitely take it up with Mufasa shortly-- no, perhaps if he... "I was with Mufasa earlier this afternoon out around the forest boundary. We... did talk a little bit."

The lionesses ears perked up trying to pick up any sound emanating from the hornbill. She blinked at herself in the water before looking straight into the bluebird's eyes. "What did Mufasa have to say?" Sarabi wanted to know. And it was clear from her distraught tone that she and the king had not spoken about anything to do with Mufasa's running off; absence; anything!. Now he was sure there wasn't anything better for those two to do right now was to talk out their problems!

Zazu has served many great kings of the past; and his kind served many before him. But the King and Queen that he served now took everything beyond his training. There was so much motion that he was just unable to handle anymore. Now that he stood before Sarabi knowing the turmoil that swirled about Mufasa; he had to hold his tongue and follow the wisdom of his training: One doesn't get too involved in the King and Queen's personal lives. If his services lasted through all this; he probably would go down as one of the best majordomo's ever recorded in hornbill history.

Though, every majordomo has had some personal intervention with their servants, and he was no exception. Unfortunately for him, past problems were of little or no consequence to the ones that existed today and the one he had fall in his lap was a rather big one. Poor Zazu was caught right in the middle of it all. His grief was finally interrupted by Sarabi's question: "So, what did he say to you?"

Zazu disregarded the question as he wasn't paying much attention to the lioness right now. There were far too many thoughts and questions racing through his little head; far too many for him to worry about. "Pardon?" he said at last; prompting a reply. "Zazu!"

"Yes?"

"What did he say to you?"

He said a lot of things, Zazu told her. There were many personal thoughts floating about. Most of which should have been heard by the queen herself; if only she were there. But, Mufasa needed a friend; a confidant right then and would settle for no one else. Yet, the hornbill knew he could not divulge all the information he knew to Sarabi because if he did it wouldn't do him or them any good. "We talked a bit about Scar," he settled on at last trying to make it sound

convincing. "How his attitude was during the absence... so on and so forth."

"And?"

"Well, I told him that Scar sure was acting rather pushy; even now that the king has returned."

"Yeah," she muttered.

It was so like him! Scar was always doing something to interfere with her and Mufasa's happiness. Always! He must really enjoy the thought of the pride separated without their king and queen. Though, from as far back as she could remember, as a cub she knew Taka had taken heart to her. When she was betrothed to Mufasa the lion friend she knew became very bitter and distraught. She always could see the burning desire in him; and the shame and anger he kept inside. Could all of what Scar was doing to her: the mental abuse to gain strength and leadership; stem from that hatred created all so long ago?

"I suppose we won't have to worry too much about Scar now... now that Mufasa is back."

"Perhaps," Zazu added.

Sarabi looked up.

"I've come to realize," said Zazu. "You never underestimate that lion. He's ruthless I tell you - pure and utter evil."

"Oh Zazu... He's not *that* bad."

"Are you sure?"

Sarabi lightly chuckled at the bird. Certainly the dark lion has done a few things quite unpopular; especially to herself- but he was hardly the purely evil being Zazu made him out to be. Now that her mate has returned; she was more worried about *him*. But, he would not come to her. Instead Mufasa ignored her. Why? Why! "What am I going to do Zazu," Sarabi sighed. "How am I going to go on if Mufasa won't even talk to me?"

"Sarabi," he whispered gently. "I don't know what to do. The only thing I can suggest to help you is for you to confide in Mufasa. Go to him instead of having him come to you. And when you do finally get together; tell him all your feelings, worries and retributions. Get it *all* out."

The words did not fall on deaf ears. Sarabi was listening, and listening hard. But there was still too many things going on; and it seemed Mufasa did not have the time for her right now. Zazu was about ready to fly off when he caught Sarabi's glare once more. "All I can tell you Sarabi is that Mufasa and you need to talk. Go to him, talk with him. "What is there to fear? You'll learn a lot about each other... especially what *he's* been going through."

Sarabi looked at Zazu with curiosity; how did he know so much about what was troubling her mate. Though he was right, she should quit stalling and face up to her questions; to confront Mufasa. Just as before, he's been ignoring the questioning stares and the direct comments. Sarabi needed to know. "Zazu, even though you're a pain sometimes. You're equally as needed."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he smiled. "I think."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Sarafina walking in on the conversation.

"Oh, nothing of consequence," said Sarabi regarding the intruder.

"You weren't thinking of some way to get back at Mufasa were you?"

Sarabi laughed and shook her head silently trying to figure out exactly what it was her friend meant by that comment. Get Mufasa back?

"For what?"

Sarafina shrugged the best she could, "general principalities?"

"Is there something we can do for you Sarafina?" inquired Zazu.

"Why yes there is. The king has requested your presence; I think something big is about to happen."

Sarabi turned to look at the hornbill, finding him staring right back in amazement. What was Mufasa up to now? Kolo gathered the two stunned individuals and motioned for them to follow her. The trio walked back to the cavern in the forest where the lionesses took shop all the while trying to think of a reason for this call. What could be so important for Mufasa to call the whole group together; unless...

Sarabi, Sarafina and Zazu were the last to pad into the meeting. There they found all the lionesses centered around Mufasa fidgeting; waiting for something to happen. As walking into some place they were unwanted; the trio found themselves at the stares of the others. "Glad you could make it," said Mufasa. "Please, sit and listen." Mufasa was about to make a monumental speech; Sarafina could feel it. Her mate didn't call an assembly unless there was something important he wanted to get across.

"I know you all have many questions about my absence. I've tried to answer a few to the best of my ability. Beside that; we have a greater purpose to focus on now. We've been evicted; displaced; thrown away. Pride Rock is our home and we shall return to it."

The lioness broke out into a murmur.

Sarabi regarded Mufasa with an inquisitive smirk on her face.

"To accomplish this, we're going to have to work together. We're going to have to keep good spirits. Most of all, we're going to have to heal our wounds."

"How can we face them after this shame?" asked Ng'ara.

Mufasa looked at her and smiled, hoping to ease her tensions. "You must have faith; that the Circle of Life will fulfill our destiny as it was meant to be. We must take charge; put away your inhibitions. If you believe that you can make a difference and fight these cheetahs. Than you can; and will come out the victors."

"When are we to commence attack?" asked Kolo.

"Soon," he muttered. "Time is still needed to heal; but don't fret Kolo. You will get your chance to fight back real soon."

Sarabi looked on deep in thought. Soon, she'll have the chance to revenge her attack by Kichasi; this time she'll rip her to shreds. She promised herself that. The lionesses all seemed to cheer at the fact they would get a second chance to entangle with their cheetah counterparts and teach them a lesson once and for all. Mufasa looked at his lionesses with pride; they seemed just as eager as he to return to Pride Rock. Anyone with that kind of determination, he dared not let down.

* * *

Scar sat down with Shenzi and Banzai and sighed. "The deal is done," he said. "Mufasa has full control and is ready to take back the pride lands."

"What?" asked Shenzi.

Scar only nodded.

"Won't he miss you?"

"I'm sure he will."

"Ooaahheeuuah?" asked Ed.

The lion looked at the other male hyena and asked, "What did he say?"

"How will that work into your plan?" echoed Banzai a little agitated.

"It won't..."

"Then... won't he turn his back on you?" Shenzi wanted to know.

Scar nodded, "Most likely." grinning evilly. "That is the most unwise thing to do. If that time arises, you can rest assure that I have a perfect plan to launch myself back into the crown."

The hyenas chuckled and looked on.

The Pride

Chapter Twenty-One

Mufasa stood on a medium rock face staring into the cave wondering why he was just sitting there instead of doing something constructive. It had been two days since he'd made his rallying speech to the lionesses and they seemed to take to it well; except for Sarabi. She seemed to be ignoring him right now and Mufasa wondered why. Did he do something wrong? Was his abrupt return too shocking to her? That and a million other questions raced through his mind and he decided to find those answers. Without another second going by, the massive lion brought himself to his feet and padded out into the forrest in search for his mate.

Sarabi took a step closer to the waterhole slanting down to lap up a cool drink of the liquid. As refreshing as it was, the water could not wash away the guilt she was feeling. Knowing she should go to Mufasa, the past two days just seemed to go too quickly. He was off doing something or another and it never seemed the right time for a confrontation. The fact of the matter is, she loved him; more than he or sometimes even she realizes and she wasn't about to let Scar ruin the love she had. His agenda be damned! She would tell Mufasa about her problem; letting it all out; and to hell with the consequences that might prevail.

Turning to leave, she rescended her tongue and moved her paw only to yelp and jump into the air at the sight before her.

"Sarabi, I'm sorry!" the lion apologized but it was too late, she'd already fell into the water making a big splash.

Mufasa pawed away the moisture that splashed upon his face and looked at his mate peeking out of the water below. "I didn't mean..."

Sarabi chuckled and girgled, "It's okay Mufasa. I was just thinking of you actually."

"Are you alright?" Mufasa asked.

She said so and proceeded to pick herself up out of the water. When she was beside herself, she padded closer and made it a point to rub against his fur, matting it to his body. "I'm fine."

For an instant they were one in love as they had been in the past. It was like neither had been seperated. But, the feeling didn't last forever as they both began to wonder about the other in confusion. How did each feel about one another? Was there a reason for this distrust? "Mufasa," Sarabi broke in "I have to know... do you love me?"

