



*The Huntress
at Sunset*

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The Huntress at Sunset

A novel by
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“...in many ways we have come full circle, we are returning to the beginning. The younger ones have good hearts and they will reach where we are in time. They don't yet understand but they will....”

Anon.

The Mountains

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The Mountains

Tiny plants clung resolutely, precariously rockbound in the watery fissures in the freeze-thaw fractured stone. For a few short weeks each year these inmates burst into dramatic flower; vibrant pincushions of bold colour dotting the steep slopes and shadowed gullies above the tree line. It was a short-lived, almost futile attempt to show the inhabitants of the fertile foothills and sun-parched plains below that they too, if only briefly, could bring beauty and colour: a pulse of new life on the otherwise barren mountainside. Yet all their transitory exuberance passed unseen; unnoticed by the busy, bustling world way below their roots. This was a land where everything, plant and animal alike, was small, and clung to the ground trying to avoid being drained of heat and life by the unrelenting wind. Icy blasts tugged and tore at everything that dared to put a whisker or a tendril above the rocks. Yet low down in the rocks and in the air, there was always moisture. Clouds descended to swirl and cling to the peaks and passes of the mountains making the air fresh and cool, worlds away from the stifling oppression of the plains.

This was not the summit of the range; it was not even close to the peaks. They towered far higher still, glistening silver white in the late afternoon sun. This was just a tiny shallow col; a hollow in the mountainside; a staging post to one of the lower passes. Northeast lay the world. Southwest lay miles of frozen wastes: Nowhere. There, claimed by the mountains and absorbed into the green speckled grey rock, lay the bones of those foolish enough to try to pass. No animal had ever returned from beyond, even if there was a beyond. This was the end of the world, the pass led nowhere; a vast unending expanse of void that let nothing escape its frozen tentacles. It drew in and held onto everything: plant, animal, rock, the air; even, some said, day itself. From it came nothing but cold. It even ate the intense heat of the day. On just a few days it drew the clouds together in the frozen gloom, gathering up their venom before sending them sweeping down to the plains below, turning everything to mud and misery.

The end of the world had a purpose; it gave life one moment while taking it back the next. In the void, as hushed voices told in stories at sunset, dwelt the souls of all the animals and plants. In moments of forgetfulness or inattention the void let a few souls escape to be born again. Yet the void would always reclaim some unfortunates to redress the balance, for it must always have just enough souls: the eternal tally.

Soon darkness would clothe the mountain, gathering all into its emptiness. Until then the sun shone deep into the col, seemingly making little effort to deprive the void of cold. One tiny ground-hugging plant grew alone where the ground sloped abruptly. This was almost the edge of its world. It had struggled for months to establish a foothold in the warmer soil, but here was little moisture in the light, free draining soil. It had never flowered and it might have done soon had not a callused, cracked and heavy animal pad crushed it. The paw trembled minutely. The almost white filaments of fur were patchy-stained red but shimmered in the breezeless chill of the late day sun.

The paw did not rise immediately. It pressed down firmly. A heavily muscled foreleg rose from the paw. The powerful flesh tightly wrapped around

its central core of bones; skin and fur smoothly enveloping all within. Above the paw the fur darkened, growing darker still above the wrist. A colour even and warm; yet the mountain air chilled the muscles below. The mass of the body was covered by short, hairy fur. At the shoulder and beyond the tufts of dark brown at his elbow, a thick dark grey mass enveloped and hung around the shoulders, neck and chest. Unlike many others of his kind, he spent much of his waking time ensuring it was clean and almost free of the grass, earth and insects that usually dwelt within. Behind stretched the taut, strongly curved, fine-furred body of a young adult male lion with no scars, gained from the rigours of taking a pride, to mar his fur. The curve of his delicately, downy soft underfur rose boldly to his loins. The flesh of his hindquarters was firm, lithe and muscular, covering but not obscuring the strong lines of bone beneath. The shaft of his tail continued the line of his back in a smooth curve to a tip of rich, deep brown that seemed to absorb all the light from around it, creating a dark, warm hole in the day. He embodied the fleeting physical perfection of youth.

For all his vigour, strength and speed, he was not at ease. His ears twitched at the faintest of sounds that floated up from the sunset drenched world below. His eyes were wide with a delicate fear. He seemed to hesitate; to linger, unsure of which was the right path. He sniffed the air, lifting his head to the wind. Ahead and above lay an unknown and feared land of legend and superstition, behind lay the world of pressing danger he had left just hours before.

The wind dropped again. For a time the deathly beauty of the mountain wore a benign face. The daily round of life played out by the specks of motion far below seemed unconnected to the second by second struggles for survival on the mountainside. To the grassland animals below, the mountains were the end of their small world. They formed a barrier so great that any creature that ventured into it was sure never to return, swallowed up by the foothills before they even crossed the tree line onto the open mountainside. The lion, the zebra, the wildebeest and all the animals of the plains, even the birds that over flew the foothills, knew the two worlds had no common ground. Only the eagles that soared alone above the lower slopes of the mountains saw different. They knew no dividing line cut into the earth to separate here from there. The cold mountainside wasteland was the same land as the fertile grazing of the rolling hills and the sun-browned savannah grasslands.

This then, above and below, was all one land and ruled by one; one that never visited or even cared to visit. He did not even know that such a place as this, almost half of his kingdom, existed at all. The eagles were the stewards of the mountains and heeded the calls of their distant king. They governed it wisely in case they were ever called on to account of their guardianship. They imagined the plains where the king roamed were paved with a carpet of small, juicy mammals. None of the solitary eagles dared to cross the boundaries of their territory, even for the promise of such unlimited supplies of food.

On the mountain everything was small, insignificant and under the rock's control, whether it was the tiniest plants or the mightiest of beasts. So it was, perhaps for the first time in his life, that the young lion felt small and very afraid. Afraid of what may, or indeed may not, have lain ahead. He knew not whether to go on towards the unknown or to go back to the familiar, dangerous

land below. He repeatedly turned his head back and forth with staring eyes. He knew he could not return, too much had happened for that, but the stories and fears of what lay ahead preyed on him.

His ears caught the deep, rolling remnant of the call of another of his kind floating up from below. Its distant echoes, which flowed from rock to rock, carried an urgency that drove a new sense of purpose into him. He turned his head to face ahead and stared determinedly, his choice made. He sprang forward with a surge from his hindquarters.

Later, the plants that marked the spots where he had stood began to wither, crushed by his pawfall, their brief time was past. The young lion's life lay ahead. Whatever lay behind, lay in the past. A past he was determined to learn from, a past he was determined to leave behind on the mountainside. His cubhood was finally over; he was now a lion, alone and free. He was running into his future, in which all was as yet dark. Like all nocturnal and semi-nocturnal animals, lions are no strangers to the dark. Most treat it almost like a friend, as this young male tried to feel, but this darkness was different.

He ran boldly as the evening gathered and fell all around him. He ran on, leaping from rock to rock. Yet he soon realised that this darkness was deeper and denser than any he had experienced before. It was cold and clinging and drained his strength and his will. The farther he went, the more his progress became erratic and halting. He began feeling his way across ground that felt unfamiliar and unsettlingly unstable, feeding his latent insecurity. Later, in the moments when the depths of the darkness became unbearable, he told himself that he was above all this; he was the ruler of this land of cold shadows. Yet no matter how many times he said it, he never quite managed to believe it, as everywhere he looked, the mountain closed in upon him and held him down.

The thousands of blue-grey facets of stone glinted and glistened in the confusion of his mind. He had never been anywhere as hostile as this. With each step he faced new, dimly glimpsed terrors that only added to his pain. He soon lost all memory of why he was running. Now he was running just to stay alive, but he felt he was running to his death. Running into emptiness where no one would be able to bring him back.

He had no idea of how long he held up against the unyielding bone-chilling cold of the night. The hard stones beneath his paws grew sharper still and began to cut painfully into his pads. The endless rock gullies grew narrower and steeper. Just as he thought he had at last cleared the final summit, the next rose ahead of him. With each grim ridge his old life receded into the darkness, each time he felt he might fall off the edge of the world and into the endless void beyond. The winds took his strength and scattered it over the endless blackness of the mountainside. Many times he stumbled; rising became more and more difficult and painful as the biting winds swirled into the fissures and hollows, laughing mercilessly at him.

He fell as his forepaws dropped off a ridge into blackness. He tumbled down helplessly, sliding down the abrading rock face, his flank slammed onto a flat, damp, stone-hard surface below. Pain overtook his senses and filled his mind. Through the pain he came to realise that all the stories of this endless place were true. He knew he had at last found the emptiness; the void had taken

his soul. Then the blackness enveloped him and, lying painfully on his side, he descended into never-ending exhausted, dreamless sleep.

1. A New Vision

When Nengwalamwe woke it was still dark. He lay remembering the vivid stories he had heard as a cub: of epic struggles of the forces of the living and the dead and of light and dark. He remembered other times when he had lain awake; wondering why in all the stories there was no dawn and sunset. Wondering why there was no time when the day gave way to the night or the darkness relinquished to the light. In all the stories except one, one that told of the time before the day and night became two, there was dark or light but never both. The time came when, like two quarrelsome brothers, they had to be separated. They could not understand what had happened to them. The brothers chased each other's tail forever round and round the world. Night's lair high up in the mountains in the east; Day dwelt in the west.

The lion wondered why death felt so much like life, only colder. He had expected to see others, maybe not different animals but certainly other lions, but there were none. Then he remembered; he was in the realm of the darkness, the void, the emptiness in which nothing lived, and he too was not alive.

So, this was the void: that empty, desolate, frozen wasteland devoid of life, a place of never ending darkness and fear. He thought he would not feel the cold when he was dead, yet the chill bit deep into his fur. As he stared into the blackness he slowly became aware of a faint deep blue that grew steadily. The darkness was beginning to lift away leaving a faint light that formed in the distance. He lay still, pondering on how far away the blueness looked. First it seemed close, then, as it grew, it receded into the distance leaving a line of black below a cold blue that deepened, penetrating the sky. He shook with fear; not just his head, nor even his mane, but his whole body quivering like a fearful cub, and still the blue rose. Below the blue the air seemed to redden, turning to brown and then to orange in a continuous band of graduated light that stretched as far as the lion could see. There were no stars, no clouds, nothing but the vibrant colours of the steadily climbing light. Had the light entered the darkness? Was this his life entering death? Why was the void filling with the brilliant colours of the dawn sky?

For a while he lay still and simply watched the spectacle unfold around him. He was transfixed by its beauty and held down by its terrifying power. He had been a lion; the proud son of a powerful father. In life his teeth had been white, his fur smooth and unmarred by wounds and his mane soft and unmatted. His youth intact, yet coloured by the first experiences of adulthood. Now he lay still and waited for the void to envelop and take him.

Still the light grew. It revealed that the void was not without form: it loomed up all around him in cold stone. Ahead and below lay open flatlands with darker patches. The light grew brighter and the patches formed into high, dense thickets, kopjes and isolated rounded rocks, dusty luggas, lush green uplands and brown-grassed plains. In the middle of them all, like nothing Nengwalamwe had ever seen, rose up a rock mass that dominated everything around it. This was not the void; this was not death. This was a land richer and more varied than even the gentle Kolata hills of his cubhood. From behind him, the light of the dawn sun finally pierced the cold of the night; a new day had begun.