Mufasa was shocked and regarded his mate with unbelieving ears. "How could you say that? Of course I love you."

"Well," she paused. "You've been so..... distant since you came back. And then there's your... absence."

The king backed off slightly and crouched on his haunches and stared at the green grasses surrounding the waterhole. He wasn't prepared to answer anything about his absence quite yet. He hoped he could lead into it; but it seemed that he was foremost on Sarabi's mind. Her wondering whether he loved her or not struck his soul and he felt even more shameful for allowing such a thing to happen in the first place. He found Sarabi's eyes finally and peered into her soul asking himself, what are you thinking? Do you think I don't love you anymore? Why? "Sarabi, I love you more than anything else in this world. I would not ever stop loving you."

"Then why have you been so... so....," she tried to finish her sentence but it was too late. Her emotions had begun to overwhelm her and a couple tears were seen streaming down her cheek. Instinctly, Mufasa cuddled her and tried to express his love the best he could. Sarabi buried her muzzle into Mufasa's mane and began to weep. "Oh Mufasa!" she said; and there was nothing left for him to do but sit and caress his love.

When she stopped crying, Mufasa no longer had the courage to tell her his secrets. She was pretty shaken up now and he could only imagine how she would be if he started talking about his decision to run away. Alas she was the one who wanted answers. Perhaps he was doing a worse disservice by not telling her everything. Besides, that was the fact of him coming to her... "Sarabi," he gently whispered. "I love you. I always have and I always will. You were not responsible or a factor for my leaving you."

She sat up and looked squarely at Mufasa, tears trickling from her eyes. She sniffled, and looked on, waiting for a reply to her question. "Then why did you leave us?"

"It's hard to explain Sarabi," Mufasa sighed. "My decision wasn't based in reality. But it was a lot of things that drove me away."

"What things? Your father? Me?"

"Not you," he smiled at her trying to be reassuring. "Just things..."

Sarabi was hurt that Mufasa would not allow her the chance to know just what exactly was her mate's motives. "Tell me... please?"

The great lion king stood up and walked a couple paces away from Sarabi in order to get a bit of breathing room. To say what he had to say, some room would definitely be needed.

"That night," he started. "I wasn't sure what I wanted. You were there, and don't get me wrong I love you so much, but... from going to prince to king to having a queen hit me with more force than a lot of things. It became so overwhelming Sarabi," he sighed. "My father's death had quite a bit to do with it."

"I see," she said.

"I needed to find him; have him guide me."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Mufasa nodded.

"Then there was Taka... and that scar of his. The Pride was mistreating him; he felt alone... I didn't know what to do. Then the shortage of food--" Mufasa sighed and confessed, "I couldn't handle it anymore Sarabi! I just couldn't do it! It was all too overwhelming!"

Sarabi sat up on her haunches and watched Mufasa. "Can you tell me why?" asking that of him was like asking herself why she put up with Scar and his wants. She knew that the problems facing the pride a few nights ago was quite severe. But everything had shown signs of returning back to normal before Mufasa decided to leave. While there might not be many herds to hunt, they were returning. Scar led them to one. And Taka? Now it seemed the bloodlines there were fastly being torn apart by a brother who never seems to give his all. Mufasa said it wasn't herself that caused him to leave, but she knew she had to be part of the reason. Maybe it was the cheetahs.

"The Cheetahs," said Mufasa, settling on them. SEeing Mng'ariza once more brought back many painful memories of the past - and those of his future. It was memories like those he wanted to keep hidden and out of his life. He just couldn't get the cheetah's words out of his mind that night he left: You should have gone lion, now you've starved us both. He just didn't see any of those problems coming and because of that, he could no longer remain king. He could not focus on solving the problems he faced. Mufasa was becoming the king his father was not.

"So..."

"So," echoed Sarabi next to him now. She nuzzled her mate and tried to lift his spirit, "Mufasa, you are the best king this Pride could have - ever! You are fit to be king. I'm the one who should be..." and she fell silent. Here it was, Sarabi decided, the point of no return. She would either need to tell him now or hold it in but she could not handle the pressure any longer. Mufasa held out his paw and lifted up his love's chin so their gazes met, locking on the same plane. What he saw was unnerving: her eyes were watering and confused; horrorstricken; and unfaithful.

"Sarabi?" He asked a bit stunned. "What is wrong?"

"It's nothing Mufasa. I just missed you a lot. And I did not realize..."

"Realize?" He searched her face trying to uncover some underling meaning.

"Realize what my dear?"

As gentle as he could be, Mufasa comforted his love. There was something obviously bothering her. Something quite overwhelming and it got him thinking. Perhaps Zazu was right; maybe there were really some convictions in Sarabi and it became apparent that they needed to talk much much more. With sadness on his face, he pulled her away from him. "My love, if there is something you need to tell me... please do."

"You're not going to be very pleased."

"Let me be the judge of that." His voice thundered.

"It's about Scar..." she saw Mufasa wince at the nickname once more; would he ever get used to that?

"How did he get that nickname?" Mufasa wanted to know. "Do you know?"

"Well..." Sarabi mouthed uneasily. "I'll tell you about that."

"Alright, lets get back to my brother. What about him?"

"I... I.." she stammered.

"Shhh," Mufasa whispered. "Just tell me..."

The great lion sat back awaiting the words Sarabi tried to speak as he gazed upon his bethrothed. He regarded her now in a different light; she looked absolutely terrible! Her fur looked unkempt; her eyes red from crying; and her frame looked somewhat slimmer than he last remembered. Raising her head up meeting his inspecting gaze, Sarabi sighed and finally let it all go. "I gave Taka his scar..."

"What?" was Mufasa's first reaction which lasted for only a brief minute before being replaced by his second reaction: outrage. "You gave it to him?" and that was even replaced by a third state of being; one of much serenity and understanding. "How?"

Quickly she tried to explain the situation, hoping to thwart any comment Mufasa might have for hear. He needed to hear the full truth before he interrupted with questions. "It was an accident; I didn't mean for-- it just sorta happened!"

Mufasa's aura turned from rage to concern. What on this earth happened while he was away? It wasn't like his mate to strike out; lash out at Taka without a reason. She didn't have reservations of that nature. Could the tensions between the two of them gone that far? Sure, Mufasa knew that Sarabi did not prefer to have his brother around; and that she did not seem to get along with him lately but to go off and claw him? No, she was never pushed to that point and that puzzled him greatly. "What happened Sarabi?"

She painted the picture for her beloved. Her nonchalant trip to the waterhole just as innocent as she could be. Her lapping of the cool liquid then a quick tensed muscle followed by a sniff.

"Go on he protruded," aroused by the situation.

Sarabi continued the same story she thought about over and over in her mind: she awaited the sniffing lion to see what he would do. He sniffed at her flank before rising up under her tail. Giggling as she turned to greet her lover; her immediate response of shock lashed out as she found that it was Taka before her instead of Mufasa - a sight that repulsed her. "I thought it was you," she allowed, "I really did!"

Mufasa urged her to continue as his blood began to boil over the incident his mate was describing. Sarabi continued her confession; cleansing herself of the ghastly events and silently hoping that Mufasa wouldn't become wildly angry. She knew what she was saying was a shock to Mufasa, as it registered on his face. "I tried to get away...." she continued at last. "But.. It just happened."

Mufasa's face twitched at Sarabi's last sentence. My gods, what had happened here? "He didn't--"

Mufasa's face was becoming redder and redder as he became angrier and angrier thinking about the pain and suffering that Sarabi went through at the hands of his brother. How dare he violate her like this; behind his back! What was worse; Taka did this right in front of him!

Mufasa looked as if he could tear his brother apart and Sarabi sensed this. She needed to put a stop to his rage immediately. "No Mufasa, he didn't do anything to me." She chuckled lightly trying to lighten the mood. "Not for his lack of trying mind you. He didn't have much of a chance..." Sarabi bore her claws in a mockary to show her mate exactly what happened.

He smiled back, but it probably wasn't a good idea to laugh at the instance. Yet he knew Sarabi seemed to get a laugh from the whole experience now. She remembered the look on Scar's face when she clawed him - it was priceless! Something now, she wouldn't trade for anything else in the world. Thinking he might chastize her in some way Sarabi turned from Mufasa and hid her muzzle.

"At least he didn't hurt you," his voice firmly said.

"No, he didn't hurt me... physically."

"Good," he smiled tightly.

"You're... you're not angry?"

"Of course I am," he thundered. "But I am King of the Pridelands--well," Mufasa took a look around and laughed. "I'm King of the forest at the moment."

Sarabi laughed louder.

"But as long as I am King you will be safe. Besides, you are my mate and I love you. Nothing is going to stand in the way of that."

The two lions sat staring at one another lost in each other's loving touch. Today, great confessions were heard and because both listened to one another; their relationship grew considerably closer. Nothing would dissuade their love for one another now because they completely understood one another and pledged to work together to make their lives and the lives of their pride a bit more harmonious. As the two watched the sun fully bear its energy down on the plains of the Pridelands; Mufasa snuggled in closer. "I'm glad we had this talk."