Nengwalamwe forced himself to his paws. He had slept on a ledge that extended just a couple of lengths ahead; beyond the ground fell away sharply. He was shaking, no longer with fear, just with cold. His paws ached and his side throbbed with dull pain from bruises gathered when he fell on to the ledge. Had he run clear over the edge in the dark, the fall would have broken his back. The eagles would have grown fat picking his shattered bones clean.

As he looked to the strange land below he felt his strength begin to return, and with it his will to survive. He had entered the void and lived. Below was his reward: a fresh, lush land and it was all his. He let the winds rushing up from the distant plains flow over and into his mane. He opened his nostrils to the breeze and drew it in deep. It held promise of all sorts of different prey. It was a heady cocktail of twenty different antelope, zebra, buffalo and many other animals he could not name. In amongst the scents lay faint traces of hyena, wild dog, jackal, leopard, cheetah and myriad birds, but there was no trace, not the slightest sign, of any lion. This was to be his personal kingdom, his very own land. He threw back his head, straightened his neck, and roared powerfully. The sound echoed around him, magnified a hundred fold by the mountain. Seconds later, a speckled swirl, black and grey, rose from the canopy of one of the distant thickets.

He waited for any reply. When no answer came he called again. The cold seemed to be receding. Though the dampness still clung to his fur, the iciness no longer held its grip so tightly around him. The air of the dawn laid still, damp and fresh all around him, coating the rocks with a glistening, sparkling sheen. He stepped forward and bent down to lick the coating from a rock close to the edge. It was the purest, cleanest water he had ever tasted. The experience overwhelmed Nengwalamwe and he dropped down and lapped at the rock. He relished the delicious sensation as the chilled water tingled on his tongue.

Having dried the dew from the rock he got up and looked along the ledge. To his left it thinned alarmingly. Right, he saw that the ledge sloped down half a length or more before the rock face resumed. Below, the slope lessened. It seemed he might be able to clamber down from ledge to bare slope, bare slope to rock, rock to ledge and on down the mountainside.

Nengwalamwe was unused to looking down. He always associated 'down' with the earth. Here there was none, just the cold, hard, claw-blunting, pad-freezing rock. He moved tentatively along the ledge. He looked over, teetering on the edge. There seemed to be no obvious route down to the plains below. He could see none of the tracks he was used to following back home, etched into the grass by generations of lion and prey, indeed there was no grass. The rich plains looked to be frighteningly far away. He stretched his head out over the edge, keeping his forepaws tight in front of his hind and his tail thrust out straight behind him. His tail-tip bent to one side to clear the rock face. He felt unsteady, and for a moment thought about going back over the mountains. He told himself there was no way back; that there was no past, only the future.

"Come on Nengwalamwe. You can do this. It's not so hard. It's just like leaping over the gullies with Tashi." He looked down, and wished he hadn't. "OK, OK, so it's not like leaping over the gullies with Talashi, but I can do it, I can!" He stretched out again, wobbling for a few seconds. He looked to the horizon. It seemed so far away. He knew he would never reach the pinnacle that broke the

perfect line. "I can't do it. I can't." He drew back and sat on the ledge. His near forepaw felt unclean. He lifted it to his muzzle and was about to put his tongue out to lick it when he felt a chilling blast of frozen air fall onto his back. He shook involuntarily and rose suddenly, stepping forward instinctively. A second pulse of cold air ran down the rock, ruffling the rough knot of fur covering his spine behind his shoulders. He surged forwards off the ledge, leaping down to the rock below. Then turned and leapt a second time to another, then to the bare slope. "I did it! I did it! There's no way I can stop, this rock's way too slippery. I had better keep on doing it."

From five or more places in the fissured rock - Nengwalamwe couldn't count well enough to be sure - bubbled tiny, insistent streams of clear, near-frozen water. The streams slid over the rock, spreading into thin sheets. Where Nengwalamwe stood, the icy film rippled around his paws, condensing beyond into runnels. One by one the runnels joined, gathering into a bubbling mountain stream a little below. He watched the stream for a moment, fascinated by its continuous delicate movement. His eyes followed its flow down the mountain, threading its way among the rocks. In places it disappeared from view into gullies, only to reappear a little farther down the mountainside, stronger than before. In the distance it vanished altogether, hidden by a change of slope. Nengwalamwe scanned around and picked up its trace, much bigger now - almost a river - as it disappeared into a green and brown mass that covered the lower slopes like his mane. Beyond the mass, on gentler slopes it reappeared as a shining ribbon, laid out flat on the plains, heading for the distant horizon in a convoluted series of meandering bends and bows. It passed close to the monolithic pinnacle set deep into the plain.

The young lion moved on. For hours he clambered, slipped and lurched down the mountainside from boulder to boulder, always keeping the stream within earshot. The farther he went, the bolder he grew, just as the stream grew stronger. He leapt from one boulder to the next, turning each time before launching himself toward the next.

The lower down the mountain he got, the more the slope lessened. The ground changed from bare rock; first to moss-covered then to a thin, bare soil and now to something approximating earth. Nengwalamwe was not sure which he liked least, all felt unfamiliar and insecure and none would hold the steady dig of his claws. He grew used to each new sensation after a while, though not before slipping and falling. He was lucky to escape with no more than bruises, but they hardly mattered. Each time he picked himself up he felt his confidence rise. He was the lion who had beaten the void; he was the one who could not be hurt by mere rocks. He was the chosen one.

Other streams joined the flow, adding to the cascade of water. In places the stream dropped suddenly in white falls into narrow dark and dank gullies. Nengwalamwe avoided entering them and jumped, picked, and scrambled his way down the steep slopes on either side. Each gully was larger than the last, each falls more spectacular and dramatic, and each slope more difficult to clamber down. At one point he teetered at the top of a steep bank twice the height of the ledge on which he had spent the night. He peered over, and craned his head out over the edge. He roared: a thin indecisive call that echoed off the rocks around him. He tentatively extended his paw into the space ahead, unsure

of how far he would fall if he leapt. He drew it back and sniffed the air and then looked out across the plain to the lower course of the river. A dull green mat stretched out on both banks. He could just make out slow-moving dark spots in large gently shifting clusters. The movement, unhurried and halting looked familiar and raised his hunger; reminding him of the shifting of grazing herds.

Then he remembered that he was the chosen one who could come to no harm. He lowered his forequarters, sliding his near forepaw down the slope. As his chest touched the edge he pulled his other forepaw forward and dropped over. His paws could not grip on the loose scree of shattered rock fragments so he slid down, his tail flailing uncontrollably, his hind paws dragging over the edge and down the slope. His forepaws struck the slope hard but he could not gain any purchase on the loose surface. He tried to run with the fall, to move with rather than fight against it. As the slope tailed off he found himself running at full pace across damp, well-compacted soil covered in tight, low grass interspersed with spongy mosses. Here at last was something approaching familiar ground vegetation. He managed to break his run, bringing himself to a halt just before falling into the next, shallower gully. He looked back; raising his head uncomfortably high. 'That was lucky... No...' He had fallen from as high as an elephant's ear and yet was unscathed, apart, maybe, from a dull ache in his forepaws where his delicate pads had hit the foot of the slope. '... It can't be luck. I'm meant to be doing this - I'm pretty special, ain't I? Yeah, too right I am!'

Throughout the day the distant plains remained distant, but towards sunset he caught glimpses of the dense green blanket, which seemed to get closer with each leap. He could not quite make out what it was. It was another thing that was unfamiliar, unsettling and dangerous. It seemed to grow out of the mountainside, a rich mass that seemed to flow out of the rock. Nengwalamwe felt he should stay clear of it, but as he got closer he realised that there was no way to avoid it. The stream, now over two lengths wide and elbow deep, plunged into it. If he was to follow the stream any further he was going to have to deal with this unknown.

Later still, as he padded to within a few hundred metres, he saw at last that the green mass was not a blanket. It was nothing more than trees: the canopy of a thick forest that ended abruptly below him. This knowledge did not help the lion much. He was as unsettled by the trees as he had been on the barren open rock. He had seen trees and thickets often enough before. As a cub back in Kolata he had often played around the sparse acacias that littered the slopes down to the Kolata River. Even the thickets had been open and small, often no more than ten sun-dried, wizened trees in all. Here were far more trees, and far denser trees than he had ever encountered. To the lion, the forest seemed endless with dangers lurking in its dark depths. He longed for the security of open grasslands, warm and reassuringly familiar. "Anything could hide in there, lurking. They could wait for days for something to wander past. Am I that 'something'?"

As the light faded, Nengwalamwe, a fearless beast of the night, entered the upper slopes of forest. He was as frightened as ever he had been as a cub. If the forest had looked dangerous from the outside then it was terrifying when seen from the inside. The trees were not open and spindly as on the plains. They were dense and towering: an overwhelmingly humid, stifling place where the

undergrowth crowded round. The trees towered above Nengwalamwe, straight to the sky far above. They smelt heavy and resinous and covered the ground with fine, yielding leaf-litter. Nengwalamwe travelled slowly; afraid of every sound and every subtle swaying shadow cast from the moon. Sounds filled him, unimaginable sounds, unrelenting sounds, sudden sounds and fearful sounds. He could not imagine what kinds of animals make them. Even though the sounds were loud he could not tell from where they came. He imagined the croaks and ripples from tree frogs to be the calls of massive lion-eating beasts. The pips and whistles of bats became mind-penetrating fangs of bloodsucking birds of prey. He froze at every movement of the fallen leaves and branches, waiting to see what horror might burst forth upon him from the undergrowth.

For hours his fear overshadowed his more basic needs. His hunger grew until it consumed him. Now he was not just afraid and bewildered but also hungry and tired. His step became unsteady and his progress through the forest of fear grew slower as his pawfall began to falter.

Nengwalamwe could not sleep in the forest: it felt far too dangerous. He knew that if he slept he would never wake again, but could the forest at least provide him with food? He considered investigating some of the noises, particularly the rustles coming from the undergrowth, in case they came from the hunted rather than the hunter. He heard an unhurried movement ahead and a little to his left. He dropped down to the ground, instantly realising that hunting in dense undergrowth required a different technique.

Suddenly the trees around him shook as something massive, dense and black, loomed out at him. The air filled with a rapid hollow knocking as the creature careered toward Nengwalamwe. The lion roared in fear, turned and ran down slope in terror, the ground behind him shaking as the vast creature, taller than a wildebeest, lumbered after him. Nengwalamwe ran and ran, not daring to stop. Not even to check if he was still being chased.

When he eventually stopped, the forest was different: it was more open and not as overwhelmingly hostile. The sounds had changed too, though they were still all unfamiliar. The lion came to the edge of a clearing. He looked around, sniffed, and crept forwards into the open. Something moved ahead. It turned, and looked at him with eyes filled with curiosity. It seemed as though it had never seen a lion before, and appeared to be unsure whether it even needed to run. Nengwalamwe was equally unsure whether this animal, no bigger than a wild dog, was edible. It looked and smelt a bit like prey. When it dropped its head to graze he became convinced that it was crying out to him to take it down.

He advanced, low to the ground. The animal looked up, and eyed Nengwalamwe warily. The lion froze. The animal stepped forward and lowered its head again. Nengwalamwe inched forward, his belly touching the leaf litter. The animal raised its head once again and looked directly at the lion. Suddenly a powerful instinct belatedly flooded it and it ran. Nengwalamwe sprang after it, catching it in four strides and knocking it down with an almost insultingly easy flick of a forepaw. "Easy prey," his father's voice rumbled in his head, "feeds only cubs."

Nengwalamwe couldn't quite place the taste. It was strong and dry, quite unlike zebra; almost, but not quite, like gazelle. Unfamiliar as it may be, it was certainly not unpleasant. Replete, Nengwalamwe was at last able to forget the

forest and turned his concentration to cleaning every last scrap of flesh from the bones.