"So am I," replied Sarabi giggling finally able to let go of all her nervous energy. There was nothing to fear now. Except... "So what do you plan on doing about those cheetahs?"

"I plan to hit them hard."

"When do we leave?"

Mufasa looked at Sarabi with a focused look and felt something he hadn't felt in some time: strength. "Right now." The king rose to his paws and began to pad away, leaving his mate sitting alone in surprise. Right now was the perfect time to get the campaign underway. Why delay?

"Now?" Sarabi echoed coming to her paws and chased after him. Apparently; now was as good a time as any.

* * *

The Sun was beating down upon the rock face of PrideRock; relentlessly releasing its searing heat upon the cheetah's lounging on the rock below. All were content; soaking up the golden rays of sun without a worry in the world. They'd just given chase to a couple of hyenas who were stupid enough to encroach upon their hunting grounds and it was time for a nap. How like those pests to turn up wherever unneeded. It seemed that their needs to defend their land from those scavenging fools grew over the days and they grew tired of it.

"I think those hyenas learned their lesson," said Kichasi stretched out across the precipice looking out at the plains of the Serengeti. "We gave them a pretty good wallop."

Tambulo grunted in agreement. "Perhaps, but with their intelligence I'm afraid they'll never learn."

"You think they'll be dumb enough to come back?" asked Tshatshi.

"Of course..." trailed the female. "They always come back. Don't they?"

"Like rodents in the night," said Khulo deadpan.

Kichasi frowned looking at the fallen leader, "Or an unwanted menace." Her looks were is if they could kill as she despised Khulo now more than ever.

"Mark my words--"

"I don't have to," she shot back quickly cutting him off. "I've had about enough of your words."

Mufasa was determined now more than ever to march across the plains and reclaim his kingdom. No cheetah was going to stand in the way of his conquest; not even his own brother! He hurriedly rushed to the cavern in the forest that held his lionesses and called for them in a low roar. Within no time at all; those who were not outside already had done so and lined up to give the king their full attention.

"The time has come," Mufasa said to them. "We've waited two days in order to be better prepared to attack the cheetahs and reclaim our lands. That time is now. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" the lionesses roared.

"What was that?" asked Bhutai; his ears perking up at the sound of distant roars emanating from somewhere on the plains.

"Sounds like lions," said Khulo coming to his paws. "And they don't sound happy."

"Do you think they're on their way here?" asked Tshatshi of his past superior.

Khulo shook his head. "I don't know. Those were female roars... probably out on a hunt or something."

Kichasi grinned and licked her lips hoping once more to fight the king of beasts, those lions. "I for one would relish another chance to teach those lions a lesson."

Sarabi ran up behind Mufasa and stared at the sight. There before her standing with the rest of the lionesses was Malaika; propped up by Kolo and Sarafina of course. She looked pale and quite weak. There was no way she was able to fight even in her slightly recovered position.

"Malaika," called the queen. "What are you doing up?"

"I'm ready," she winced. "To get my life back in order."

Sarabi shook her head. "But you're not well," she said walking up to her. "You should lie back down before you reopen your wounds.

"I don't care," said the lioness. "I want to fight."

"Kichasi," sighed Tambulo. "Isn't once enough?"

"Is what 'once enough'?"

"Battling against another group," answered Khulo for his comrade. He saw it when she contested against the lionesses; boiling to the surface like molten lava. Rage. Pure utter rage against not only these lionesses but on any creature she deemed fit to be the receiver of her

anger. It was that sort of rage that crippled his leadership abilities and cost him his command. It was that sort of rage that would become her undoing and possibly take the whole cheetah clan with her - into damnation!

"No, I take pleasure in finally asserting our power."

"You mean *your* power, don't you Kichasi?" asked Tshatshi.

The Queen padded up and nuzzled her gently on the nose hoping to wane her from the terrible decision she made. "Malaika. I know what you're going through. But you need to stay here and get better. We'll win this fight; we have Mufasa--"

Malaika was about to say something but was immediately hushed by the King.

"Sarabi is right," he said. "Your injuries are still quite serious."

Malaika resigned as Mufasa too came over to comfort the lioness.

"You'll get your chance... but for us to survive in the future; we'll need your services."

The younger one smiled; pleased to know that she was well thought of yet not entirely happy she would be denied this chance for revenge.

"As for the rest of you. I'm going to need everything you've got in order to pull this off." He looked around receiving answers from his pride.

Sarabi stepped back and joined her mate. "Then prepare yourselves," she spoke. "Let us not waste anymore time!"

"You have some nerve," said the female to her companion. "After all I've given you; you still can't seem to trust me."

"No," he said blandly. "I can not."

"Why?"

"Because you ignore even the most important of things. You're just a girl," Tshatshi answered. "Nothing more. With plenty to learn--"

"I am--"

"However," the male continued uninterrupted. "One day you will find the error in your ways. Only that might be too late."

Mufasa looked over his band of lionesses still tattered and torn; but healing. He hoped they had the strength to pull off this amazing feat. The lion even began doubting himself... only Rafiki would not have any of that. "Stay with Malaika," he asked of the mandrill. "Keep her out of harms way."

"I promise," Rafiki bowed slightly and watched as the lions trekked away.

The younger cheetah, Bhutai looked up again and whined slightly at the sound his ears picked up on the wind. It was a sound he didn't want to have to hear for some time to come. Yet, there it was as plain as day lofting its noisily sound across the waves and it unnerved him. "I heard that roar again," he said. "I don't like it."

"Why not?" chuckled Tambulo. "Afraid of a little lion?"

The other male hrumphed. "They're not little."

"No, they're not." said Khulo padding over to a side of the precipice to take a gander across the Pride Lands. He heard the roar too. This one was much more fierce than the others - even for the one sound.

"Female?" asked Tshatshi.

Khulo shook his head. "Not that one. It is male."

Mufasa lowered his muzzle from the announcing presence and decided it was ample warning to any and all creatures who decided to cross their paths. The lion and lionesses trekked their way out of the forest and into the grasses of the Pride Lands and were completely surprised at the lack of opposition.

"What's wrong?" whispered Kolo coming to a stop.

Sarafina shrugged looking on to the King for an answer.

Mufasa didn't utter a sound. He looked to Sarabi and seemed to convey his worry. She immediately flanked him and went off into the distance. Uneasy moments passed before her return and again; just like before: the two exchanged glances and immediately knew the expected.

"No sign of a ambush," said Sarabi at last.

"You sure?" mouthed her mate.

The queen nodded and turned to the lionesses. "Fan out, from here on out we must be in total silence."

The lionesses nodded.

"Zazu?" Mufasa called to immediately have the hornbill in front of him. "Scan around the immediate area.

The bird nodded and flew off in an instant searching for who knew what.

Kichasi picked up her head and growled loudly at the males for awakening her from the slumber she so sought. If it wasn't the hyena's conflicting with them it was some other creature. A living soul couldn't even get a moments peace. The female watched silently as the others scurried nervously about. "Don't you have anything else better to do?"

"Uh-uh," said Tambulo.

"Quickly find something useful to occupy your time," she said irritably. Just then the breezes slightly picked up to offer a short escape from the searing heat. Kichasi let out an audible sigh of relief before returning her attention to her clanmates.

"Aren't you worried about an attack from the lions?" Bhutai spoke up.

The other too decided to throw in their say.

She shook her head. "Don't worry. Chal is on patrol. If there is trouble... he'll report it to us."

"What if he can't?"

"Would you stop worrying!" she yelled. "There is no danger!"

Zazu fluttered at an elevated level performing a reconnaissance mission for his king Mufasa. So far, they'd not detected any Cheetah's nearby, but one never knew where those pesky creatures could be hiding. If the party was ambushed at this stage; they may not be well enough to fight the big battle - and that's what mattered the most! So, like any good majordomo, Zazu put his skills to good use and offered his king eyes in the sky. At least it was a task the hornbill could do; and it kept him out of the king's way.

"Do you think there's someone waiting for us?"

"If I were them," Mufasa directed to Isha. "I would have someone out here... maybe even a couple someones."

Kolo kept up her watch. "I don't smell any cheetahs."

"I'm sure they're smart enough to keep downwind. Despite what you think... cheetahs are not stu--"

Zazu flew in suddenly, interrupting the king's train of thought. "Sire," the bird called out of breath. "There is one single cheetah not far from here."

"Where?"

The hornbill pointed the way without hesitation.

"Alone?"

A nod.

"Stay right here," Mufasa said to his troops. "I'll be back momentarily."

The king left his lionesses alone in order to eliminate the cheetah that was spotted not far from their position. If successful; they should have a clear shot back to Pride Rock. But, if it turned out that this lone cheetah was a decoy... some part of a trap; the consequences could be disastrous and Mufasa might return to a blood bath. This is why his incursion must be precise and quick.

Out away from Pride Rock and for the most part, away from Kichasi, Chal wandered around the plains taking in the beauty of the land. Being away from the group did wonders for the young cheetah. There was no yelling, no worrying and best of all... no females. Not that he disliked them; just one in particular that now that she had control of Pride Rock, decided to put her power to the test and slap everyone else in the clan down amongst their ranks. But out here amongst the bird song; there was everlasting peace and tranquility.