It was almost dawn before Nengwalamwe finally reached the far edge of the forest. The ground opened out onto a wide treeless area of low hills. Exhausted, he walked to a tiny knoll and lay down. He didn't bother to check for signs of danger. After the forest, anywhere seemed as safe as his Kolata homeland. In a few minutes he was asleep for the first time since the high mountainside. This time he was not at all cold, and he knew he was alive.

2. *A Land of Plenty*

Nengwalamwe, who had been dreaming uneasily of a lioness, Llasani, blearily opened his eyes.

“Hey, are you a lion?”

He was not afraid of the small, warm voice. About the only thing he had ever really been afraid of was his father. He looked to where the voice had come, expecting to see some strange and curious creature like the forest antelope he had brought down during the night. He was surprised and disturbed by what he actually saw. He was even more surprised when it bent down and licked his cheek.

“Yeah, I thought you were. Sorry, I just had to check. You don’t mind, do you?”

The lion lay still for a moment then lifted his head and yawned with a gape that left no doubt that he was a predator. Had he been more awake he would have lashed out at the strange cub who had just licked his... ‘Cub?’ he thought. His thoughts overflowed into words: “A CUB? What are you doing here? Who are you?” Then his mind cleared a little, “Where are the rest of you?”

“What rest of me? Oh.... you mean my pride don’t you?”

“Yeah, like I said: the rest of you.” He considered rising and walking around the cub, showing off his size and power. He decided not to bother; the cub wasn’t worth the effort. “Who’s your father?” If the cub lived close by, as was almost certain, then he was more than likely violating her father’s territory. That lion was Nengwalamwe’s main concern. If he was alone then Nengwalamwe might do worse than to challenge him and take control of his pride. He needed to milk the cub for information; to find out as much as possible about the pride’s male, or males, before deciding whether to challenge them or move on.

“My father...” The cub looked sad and alone, “He’s not here right now.”

Nengwalamwe saw the opportunity clearly, “So who looks after you?”

“Oh, I get by pretty well. You know I’m really older than I look.”

He looked at her carefully. She looked like a ten-month-old cub. She was still not adult, yet not totally dependent; she could not be living alone.

“Come on, you’ve got to have a mother, surely?”

“Oh yeah, ‘course!”

“And aunts?”

“Yeah...,” she sounded evasive, “well sorta.”

“So, where do you live? Where’s your pride now?” She sounded too trusting for her own good; he half expected her to lead him to them. She gave Nengwalamwe a clear picture of a small pride with no males, just right for a young lion like Nengwalamwe - provided the lionesses weren’t too old of course. If they were then maybe he wouldn’t stay around too long.

“Over there stupid!” She flicked her head round in the direction of the far off rock pinnacle. Between lay the river, plains, wetlands, kopjes, ridges, knolls and thickets. On those plains, herds peacefully grazed on the browning grass. Some places were darkened with prey; prey of every species Nengwalamwe had ever encountered. The terrain offered rich cover: shoulder high grasses, brush, trees, boulders, rises and gullies. A land so rich that lions should have been

falling over each other, yet this cub seemed to be saying that her pride was so weak as to be hardly be worth taking.

“What are you doing all the way out here? You must’ve come a long way from home. Don’t you know it’s dangerous for cubs to stray onto other pride’s land? Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“Dangerous? For me?” She laughed; a giggle as if Nengwalamwe had said something really stupid, “What other prides? Why should I worry about any other prides? You’re the first Lion I’ve seen for... well, ages and ages and ages and ages... and ages. And I’ve been looking hard.”

Nengwalamwe grew confused; how could this cub be telling the truth? She had to have been conceived somehow. What time was 'ages' to a cub? If she was right about there being no other prides then her father may have died in some accident or through sickness rather than in a border dispute or challenge. It didn’t occur to Nengwalamwe that he might have simply died of old age. Lions didn’t grow old, they never grew old, they died suddenly, and violently. The idea of an old lion was totally alien to Nengwalamwe. He never even thought of himself as ‘older’ than when he was a cub, he was simply a lion and that was all there was to it.

“But Cubbie, where are all the other prides? This place must be full of lion.”

She shook her head sadly, “Nope, no other prides, none, not one.”

“NONE? Come on now, don’t mess me about Cubbie, I ain’t come all this way for nothing.”

“Oh no, I’m not messing you about, honest.” She began to snivel sadly, “I only wanted to be friends. Can’t we be friends?”

Nengwalamwe looked at her, thinking back to the mountainside. He now knew what it was like to be alone. He raised a forepaw and rested his pads on her hunched shoulder. He moved his head over to hers. He rubbed his muzzle over her cheek gently. It didn’t matter that she was some other male’s cub; she had an instinct-disarming charm that cried out to be loved.

“I’m sorry; of course we can be friends. Just lay off calling me stupid. Err; do you think I can be friends with your mother too?”

She looked into his eyes blankly then wriggled out from under his paw. She gave him a piercing look and then dashed off down the rise. Before Nengwalamwe could get up to follow she had disappeared into the grasses.

“What did I say wrong?” he called as the rustling of the grass died down. “Aaah, I’ll find her again, I’ll soon pick up her scent.” He lifted his head and sniffed the air - nothing. He sniffed at the ground - nothing. He sniffed his paw that had lain on her shoulder - nothing - nothing except the warm, full richness of the savannah. The intricate blend of scents was just as it had been at the top of the mountain pass - no lion scent at all save his own. The dense sounds of a savannah morning rose up all around him; none were those of lion.