Alone like he was, Chal kept an eye on the horizon. If he so much as let his guard down for one brief moment... no, that was Kichasi talking there. A way of thinking pounded into his being these past few days. Before that female; his skills were refined and his thought distilled. There was no fault in his ways... but now he'd somehow been corrupted. Always on edge and paranoid, Chal regarded himself as weak; unbecoming any member of a cheetah clan. Then there was always--

Snap!

Chal spun around in an instant towards the direction the incursion came from.

With keen sight and sound; the cheetah listened in all directions now but could not detect a soul - only silence. His heart pounded. His head raced. Would this be the end for him? Would he be attacked now?

A grass stalk rustled.

Chal was frightened; unsure of what was about to come next. He could feel his heart leap in his chest and fought to control it. The cheetah turned; again and again; searching for any sign of his attacker. There was none. Chal wondered if his life was about to end right here and now. 'Would it matter to anyone that I am dead?' he asked himself. 'Would anyone care?' And he soon realized that most of his life was dedicated to useless campaigns; saddening him to know that he wasted his young life for the sake of honor.

Almost as if by call, a loud thunderous roar set out across the lands announcing the omnipresence of a male lion. Chal instantaneously swiveled around to see his attacker and was scared stiff watching as the massive lion Mufasa leaped upon him. The last thing remembered was the snarl of determination on the lion before everything turned red and then black.

* * *

The lionesses heard the comotion in the grasses only a few feet away. Some of them grimaced as they knew the undenyng fate that cheetah had met. Being pounced upon by a lion; claws unsheathed. At first swipe the cheetah would fall covered in the red of his own blood. The next swipe would alleviate his pain by taking the life from the cheetah. Whoever it was Mufasa pounced upon; all agreed it was better to be the cheetah, than themselves.

Isha seemed to ignore the scenes around her and focused on a disturbing thought: her mother. It had been only a few short days ago that her mother passed away - called by the Great Kings to serve a higher purpose. The lioness had pondered what she'd do if her mother would suddenly pass on; prepared for the inevitable. Though, Maloki's death did not have the effect on her that she thought it would; the tears that would be shed were not and she felt discouraged because of it. Maybe even a little betrayal... of her mothers spirit. Soon though that betrayal feeling turned to strength when the cheetahs came; as she drew up from her feelings keeping her mothers spirit close to her.

Kolo, on the other hand, could not stop thinking back to her friend; and the injuries she nursed. Malaika had been one of a kind to her... a true friend. Someone which she could tell anything to. To lose such a soul as hers would be quite devastating. She probably would withdraw into the darkness and never be seen again. Though Kolo knew that wasn't the solution to any problem; what else could she do? Fortunately Malaika seemed to be recovering and would live. Now the lioness understood what her companion Sarafina was going through with the loss of Wamase; *her* friend.

And what of Sarafina? Her attention was elsewhere as she looked high and low for her unseen companion Wamase. Understanding the need to help herself; Sarafina came to terms with the spirit of the dark lioness and let her go. Hoping that she'd be there when needed; Sarafina felt confident that she could hold her own against the cheetahs, or anyone else who assaulted her.

Ng'ara wasn't thinking of anything but of the pending fight. She'd wanted to get back at those cheetahs for the show they displayed the other night and the wounds they assessed to her. Not completely healed now, Ng'ara knew she'd have to watch herself. Reinjuring her cuts, scrapes and bruises would only suit to make her an easier target to put down. This time things would be different. It wouldn't be her forced away from her home; it would be those animals. She would now have the satisfaction of watching as the spotted creatures tucked tails between their legs and were ordered from the Pride Lands. Satisfaction in knowing that she beat them in combat--

"Clear," said Mufasa suddenly bursting upon the scene. "There is no one else out there; just the one."

"Did you...?" Kolo wanted to know.

Mufasa only nodded and licked the red suspension from his nose.

"Let's get going again," said Sarafina rallying her troops.

"Follow me," ordered the King as he turned and set off in the direction everyone knew: to Pride Rock.

The heat of the sun would not let up, not even for a second! And Kichasi had just about enough of it. Standing fully on all four paws, the female looked up at the fireball and cursed at it. Ordering it to fall beneath the land; to conjure up the cool breezes of the night; and to finally make it bearable to lay outside. There was no shade at Pride Rock; at least, none that she could see. There were some trees down a ways from the structure; but she did not want to risk abandoning the rock in favor of an unwanted attack. Still, if she did not get out of the sun soon, her fur was going to combust right on the spot.

"How do these lions stand such searing heat!"

"They don't Kichasi," said Khulo. "They go elsewhere to lounge."

The female snarled at the comment. "You don't say... Why didn't I think of that?"

The other just looked at her and smiled.

Kichasi was about to walk away to find a nice cool spot in which to rest until one of her clan members came trotting in. "I'm getting worried." It was Tambulo. "Chal did not check in."

"He's on patrol you idiot," Kichasi chastized. "If he came all the way back here how would he keep an eye on the borders!"

"Why does that matt--"

"Did you hear that?" interrupted Bhutai of his mates.

Khulo and Kichasi looked at one another before answering negatively.

A loud thunderous roar then echoed across the lands; one too close for comfort to the cheetahs.

"Did you hear *that*!?"

"That I heard," said the female turning sharply. All blood drained from her face as she spotted the source of the deafening bawl. There standing on a rock was Mufasa, King of the Pridelands - and surrounding the formation; Sarabi and the rest of the lion Pride. All with claws unsheathed and snarls on their faces. An attack was eminent.

The Pride

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mufasa stood looking at the vermin that had infested his home with asternation. He identified each and every one of them by name: Kichasi, Khulo, Tambulo, Tshatshi, and Bhutai. They were all looking right back at him in fright and indecision. But Mufasa didn't care. He didn't care how frightened they were; or how apologetic they might be because of their previous escorts. He didn't care whether they bowed down to him or not. What he did want was for them to leave his land - now; without a fight. But that was probably too much to ask of any creature. To give up on a property rightfully won in battle wasn't heard of. Nevertheless; before this afternoon was over; either Mufasa would be returned as the rightful ruler of the Pridelands; or he would be dead. The king wouldn't have it any other way.

Silently, the king also looked at his lionesses in the same judgement. Completely surrounding the cheetah encampment they were; was his mate Sarabi, Sarafina, Kolo, Ng'ara and even Isha. All ready to pounce at a moments notice. They'd been through hell. No, much worse. So today would be their proving grounds. Would his lionesses be strong enough to reclaim what was once lost? Would they be able to go up against the very animals that took their lives from them? Or would some other course occur. What was to occur was yet to be seen; yet there was certainty to all this: the lionesses would follow Mufasa anywhere - even into the gates of hell!

The lion turned his attention suddenly back to the cheetah he knew as Khulo and spoke aloud, "I think you have something that belongs to me."

Kichasi snorted, grabbing Mufasa's attention. "No, I have something that belongs to you." She spoke harshly. "Which I believe you are trespassing on."

"Bold words from someone who is completely surrounded," the lion responded

"Look again lion; we're not all accounted for," said Tshatshi.

He chuckled a hearty laugh and threw his tongue over his darkened muzzle. "Maybe *you* need a counting lesson," he said at last. "You might find yourself minus one." Sarabi arced her neck and looked at her love in a new light. This was the first time he'd heard him tease in this fashion before. It wasn't like him and it frightened her a bit. Sarabi wasn't sure if there was something he was holding back from their discussions earlier; maybe something more happened to him out there and it was just to damning to discuss. Possible?

"All I can say, *Mustafa*," spat Kichasi purposely saying his name wrong, "is that you better be kidding."

All he did was bear down and look her dead in the eye.

"Nooooo!" screamed Bhutai. "How could you!" In a flash the cheetah became a blur of lines and spots as he started to rush forward. Only the outstretched paw that tripped him up stopped the enraged animal from doing real harm. Though no strikes were received; both parties tensed up ready for anything.

Bhutai fell to the ground with a thud, kicking up a cloud of dust into the air. Slowly rising to his paws and carressing his abused chin; the cheetah threw a disgusted look at his leader quite ungrateful of the forementioned incident. "Why did you do that?" he asked of her.

The female was about to answer before she was cut off.

"Becuase she didn't want to escalate the conflict," answered Kolo for everyone.

"You're smart," Kichasi hissed. "Unfortunately not smart enough."

Mufasa watched her nod her head slightly while she was looking off into the distance. What this meant was beyond him but the curious gesture caused him to wrinkle up his nose. However, to Zazu, who was circling overhead; he knew exactly what the cheetah was looking at. While distracting his king and subjects; the female cheetah sent one of her own around the back side of Pride Rock to... get a surprise step. Apparently, the pride hadn't cut off access to all the exit points after all. And in Zazu's point of view, there was only one thing left to do.

In a rush of wind and feather, the blue hornbill dove from his lofty position in the sky. Zeroing in like a bomber; the majordomo set his sights on the form below. With his aim on target, Zazu stretched out his bird claws and scraped them along the head of the offending cheetah sending out a cry of surprise and startlement. And just like that; Zazu was responsible for alerting his friends to an impending danger; a bombshell dropped in the face of encroachment. Something very exciting to the bird; even if he did jolt back amongst the clouds after his daring deed was completed.