He looked up, turning his head to the distant rock. He stretched out his forelegs, shaking them gently, his paws splayed out on the ground ahead. He lifted his hindquarters and pulled his spine straight in an all-encompassing stretch. When he had drawn out the last of the stiffness from his limbs he padded his forepaws back toward his body, lifting himself so that he stood upright. He looked to the rock again. “That’s where she went, that’s where I’ve

got to go. That's what I came here for - that's why I'm here!" He lifted his head, opening his mouth wide and straightening his neck. He roared - a long, loud full roar, "Nengwalamwe's coming to save you all!"

At first Nengwalamwe's days and nights in this new land held many excitements and diversions: places to explore; animals to chase, roar at, and hunt; trees and rocks to mark. He chose a new 'favourite' place to sleep each fresh, bright new day from as many lay-ups as he had claws. He didn't think of having a territory, he wandered wildly. He always expected to eventually come across another male's scent border but found. Life seemed idyllic for a while, but the feeling did not last. Soon he had explored all the places he could find; had chased, roared at, and hunted all the different animals; had marked every tree and every crevice of every rock.

Nengwalamwe had never lived alone. He had had a few thoughts, as most young adolescents do, of running away and leaving his family far behind. He would be able to live how he liked, do whatever he wanted. Now he was able to live that dream, it was not at all as he had imagined. He could go where he liked, but he had no particular reason to go anywhere. He could do what he liked, but there was nothing he wanted to do. He could hunt when he liked and ate rather less often than he hunted. As an adolescent back in Kolata, his mother had insisted that he learn to hunt by joining his sisters, aunts and cousins. On other evenings he accompanied his father on his boundary patrols. He could wash when he liked - his mother and, to his credit, his father, had always impressed upon their growing son that no lioness would ever be interested in a lion who covered her back in savannah dust. He could sleep for as long as he liked - he liked that best of all. His mother could no longer nose him awkwardly under his ribs to rouse him. Sleeping whenever, wherever and how often he liked made him feel like a king, just like his father. Yet he felt an emptiness, which for a while he ignored, expecting he'd get used to it in time.

He began returning to the same spot to sleep. It took on his comforting scent and became his private part of the boundless savannah. It was as near as he could get to a place to call 'home'. Day merged into day, night into night, hunt into hunt, and sleep into sleep as the excitement of his newfound bachelor life wore off. He didn't have anyone, or anything, to talk to, and at sunset each day he heard no roars of his own kind: no males powerfully proclaiming their ownership of females and territory. The young lion was truly alone.

Nengwalamwe told himself that this mattered little; for the first time in his life he was free. He felt he was especially free of lionesses and all the trouble they had brought upon him. The worst had been Llasani, but she had only the most recent in a long line of lionesses that Nengwalamwe felt had wronged him. Even his mother, Melakwe, the only lioness who had ever really mattered to him, had shown that she did not really understand him. No matter how independent he felt, there were still times when he thought back to happier days. In all those days there was someone else there with him. For fleeting instants he imagined himself lying by his mother's side with his chin tucked over her foreleg while she licked his head and neck, her soft constant purring filling his ears. He remembered the sound fading and returning repeatedly as she licked down another swath of his fur. He forgave her everything just to feel it again. He was

even prepared to forgive his father just to be able to hear his protecting and comforting nightly territorial claims.

As social as lions are, it is eating that is closest to a lion's mind, while hunting is never far from a lioness'. Though Nengwalamwe wanted to eat, he decreasingly felt inclined to hunt. As such he was a typical lion, and typically a young lion at that. He regarded hunting as someone else's job. His mother's in fact, but she wasn't there for him.

The time comes however, when everyone has to find food for them self, and for Nengwalamwe that time had finally come. Looking around as he woke at sunset, as unsettlingly quiet as the evening before, he noticed the unhurried pace of life around him. Here and there small groups of zebra grazed gently, stopping only to gaze at him for a few seconds before moving quietly on. Around them wildebeest grumbled, grunting across the grass. Birds sat nonchalantly in distant trees, seemingly unworried by anything. Wherever the young lion looked there was prey, prey of every species he had ever imagined – leaping gazelle, snuffling warthog, chirping zebra, twitchy impala, bullish buffalo, dull-boring wildebeest, curve-ridden kudu, all were everywhere. He got up, stretched lazily and walked out, the tip of his tongue poking out slightly between his loosely opened night-black lips. As the lion wandered about the prey eyed him warily, even now unaccustomed to seeing a lion. His form, potential death walking, never filled less than a dozen staring, bewildered eyes.

In places, and Nengwalamwe visited a lot of places in his wanderings, there was new life, the first faltering steps of newborn wildebeest and zebra: moments so important that failure in them meant a life over almost before it had begun. Once, he idly watched a couple of young male cheetahs, two brothers in coalition probably, hardly to raise a sweat to stifle the breath of a couple of the night's zebra foals.

All this unfolded around the lion, a spectator on life, as he got to know his 'kingdom' as he began to think of it, but a king of what? Life on the rolling plains around him went on as it had for so long before he came. His presence was nothing to the plains, and for the most part to those who lived around him. They knew he wasn't much of a threat; one of the first lessons all young wildebeest learn is how to tell when a big cat is hunting.

He soon began to think that he had explored most of the thickets, or at least went around them. Climbed most of the kopjes, seen most of the rises and ridges, he'd even ventured fairly close to the river. He felt he knew more than enough about the mountains and forest so didn't venture anywhere near them. The only place he didn't explore, or even go anywhere near was the vast sundered rock pinnacle. Somehow it seemed too special for him, somewhere he didn't deserve to go there. In any case there was no need; he had everything he needed right where he was. When it began to fall down in front of him begging to be eaten, as a baboon seemed to have done, he felt sure that he had found his very own paradise.