Instantly though, Kichasi wasted no further time knowing that her ruse is up. She immediately rushed forward, throwing paw over paw trying her best to reach Mufasa; her only target. Surreal as it was, the lionesses watched helplessly as her speed far outmatched their own. Standing idly by as the almost unreal scene unfolded before them, both the lionesses and cheetahs watched as the female of the one and the male of the other braced themselves for battle.

The battle hence begun in a firely display of vengence and attitude. The scene was hellish; respect far from the minds of the combatants. But Sarabi didn't let her plans deviate from what she had in mind. Like a flash of lightning, the Queen of the Pride Lands welled up the strength and audacity to strike at her mate and launch him away from the face of danger. Now, she would bear the full brunt of Kichasi's onslaught. Now she would be the one to be reconed with; not Mufasa. For she had a reason for doing this. Revenge was hers; and hers alone.

Mufasa bellowed as the claw born pads of his love tore into him and pushed him aside like a ragdoll. Totally focused on the cheetah coming to bear, he'd not even seen the blow coming. Watching in amazement as the two females clashed; he quickly checked his fur for injuries; hoping he wouldn't be out of the action because of a friendly wound. Luckily all he was delt was a small bit of surprise; so he turned on his feet and took another look around before preparing for the next target. He didn't have to wait long; the cheetahs were lined up to greet him.

The two females clashed with such power, it seemed the whole are rocked in a thunderous aftercharge. Sarabi, the eldest of the two fighters, was overtaken by the cheetah's speed and topped over paws outstretched into the air, landing harshly upon the ground. Pinned by the weight of the smaller animal; Sarabi lay dazed and disoriented; ripe for a slashing. The cheetah wasted no time in giving the prey a taste of her shortened claws.

"You're no match for me," said Kichasi "You're as pathetic now as you were before. Give it up before I have to hurt more of your kind."

"Never!" Sarabi yelled up at her captor. "*You* will yield; or you shall die!"

The cheetah cackled, "I will not yield..."

"Then you will die," said Sarabi, who regained her posture, leapt up from under the female to sweep the paws out from underneath her which sent Kichasi crashing to the savanna floor. Death was a sure thing... for one of these females.

The rest of the Pride had no problems getting involved after they saw their queen pumpled upon by the cheetah Kichasi. None of them wanted to fight another battle at all with them; all the lionesses remembered... and the scars from that previous battle would be with them for the rest of their lives. But as their fears of death were welling up inside; they thought of their comrade Malaika and decided that no matter how much fear surrounded them; they would fight to the death - for their friend Malaika. Each member of the Pride now drew strength from one another; and the momory of their comrade who could not be with them.

In no time, every lioness presernt was matched up with a cheetah of their own. It wasn't like last time however, everyone had their own target. They were equally matched now. The lions had strength and weight on their side; but the cheetahs had cunning and speed. Between the two of them, an explosive battle was waging on and it was a sight to any creature to witness. Zazu, circling above, could not believe the sight below him and he felt completely helpless; there was nothing he could do... again! Everything was on the shoulders of the ones below. He couldn't fight for them; they would have to do it themselves.

But they at least stood a chance with Mufasa leading the way. His strength and stability would make an unpronounced authority-like presence to his subjects. Thank the gods the lionesses weren't outnumbered like they were only a few days ago. Even though Mufasa was helping the cause; their battle was far from easy. And he knew it. The cheetahs presented unpresidented speed and agility. If they had to, they could retreat and stroke - a blitzkrig kind of tactic. Not that he'd seen any cheetah do that before; then again, cheetahs working as a clan was somewhat rare.

Yet, Zazu though all the comotion below; the thoughts about the cheetahs; and even his own self absorbal attitude; he still could not put out of his mind the image of the blood smattered fur of the lioness Malaika who was not present with the rest of her mates. Such a beautifull lioness; and so full of life. Now... now the pride could hope she'd recover enough to at least contribute to their survival in some small way. Though Mufasa assured that she would make a complete and full recovery; Zazu knew that hope was far from secure. With wounds as deep as hers; and though she seemed to be recovering; who knew what the future held in store for her.

Zazu looked off into the direction that contained the forest. There he found darkness and solitude... and dispair. Many creatures called the ajoinin forest their home; but that never included lions. Today, however, the hornbill hoped his friends could drive away their conquerers and reclaim what was once theirs and return to the sun laiden plains that was their home. But wait! Had he been mistaken? "I don't believe it," said the bird looking down at the cheetahs. "There are only five of them; and six of us!" He had been wrong indeed. The lions weren't equally paired up; his side had the advantage!

But he knew even with numbers, the outcome wasn't always what one thought. "The cheetahs were outnumbered the last time, and look what happened..." Turning now away from the scene below; in flight, Mufasa's majordomo of a bird flapped towards that dark and land covered area - the forest - to check on its occupants that were left behind.

Mufasa noticed at once that his lionesses had the cheetahs outscored, but he was unsure how he could put that information to his advantage. Khulo was all over him now; seeming to find a new found reason to fight. The cheetah was cunning and brave; but not as easily baited as some. During the breaks in exchange, Mufasa tried to put together a plan of action that would lead his team to victory. With the numbers he had; with the right execution, he and the lionesses would come out the victors - if the king could only come up with a plan.

"Are you tired yet?" Khulo asked of Mufasa.

He blinked and turned back to the cheetah unaware that he'd stopped the battle. "No," Mufasa thundered.

"You had me worried there," said the cheetah. "I thought maybe you were going to give up.

"I would never give up."

A plan, if in its simplicity, could work if he could get full cooperation from his teammates. But with small wars waging on around him, it would prove quite difficult to get to all his subjects by the time they were tired out. By then it would be too late. To try anything then would be suicide and seen as an act of desperation. But, the gods knew, he was desperate. Mufasa was desperate to get his kingdom back; to reclaim his life and to move on beyond what he is now. Shameful eyes followed him; burrying into him when he returned. He just couldn't take that anymore. Mufasa had to win back the compassion of his pride; he had to win their sincerity. If he couldn't be trusted; or even looked upon as a king; why bother to rule at all? He might as well let Scar take over for all the good it would do him.

Scar seemed capable of performing the task of king. It hadn't doned on him until now that; in all that Scar tried to do, his brother really did want to be king. He saw it in the lions eyes. The hurt; the want; the need; and the knowledge of being dethroned. But knowing Scar, his tenure as king was sweet victory to him. Something he'd try to do again in the future - and Mufasa would let him; when the time called for it. "Speaking of Scar," the king said to himself. "Where is he?" shouldn't he be here fighting side by side me? Shouldn't he be here battling the cheetahs; the same cheetahs he let upon the Pridelands? The thought of Scar once again not present during a pivotal moment in the Pride's history angered him. If it weren't for his brother, these cheetahs wouldn't be here. "That's not fair," he said again. "If I hadn't run off..."

Shaking his head; clearing those thoughts. Mufasa snarled up at Khulo with an angered expression. The lion wasn't angry with him per se; no... he was angry at his brother. He was angry at him for all he did to Sarabi; for all he tried to do in his place. Scar king? How could that ever come to be. But he let it. He allowed that to happen. He allowed Sarabi to be attacked by his brother; and he even allowed his kingdom to be overrun by cheetahs. It was his fault nobody elses. And it was time he took responsibility for his actions. Mufasa stepped up to Khulo and raked him across the head with his paws; knocking the cheetah to the ground.

Khulo looked up through his slit eyes and chuckled. "I see we've gotten a bit angrier..."

"Silence!" he commanded. "I have nothing to say to you."

Khulo rose to his feet. "Quite the contrary. A moment ago you seemed like a lion with a lot on his mind."

Mufasa snorted, "What would you know."

"I know alot," sighed Khulo. "And I know enough about you."

"What do you know," the lion growled; disliking the conversation.

Khulo knew a lot. In fact, he sympathized with the lion king. He too had his kingdom taken from him; only not by invaders: by famine. And just like Mufasa, Khulo also lost his command; but unlike the lion king, he hadn't regained control over his destiny. "We're a lot alike you and I," Khulo said pacing around the lion. "Much more than you can know."

"Be Quiet!" Mufasa commanded. "Or I shall kill you will you stand." He was sure this cheetah was only trying to slow his reactions; get into his mind; and try to outwit to save himself. Mufasa would not be led around on a wild chase. Focus must be kept!

"Oh come now..." said the cheetah. "We both know you're not in full mental control."

"What?!" the king's eyes flashed. "I am in full control."

"Are you," the other let out. "Look around. Your lionesses are fighting; with one extra; and they can't seem to put down us cheetahs. And you, standing before your lethal enemy lost in some thought. It's funny really. I didn't know what happened to you there for a second."

Mufasa frowned and bared his teeth. "Well don't you worry, I'm fine. And don't expect me to give you another chance again."

"My mistake then."

And the two began their second act of violence.

Sarabi had been kept pretty well occupied with Kichasi; Kolo saw. Being chased around the front of the precipice of Pride Rock, her vision was somewhat limited. A combination of the sun and shaddows from the rockface inhibited her view. But she too had her paws full with a cheetah whose name she caught as Thathi, or Thatshi, or... something. The lioness wasn't quite sure what to call him. *Cheetah* was good enough for her; and she smiled just thinking about the crudeness.

"What are you smiling at lioness."

"Oh, nothing. *cheetah*."