The land was stunningly beautiful but as his mother had so often told him: 'Nengwe dear, you can't eat the scenery.' Though it was rich in game of every imaginable species, he longed for just one taste of Gemsbok, 'Just like mom used to catch.' They always eluded him. He had always avoided catching large game; he was just too big and clumsy to catch even a calf. Despite his

considerable size and strength, he lacked real pace in the chase. He concentrated his few hunting efforts on smaller prey species; often lying in wait for hours for some gazelle or other to stray his way rather than actively stalking. He would sometimes fall asleep in the long grasses only to wake up even more alone than ever. The savannah grazers had quietly moved on while he slept, leaving the plain around him empty. He did not care much when this happened: he had time on his paws. He had all the time under the sun.

Warthogs proved catchable enough, even if they took rather more effort than he'd have preferred to expend. They fought back, which spoilt the hunt. He never quite felt comfortable with eating such filthy animals. They left his lower mane covered in blood, dust and pad sized clods of dried mud. Large kills were too much trouble and he might forget where he left the part-eaten carcass. He was never able to dine twice on a kill that should have fed him for three or more days. Even his well-hidden small kills sometimes moved about. Was it possible that something was stealing his kills while his mane was turned? He had surprisingly little contact with scavengers and less fussy links in the savannah food chain. The few hyena he saw seemed very wary of him and usually ran off when approached. He wondered what had turned the bane of all lions into these timid and frightened creatures. At night he often heard the howling and baying of wild dogs but only once did he ever hear the chatter and yelps of a hyena pack and never the calls of lion.

Life, if dull, was reassuringly secure. His thoughts turned slowly to getting himself a pride with cubs and a few lionesses to look after and to hunt for them, and him

'Maybe lionesses are not all that bad,' he thought. 'So long as they keep their mouths shut and have a kill waiting for me when I get home.' To Nengwalamwe this was what every lion deserved, none more so than himself of course. His father said it was the lion's reward for coming along to brighten up the lionesses' otherwise dull lives. If they dared to step a claw out of line, like some lionesses he had known, then he would put them firmly in their place, just like his father. Nengwalamwe looked forward more and more to persuading a lioness or two to do what he wanted. He often thought about what might have happened after he had left his homeland, Kolata. In his mind he could see the cruelly beautiful Llasani cowering down before his father's stern gaze. She was begging for his forgiveness. If she were very lucky he would let her off with banishment for bringing him, his son, into disrepute. She might even come looking for her lost Nengwalamwe. She might yet stand in front of him again - a poor, lost little lioness with no friends in the whole world. Nengwalamwe wondered, casually and with little consideration of what it would actually mean, what he would say to her as he denied her of his protection and sent her away:

'I have no need of your deception and lies. Go now, before I kill you!'

'But my king, I would do anything if you would only forgive me. Save me! I have nowhere else to go, I have no one else but you.'

'I cannot be king to you, for you do not respect me nor do you obey my command. Be gone forever from my sight!'

In Nengwalamwe's dream the distraught lioness, her coat dusty, dull and ragged, her ribs showing beneath her undernourished, tick-ridden flanks,

dropped her head in despair. Then she turned and walked away slowly, crying and snivelling.

‘Yeah!’ He congratulated himself. ‘That’s the way to treat an evil little lioness like her! And if she won’t go I’ll just have to persuade her in the only way her type can understand.’

3. Nengwalamwe Alone

Nengwalamwe woke suddenly. A noise from the grass filtered into his unconscious and brought him cruelly out of sleep. Before the urge to yawn took him he looked about. The stillness of the afternoon was complete. Except for the restless impala down by the river's edge and the vultures lifting and circling from the tallest acacias, even the upper tips of ancient baobabs were still. The leaves of the trees above him shook. As Nengwalamwe looked up, a brilliantly bright blue and orange bird flapped noisily into the still air and climbed away. The lion yawned and slumped back on to his forelegs, rolling his head to one side to get more comfortable.

He tried to get back to sleep but the stifling heat made his legs uncomfortably damp and sticky. Through the stillness he thought he heard something... but what exactly was that sound? It was a crinkling, crumpling sound like a paw slowly pushing over the stalks of dry grass. He lay awake and listened, with his eyes still closed. For ten or more seconds he heard nothing. Then it came again; a small, delicate sound; a sound from behind him. He rolled over slowly as if still in sleep and tucked his head against his flank, flapping his lips as he rubbed his chin on his side.

The sound came again, a little closer still. A heart-thumping thought coalesced in his mind: was he was being hunted? Leopard? No, it wasn't their style and what sort of fool would it take to try to hunt an adult lion? Lioness? There had been no signs of any. He quickly dismissed that ridiculous idea. Hyena? No, no hyena would ever bother to creep up on a lion through cover, that was far too complex for them to understand, and anyway, the hyena he'd seen would never have the guts to hunt a lion. So, what could it be?

He prised his right eye open, forming a tiny crack through which he could dimly make out his surroundings. For a moment he saw nothing unexpected then the horizon moved. It rippled like the back of a lioness on the hunt. Then a terrifying thought struck him: could his father have caught up with him? He opened both eyes, for a second they were blinded by the light of the afternoon. He blinked repeatedly as his eyes adjusted, showing him flashes of a very young lioness. No, not a lioness - a cub, an almost adolescent cub; he was being stalked by nothing more than a cub!

"Ooo, you're awake..."

"What in the grasses do you think you're doing? I could have killed you!"

"Yeah, but you didn't did you? I wasn't going to pounce, honest I wasn't."

Nengwalamwe stared hard at the cub, he was sure he had seen her before. She stood just two of her lengths from him, but no matter how hard he tried he could not recall her scent. On days such as this, the air full of the heat of the savannah sun, her scent should have pervaded everything for many lengths around, yet he smelt nothing but the dry warmth of the grasses. Clearly she was an exceptionally clean cub. Even the fastidious Nengwalamwe could not mask his scent that well. Llasani had certainly been totally unable to mask hers, even if she had wanted to.

"Yali? Is that you?" Nengwalamwe blinked against the burning sun.

"Kinda."