Tshatshi smiled and took a swipe at her beautiful fur; leaving a slight scrape down her side. Pulling his paw back from her; he regarded it with a frown. He was quite disapointed with his performance.

Luckily the scrape wasn't deep enough to allow penetration of the skin; but it sure stung and Kolo sent a paw in its direction as a reaction. But it sent her off-balance and she took a tumble. The cheetah wasted no time in surrounding the disoriented lioness. And it was apparent that he wasn't about to let her up. Slashing at her tawny fur, Tshatshi cried out for joy. But he soon found that there was no immediate response from the animal and he grew angry because of it.

"Come on," he spat. "Don't tell me you're *that* weak!"

A moan.

"That's it little one," Tshatshi said. "Don't give up on me."

Instantly someone bolted over the precipice and landed near the two bodies. It was Tambulo.

"Glad you could make it. Where's your target?" Tshatshi asked of him.

"She bit me," the other replied. "But I was able to knock her away for a bit."

Tshatshi nodded and continued his torment upon the young Kolo's body.

"Leave her alone!" yelled Sarafina from a position just above them both. She was standing over the rockface of Pride Rock's precipice. Her sideglance step was not very high; but far enough up to cause the cheetahs below alarm. Sarafina had them both in a perfect pouncing position... but both Tshatshi and Tambulo knew that if the lioness did decide to join their party; she'd be grossly outnumbered.

"Why should I?" Tshatshi answered her call.

Licking the bright red blood from her muzzle, the lionesses looked down and sinfully sneered. "Because I told you to."

Tshatshi caught the glint of the red suspension upon the creature's snout and knew it could only be of one donor: one of his kind. But who? And when? The scuffle had hardly broken out. Surely time hadn't gone by *that* quickly and then he remembered Tambulo. This lioness must have been tracking Tambulo.

"Why don't you come down here!" Tambulo teased her, abiding his gaze. "And we'll finish what we started."

Sarafina couldn't ignore her battered friend down there, but if she joined her; there would be no stopping the two cheetahs. She'd be completely vulnerable to whatever they saw fit to strike upon her. And that she didn't feel was the best thing to do. Still, Kolo was hurting down there; if she didn't go, who knew what else they'd try to do!

The lioness had no choice in the matter now. She had to jump down there; into the jaws of the enemy; or doom her friend to a horrible, unsightly death. Yes, joining the crew below would be the only way to save Kolo from her cheetah attackers. Time was of the essence; they were baiting her. Would she go down? Could she put her own life in danger? Of course she could. But what would happen if she too was put down? How would that work into the scheme of things? Sarafina shrugged off her questions with a growl. She didn't care anymore what happened to her. There was a greater purpose now. Pride Rock must be won back at all costs and she had to be one of the causing factors for that victory. Without another thought; Sarafina the lioness heaved herself down to the cheetahs, bearing her claws in anticipation of anything.

"There now," hissed Tambulo. "That's much better."

Sarafina bared her teeth and growled lightly preparing to launch herself at both the cheetahs.

Believe it or not, both Isha and Ng'ara were kept at bay by one attacker: Bhutai. For a smaller, younger cheetah; Bhutai certainly could hold his own which was quite evident here. Of course, unlike the lionesses he fought; the cheetah was a supreme hunter - his skills refined. Yet Bhuthi had to give the two lionesses credit. For their youth, they were knowledgeable enough to know when to take a slash. And between the two of them; they slashed with their claws quite frequently. But a little blood hurt no one and it seemed to make the victory seem a little more sweeter. Either way, he had to keep these two lionesses at bay for just a little while longer. Tshatshi and with luck, Bhutai would be along shortly and their plans for domination would go

forth.

"Tired yet?" Isha asked of the cheetah.

"No," he huffed. "I'm enjoying this."

"Liar," Ng'ara butted in. "I can see you gasping for air. Don't try to lead *us* on."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Bhutai was a crafty little devil. No matter what those two lionesses threw at him; he always managed to stay one step ahead. If they'd pounce; he'd kick. If they lanced; he'd turn. Anything they could think of he thought of first. It was like fighting a mirror! No, worse... fighting yourself! But there was one thing about the cheetah that alarmed the two; he was stalling. Stalling for what neither of them knew. Whatever it was the two would have to take it in stride and hope it could be overcome.

"We know you're waiting..."

"Am I?" he offered a clawridden paw.

Isha nodded while she danced away from him. "Yes you are."

"Don't worry," Bhutai grunted. "You'll know soon enough."

Indeed they would. Soon Kichasi would be dead; he was sure of it; and that would leave himself, Tshatshi and Tambulo to rise up and reclaim the clan for their own and place Khulo back aboard as their leader and rule the Pridelands. Their victory would be an awesome sight indeed.

* * *

"Tambulo!" said his companion taking the full brunt of Sarafina's attack. "Make the rendezvous!" With the clan being outnumbered six to five now; there was no way Bhutai could continue to hold off two attacking lionesses for long. He was counting on either he or Tambulo to help him out if their plans were to succeed. Even if Kichasi were to die at the claws of a lion or lioness; they still had to defeat the others in order to lay claim to Pride Rock. And to do that, they had to ban together. "Bhutai is counting on us!"

Tambulo picked up the urgency in Tshatshi's voice and fled the scene in a hurry. His mission now was clear: Seek out his fellow clan member and assist when necessary. However; he turned back at the sight of the two creatures brawling and wondered if he'd see his friend ever again.

"Get going!" ordered Tshatshi. "I'll be right behind you."

"Over my dead body," spat Sarafina.

Tshatshi watched as Tambulo disappeared; leaving only the hot breath of the lioness to his attention. "If that's the way you want it."

Which apparently was because as soon as the cheetah offered his answer; she was all over him like a parasite. Biting; scratching; clawing she was. No part of the body was sacred. But just as quick as her frenzy was on; Sarafina found her self sprawling through the air.

"Weak!" the cheetah spat down at the motionless body of Sarafina. "Pathetic. And you call yourselves King of Beasts..." He continued to watch her for any sign of movement but he was left empty. Now, he was sure it was time to join his colleagues. Two lioness were down and no recorded Cheetah fatalities. This fight was turning into a normal occurrence. As Tshatshi

turned to leave the sight of the two lions; something caught his attention. The wind picked up sharply sending what little fur he had standing up on end. Something didn't seem right - time itself perhaps. The scenery around him blurred as he turned as it seemed time itself slowed down to offer him a surreal view to his kill. "Wha-- What's happening?"

He could not move nor could he advert his eyes from the two lionesses laying a few paw steps away. Sarafina stirred up now and opened her eyes slightly. This didn't even get a rise out of the cheetah. Yet, she had to shield her eyes from the wind blown dust; and that of the unrealness of the scene forming before her. Sarafina too was now captivated by what had captured the attention of her nemesis: the most shocking thing she'd seen in years.

Before their very eyes; it seemed as if what they knew about life and death was receded. Where once stood nothing but grass; now occupied a sleek and young black lioness. One they both recognized immediately. Sarafina gasped in recognition but could find no soul in the creature's eyes; golden and burning ablaze. Whatever this creature was it was no longer Wamase. Tshatshi knew. Tshatshi knew that look well; it was the look of revenge. He didn't know how or why this lioness was before him now but his future seemed clear. The gods of vengeance descended to claim his soul. And collect his soul they might; though it wouldn't be without a fight.

The lioness image stood in silence waiting for the wind to subside and the shock to wane from the two creatures' faces. Only then could she hope to succeed in her mission: to stop the senseless violence the two were partaking. Unfortunately she knew a day like this would come. Wamase had foreseen it ever since her first and final confrontation with the cheetahs. She knew their fierceness could not be kept at bay with just a warning; they'd be back. And when they did return the pride would have a problem to contend with. Now they are back; now the pride is having a dilemma resolving the situation. The cheetahs seem to be stronger than anticipated; even for her judgements! Eitherway Wamase had no further toleration for them and without further ado, she launched herself down from the ledge she was standing upon into the waiting paws of Tshatshi.

The cheetah was quick to counter the lionesses' move and Wamase was thrown to the hardened ground upon her arrival. But she too expected this action and willed her legs to bend enough so she could land on all four paws. Digging her extended claws into the sun-beaten soil that she used to call home; Wamase thrust herself back at Tshatshi with lightning speed. Her newfound agility and quickness astounded even Sarafina who'd summoned enough strength to sit up. Sarafina watched unbelievably as her slain friend, who willed herself back to life, battle the unsociable cheetah Tshatshi without one iota of trepidation.

Bhutai stood now with Tambulo as the two of them kept the lionesses Isha and Ng'ara together and out of trouble... for the moment. They were waiting on Tshatshi to begin unferling their plans for domination. Soon, they would gain the upper paw over these lionesses and while Kichasi fought with the queen of the lions; they'd assert their power and go after Sarabi themselves. Kichasi in all her stupidity would allow her guard to drop and that--that would be the time the three of them would strike her down and place Khulo back at the top of the clan where he belongs. Only thing was... everything rode on Tshatshi's shoulders at the moment.

"Where is he?" shouted Bhutai.

Tambulo just shrugged while batting away Isha. "He said he'd be along shortly."

"Well, it's been enough time."

"Give it a few more," said Tambulo. "I'm sure he'll be along."

The lionesses just laughed at them.

Paw after claw laden paw batted across the snout, face and upper body of the spotted creature. Sarafina was surprised he could stand up after the vicious attack Wamase was providing it. Still, true to his nature, the cheetah did not waver nor did he simply give up the attack because he was being overpowered. The darkened lioness also took some alarming punches and at one point in this grueling match; Sarafina wasn't sure who was striking who. But, after a minute of watching the two combatants wrestle on the parched soil; she became very worried as she saw a lot of blood pour out of the entanglement and many sour thoughts raced through her mind. But, they were all for naught as Wamase rose to her paws and declared victory.

Sarafina ran to her but stood just a few lengths from Wamase's form and there the two lionesses stood over the body of Tshatshi looking at one another. "Wamase?" the other lioness said at last, the first to break the silence. Even in her weakest voice, Wamase heard her call and immediately stepped forward and nuzzled her.

"Yes my dear, It is I."

"Is that really you? I thought I'd lost you!"

The lioness replied through her beaten form. "Nah," she spoke. "I couldn't do a thing like that to you."

Sarafina giggled a bit. "I should have known better." She was glad to see her friend of course, but a strange thought crossed her mind and she just had to know why she was there before her now.

Wamase picked up on this immediately and answered promptly raising her paw to Sarafina's shoulders. "You fought bravely Sarafina."

"But I was beaten down."

"That doesn't matter," she said to her. "Your heart was in the right place and that's what matters. Don't you see? I couldn't be here unless you believed in yourself."

Sarafina pondered that for a second or two.

"I couldn't exist in this world without you Sarafina and now my task here is complete."

"Task?"

"Yes..." she nodded. "I had to make sure you were safe Sarafina."

"Me? How come?"

Wamase's smile slipped a bit "Because you were worrying me. You're an intricate part of this Pride Sarafina. They need you. I need you."

"Am I *that* special?"

The black lioness smiled from ear to ear once more. There were still some things Sarafina would have to wait to find out. "Sarafina dear," Wamase said still smiling. "There are just some things you have to wait to see. You better run along now; the fight is still on."

Sarafina stood up looking to the other small battles and nodded. "I suppose we are needed."

Wamase affirmed that position but said she could not go with her. Sarafina cried for her to join the battle but Wamase was right. It was no longer her fight. She did all she could to assist the lioness; now it was up to her to prove she was still a capable member of the Pride. "Will I ever see you again?" Sarafina asked of the dark lioness.

"Of course you will," Wamase answered with a smile. "I will always be a part of you, don't you remember?"

Sarafina nodded with a giggle, "Of course I do... just checking."

Wamase raised up her paw as to strike Sarafina but instead shooed her off. The lioness received the message and turned to comply. But when she turned back to wish her friend a goodbye; the black lioness had disappeared without a trace--again. Sarafina smiled and walked on. She was sure to see the lioness again sometime in the future.

* * *

"I don't like this Tam," said Bhutai. "Tshatshi should have joined us by now." Even Tambulo realized that something must have detained the cheetah. Still, he refused to believe that he could have been bested in battle. Not Tshatshi; not he second in command. Not ever.

"Waiting for someone?" said a voice from behind.

The two cheetahs spun instantly to the female voice their hearts dropping. They'd been discovered. The two of them didn't know how; but it seemed that Kichasi found out about their plans and have come to dispose of *them*. Yet, when Tambulo and Bhutai got a full look at their intruder; both of their jaws dropped.

"I see you were expecting someone else."

The two captured lionesses cheared!

"You!" exclaimed Tambulo. "B-b-but how?"

Sarafina lowered her gaze to him and simply stated, "you can never underestimate the spirit of a lioness." She grinned evilly and jumped into the arena. It was now three lionesses against two cheetahs... a bloodbath was sure to enrage.

Mufasa had lost sight of Khulo; he'd been evaded most perfectly. The cheetah didn't leave any clues to his whereabouts. It was if he simply willed himself out of existence. This confused Mufasa for a bit; but couldn't see standing in the middle of grasslands searching for a creature that was just as well built to blend in as he was. So, he turned about and made his way back to Pride Rock. There, he could make a difference and finally turn the tables of victory to his side. Even in his position, he could see his mate contesting with Kichasi with all her might. He watched on as blow after blow was given. His mate gloriously defending her honor and her home against any intruder. He felt honored seeing her dedication. Even in the eyes of his failure; she still went on without question. Mufasa made a note to himself to talk with her more in the future.

But then something incredible happened. Sarabi was down on the stone ground of the precipice and she was not getting up! Mufasa strained to hear the words from Kichasi; but he didn't have to work much. She seemed to yell them for everyone to hear.

"That's it queen Sarabi," the cheetah howled. "Lie there like the pitiful creature you are."

Mufasa wanted to rush right up there and make the female beg for her life but he didn't because it was Sarabi's fight and she earned it. It was her honor at stake, not his. Sarabi was the one bested by this creature made it quite clear to Mufasa that it was to be her and only her to battle Kichasi to the death; if that was what it took. He hung his head down now not wanting to see anymore of the scene folding before him. But when he heard everything become silent; Mufasa looked back up in confusion. Surely someone with enough gumption to announce her victory wouldn't suddenly fade away. With his curiosity peaked, Mufasa made his way up to the entrance of the den and just about fainted at the sight he saw. Just as she was fought, Sarabi sat with Kichasi's throat between her fangs as the lioness drained the last bit of life from her being.

The queen looked down at her catch and sighed heavily. Sarabi was quite happy that it wasn't her in the jaws of the cheetah! It didn't matter though; the queen wasn't the one having the life squeezed from her. She lived; She breathed; and she was now vindicated from shame. A shame that Kichasi put upon her. A shame that she put upon herself. A shame that called out for exoneration. And today was the day to begin getting her life back in order. When Sarabi finally spotted her mate, she dropped the limp cheetah from her hold and smiled. "I guess that's one way to shut her up," announced the queen. "Even if she does look like she's about ready to sneeze."

Mufasa could do nothing more but laugh.

"Look at her," growled the lioness. "The mighty Kichasi put down by a lowly lioness."

"Was she really *that* confident?"

Sarabi nodded. "Smug is more like it."

Mufasa nuzzled her and told her it was over. She had won her battle and it was time to help the rest of the pride win theirs. The celebration could wait until all the cheetahs were removed from the Pridelands. "Do you know where the others are?"

"I saw Sarafina and Kolo moments ago down below," she spoke. "But as for Isha and Ng'ara..."

"Mmmm," acknowledged Mufasa. "Let's go. They may need us." And the two leapt down from the precipice of Pride Rock in search for other battles to fight.

The two cheetahs barely had enough time to tense up when Sarafina jumped into the arena and tipped the scales of victory to her side. The lions were angry, the two of them could understand that. But it wasn't they who took their land from them; it was Kichasi! It was all Kichasi's fault! And now, by the sounds of that roar, they figured Kichasi had fallen. What else could it mean? "Look," Tambulo began. "We don't want to fight anymore."

"Don't want to fight anymore?" asked Ng'ara. "You shouldn't have picked a fight with us in the first place."

"I know," answered Bhutai. "But what is done is done. We were just following orders--" but the lionesses began their approach. "We didn't want to--" Isha and Sarafina already had their claws extended. "No! Wait!" Ng'ara joined them, circling the two cheetahs.

"Fight, or die," announced Isha through her menacing growl. "This is the last time we will be made fools out of!"

Tambulo cringed and replaced his stance with a much wider version. They were losing the scene and it became apparent that they weren't going to get out of this squabble without a fight for their lives. And this was a fight that they couldn't afford to lose because there was no second place.

"We were just following orders!!!" Bhutai walloped before being pounced by the tawny fur of the lioness Sarafina. Unfortunately the creature couldn't revel in the softness of her coat; he had to wrestle with the sharpness of her claws.

Sarabi and Mufasa heard the roars and grunts of another battle and set off to lend a paw or two if necessary. But as they left from the orifice of Pride Rock the scene turned dreamlike. The grasses swaying in the breeze blurred and blended together and no matter how hard they ran, the two lions could not seem to make any ground. With the snarls and howls coming out of the conglomerate of wrestling fur, Mufasa wondered if anyone would come out alive! The massive lion shut his eyes and willed away the pain of the distorted scene and reopened them with a new sense of purpose.

"They're over here!" announced Sarabi.

Mufasa turned sharply and dug his claws into the soil launching himself towards his mate.

The two of them ran like the wind. Mufasa threw a paw over his face every few steps, fighting to keep his mane out of his eyes. His heart was pounding and his mind racing. Too many questions strained his understanding and it was just too taxing on him. The massive lion began to lag behind his mate and the minute he sensed it, the paws pounded the turf much harder.

"Hurry Mufasa! They might need he--"

Sarabi stopped dead in her tracks.

Mufasa came to a stop beside her.

What the two of them saw they could never prepare themselves for. There in the midst of a bloodbath stood three blood soaked creatures of destruction. Ng'ara, Isha, Sarafina; Mufasa made out every one. The lionesses' breath could be seen upon the coolness of the night as they heaved for air. In and out, in and out; the Lion King watched as the puff of condensation formed in the air then suddenly dissipated. He found no such clouds around the prey. With the task over and the battle won, Isha turned to Sarafina who in turn followed gaze to Ng'ara and silently sent a look of thanks and friendship for a job well done.

"We're all right," uttered Sarafina at last to the two lions she passed by. "We are a little dazed, but we are all right."

Sarabi dropped to the ground and cried in relief. The ordeal was over.

Mufasa turned and watched Sarafina, Ng'ara and Isha walk by on their way to who knew where; commending them on a superior effort. Victory could not have been achieved without his lionesses. And for the first time since the battle began, Mufasa smiled. The Pridelands were really worth fighting for after all...

The Pride

Epilogue

Khulo looked up at the massive lion Mufasa and sighed a sigh of defeat. He was so frightened for his life he couldn't control the shaking in his limbs. He was defeated and for the first time in his life, completely lost. All his friends had been lost in combat: Bhutai, Tambulo... and even Chal. Their lives, and his, were now forever changed; locked in the circle of life. Whether he wanted to be locked in this Great Circle or not was not his choosing. But Khulo knew his life was sealed well before he met Mng'ariza and probably even well before that! He stood over Tshatshi's body now, and though he was barely alive, Khulo weaped for him. "I never wanted this..."

Mufasa looked surprised at the show of emotion but firmly remained in control of the situation. The more he learned of the situation, the more he understood what this creature was going through. Though it appeared Khulo was in control of his clan; he was not. The cheetah was ousted by the only female of the clan and maneuvered his subjects to follow her. Mufasa understood what it meant to feel the loss of control as he just went through that himself. Nevertheless, control must be maintained and a strong presence made for his pride. "Then why did you attack us?"

"I didn't!" Khulo yelled through his pain. "All we were looking for was food... and a good place to stay."

"I refuse to believe that," growled the lion.

"Believe it..." said Khulo. "I have no reason to lie to you now."

Mufasa looked over the blood laden battle field and bore his gaze into each of his lionesses searching for a truth; some truth to tell him what to do about the cheetah before him. Should he end it right here? Should he open his mighty jaws and clamp down on the neck of the cheetah -- ending his life? Or, should the great lion king show humility and mercifully let the cheetah go. Scanning his lionesses brought no answers to the truth he sought. Again Mufasa looked into the Cheetah's eyes and asked "Why?"

Khulo looked over at the dead form of Mng'ariza's niece and sighed. What a waste... a young life that could have been something but was wasted on a futile campaign. A campaign that she could not win for she was far too young to understand the consequences of ruling a clan; and the responsibilities. He sighed once more before answering. "Because I wasn't powerful enough to stop it..." Mufasa's face changed from question to frown and was ready to argue the point when Khulo stopped him. "I think there has been enough bloodshed for today."

"Agreed," said the lion king before allowing his foe to clamber to his paws and saunter out into the plains of the Pride Lands to a place only he knew. Would the cheetah return home? Would he try and make a life of his own? Those questions were not answerable by king Mufasa. Right now, he knew he had wounded lionesses to take care of; and a Kingdom to nurture back to health. There would be time to ponder trivial questions later. For now, it was time to get down to ruling his pride--the duty he was bred for.

* * *

The great king sat upon the precipice of Pride Rock looking out among the grasses of his kingdom as they swayed with the breezes that cropped up on this late afternoon. The sun was a fireball of yellows and oranges as it set itself to fall behind the treeline in the later hours. For now, it hung on to life with all its might trying to send its warmth and light to every creature across the land. Alone sat the lion allowing the sun's warmth to wash over him as it fueled his thoughts over the past couple of weeks. During that time he'd matured greatly. Mufasa learned that one can not run away from their responsibilities. Running away doesn't solve a thing. This, the king learned the hard way.

Also during the last two weeks the king defended and proved to himself and to his pride that he alone could be king of the Pridelands. That he could fess up to his responsibilities and take command of the situation. Mufasa was the supreme ruler of these lands and he showed everyone that he could handle the job just like his father before him. But it was more than that... Mufasa learned about dignity and honor and responsibility. So many lessons learned in so little time and on the plains of the Serengeti; one had to be a quick study and learn everything there is about the land you inhabit.

Still, he couldn't believe that he was about to throw it all away. His mate, his kingdom and his life. For what? For a life without worries away from the one he loves and the Pride he swore to protect? Was this really the life he wanted to live? No. How could he? Sooner or later payment would have been collected for such a decision because there is no way of life that is devoid of worries or penalties. And it just so happened to be that Mufasa was happy now to be back and able to put his past behind him. One thing still puzzled him though: his brother--Scar. He seemed to be around when it pleased him; helping out only when it served his purpose and what he did to Sarabi was unexcusable.

Mufasa's anger seemed to chase the warmth away as the sun began to drop behind the tree line sending a silhouette of Boabab's against the backdrop of the grasslands. Almost as if planned by the Great Kings, a brisk breeze stirred across the plains whisking the grasses to and fro tantalizing the king's muzzle. The blowing early evening air sent chills down Sarabi's spine and she shivered in protest. "Ooh, it's going to get cool tonight," she said. Mufasa nodded and snuggled closer. She purred under the warmth and as one, they sat gazing onto their kingdom.

Mufasa smiled and nuzzled into her again, "Don't worry my love. I'll be here to keep you warm."

Sarabi grinned, "It's about time..."

The lion laughed, "You're never going to let me live this down are you?"

She shook her head.

"Just as well," Mufasa mouthed. "I really hurt you."

Sarabi put up a paw. "I understand," she said. "Please don't burden yourself with it. It's in the past."

"Right," he agreed. "And we have a glorious future to look forward to."

Sarabi chuckled and pawed her stomach like she was coaxing it to settle down after a bout of screaming for prey and felt the warmth and the happiness inside. The future was ensured for her now; there was no mistaking that. Her mate had returned, the kingdom was saved and her place as queen set in stone. All that was left was... "We certainly do. The Pridelands is a wonderful place to raise our cub."

The lion mumbled in agreement.

Sarabi smiled. It was just like Mufasa not to hear something important.

"It's really quite breathtaking," was all Mufasa said.

"Yes, very." The lioness looked at him with her gleaming eyes. "You didn't hear a word I said did you."

"What?"

The king bore his questioning eyes into her. What on earth was she talking about? Sarabi could see the confusion on his face but did nothing more than smile at him. She knew what had been said and that the news was good. So, before he could voice an opinion of his own, Sarabi continued with her latest confession - which was turning into such a habit! "Think back Mufasa," Sarabi said. "What was the last thing you remember me saying."

Mufasa pondered for a moment and came out with, "That the pridelands is a wonderful place to raise a cub."

She giggled and looked down at her stomach once more. She was going to be a mother - the sweetest thing in the world that could happen to a living creature and it was going to happen to her! Finally a way to extend herself into the next generation. Oh how she would love her son or daughter no matter what; and would spoil him or her every chance she got--

"Oh my!"

The words poured back into him and hit like a fleeing wildebeest. A cub? Him? Have a cub? When was he around to have a cub? And then it came to him: at their secluded watering hole he had spotted her; alone; vulnerable; in season! He'd rushed upon her like wind flowing through the grass and instantly they were one--

"Mufasa?" asked Sarabi of the expressionless lion.

-- in love. Nothing could separate the--

"Mufasa!"

His eyes came alive and began looking to and fro. "Yes, Sarabi?" he said at last, saddened that his fantasy had ended.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

Mufasa focused all his attention upon her and could not help but smile widely before snuggling into her once more. "I think it's fantastic!"

The queen leaped up and nuzzled back in complete happiness.

The two stood intertwined with one another for what seemed a life time allowing each other to get lost in their loving affections. But then the warmth left Sarabi's side as Mufasa turned suddenly and looked toward the very tip of the precipice, heeding its call.

"Go," Sarabi said pulling his muzzle back to her. "Take your rightful place again."

He winked at her and began the short trek to the tip of Pride Rock's precipice to claim his destiny - a destiny he finally earned. Tough obstacles were overcome and valuable lessons were learned, but through it all if he had a choice... he'd never do it again. To put his pride in such peril was inappropriate and very irresponsible. If Sarabi were to hate him for the rest of his life - he deserved it for being such a fool. He could not fathom his reasoning for almost ruining the lives of the very ones he swore to protect. Yet, through all the cloudy days of his life and the darkened events that followed during his absence, he was relieved to know that Malaika would make a full recovery, that Sarabi lived through Scar's ordeal and that he would now return to his rightful place as ruler of the Pride lands.

Mufasa looked out amongst his kingdom and sighed as the once green grasses of his land became golden brown. The lands looked pitiful; they looked tried, but no matter how bad the situation might become, Mufasa promised himself that he would stick to his honor and his duty and see to it that all the lions of his pride flourished. Mufasa would no longer run from his fears; he would stay and fight. He was now the king of the Pride lands, no one else. He alone dictated how life would evolve for the many creatures on the Serengeti. And just as he stood there quiet, he took in a gasp of air before letting out a monstrous thunderclap of a roar to announce a calling to every creature across the Serengeti that it was he who was the king of beasts on these plains and that the Circle of Life that had bound them all on this path of love, life, despair, faith, and hope was now complete: Mufasa had beaten all the odds and with that newfound wisdom, he reclaimed his life with his pride.

THE END