“What’s ‘kinda’ meant to mean? What are you doing here anyway?”

“I did say I lived down here you know. Welcome to the Pridelands.”

“The what?”

“The Pridelands. That’s what we call this land.”

“Pride Lands - what... we?” Nengwalamwe grew worried, did this mean there was a pride of lions here? So he was on another pride’s lands after all. What would the males think of him? No, Nengwalamwe knew exactly what they would think of him. Yali was young, not yet a year old. Her father had to be around somewhere, somewhere close. “Does that mean there’s a... a pride here?”

“Well...”

“There is! There’s lions here!” He swished his head to one side in panic. “Do they know about me? That’s stupid - Yali, you know about me, they must do too. I must get away from here, I must go - now!”

“No, don’t go.” Yali’s look grew close to terror and her tail swayed powerfully from side to side. She seemed very frightened at the prospect of Nengwalamwe leaving so soon. “Please, we need you - we need another lion for the pride.” She was nearly crying. “You can’t go now. You can’t, you belong here.” She appeared a little calmer, “This is your home.”

Nengwalamwe stood up and shook his mane. He looked searchingly at the young cub standing before him. She seemed genuine enough, even though what little of her scent he could detect revealed nothing about her. Somehow she was already more than just someone to talk to. What was it about her that felled his natural suspicions? How was it that with her he dropped his defences and actually began to care?

He lowered his head and said quietly, “I won’t leave you.” He very gently shook his head. “I really won’t leave you. Now then, what’s frightened you so much? Having trouble with hyenas?”

Yali’s ears pricked up. She almost smiled.

“Not recently..., but we do need you. We need a lion to protect us.”

“Protect you? From what?” Another thought struck him: he had indeed not seen any lions, but what if there were lions here? Not many perhaps, just a few lionesses and cubs, including young Yali. Perhaps they had had a male that had died, killed perhaps by some deadly adversary who had left the lionesses too terrified to show themselves. Perhaps they were in hiding, somewhere away from the world. Nengwalamwe’s mind raced as he tried to think of all the places where lions might hide. He thought on: ‘Hide? We don’t hide from anything... but lionesses do to bear cubs. They like high rocky places with cracks where they can hide their newborns. It has to be close to water, it has to be safe...’

“Please Nengwe, please don’t leave us now. Please.” As Yali stopped speaking her ears turned to pick up some unexpected ripple in the blanket of background sounds. Nengwalamwe heard nothing except the slight scrunch of her pawfall amongst the grass as she suddenly looked away.

“HEY! My name’s Nengwalamwe, son of...!” But she was gone, running off down the eastern side of the ridge. ‘What’s she up to now? She looks as though she was being called by her mother!’ He wondered if he should follow her, or if she meant for him to stay where he was. Perhaps she would return later with her mother. He stood still and watched her run off, her form soon merging into the grass. She appeared to be heading for the massive rocks just to the north of

the waterhole. 'Rocks? Waterhole?' He considered for a moment, 'That's it. That's where they are, there on the rocks. That's where she lives!'

He began to walk up the rise towards the rocks, but soon broke into a gently flowing trot. He could not merge his form into the grass like Yali had done; he was much too large for that. He followed her trail. It soon became indistinct and he found himself running over knee-high grass. Even though her track had faded her route was distinct. It ran directly to the foot of a massive outcrop of towering rock: the very rock on the plain that Nengwalamwe had seen that first dawn high up in the mountains.

From the distance the rock seemed a pure pinnacle of solid unforgiving stone, with little promise of cover or shelter. As he approached he skirted west round a great field of boulders, only then beginning to appreciate the true extent of the rock. It was not just a pinnacle but a long 'L' stretching over a hundred and fifty metres north to south and rising to more than fifteen metres over most of its length. The tower at one end rose to almost 100 metres, higher than Nengwalamwe could comprehend, only in the mountains had ever been so close to such an incredibly sheer vertical face. This was surely the home of Yali's Pride. This was their rocky home. 'Surely,' he thought, 'there's got to be no end of caves and ledges up there. Any number of lions could hide in there and never be found.'

He drew close to the south-western corner where the rock rose sheer out of the savannah. There was no way to climb the claw-breaking near-vertical rock. If Yali had got up onto the rocks, it was certainly not there. Yet there were no tracks, no scent: no sign of any kind that any lions had ever passed this way. There were no breaks in the grass, no pad prints: nothing.

The sun on his hindquarters reminded Nengwalamwe that night was not far away. There was no obvious place to lie up. His hunger was growing, but was not yet strong enough to push him to the effort of catching another warthog. Nengwalamwe decided to forget about hunting: it could wait for another day. This, the great rock of Yali's pride, was much more exciting. 'No,' he thought as he sniffed around along the south side, 'that's far too many words: Yali's pride's rock. Or perhaps just Pride Rock... yes, that's it, Priderock.'

Further on he thought he could smell the faintest echo of a lion's scent, not a cub's but the much more obvious acrid scent of an adult male. It spurred him on to further exploration as it must have been left by the pride's last, and now lost male. That meant they were here, but where? He thought about calling to them but he knew that if they really were in hiding then the last thing they would want to hear would be a lion roaring the place down attracting all the animals on the savannah. There would be time enough for roaring when he was their male, and what a place this would be to roar from! It wasn't going to be easy. He had first to get up and among the ledges of this great Priderock and find Yali and the lionesses.

As the evening crept over the savannah Nengwalamwe crept length by length round the great curve of the southern end of the rock, always searching for a way up; always searching for any sign of the lionesses he knew must lie above silently watching him. He risked a few rumbling chuffs but he gave up when he heard no reply other than the echoes from the hard bulk above him.

He grew more and more tired as he searched. By full sunset he was growing weary of this new game. The air began to chill noticeably, yet the rock seemed to hold the heat of the day, warming him. It was almost as if it was reaching out and brushing its head against him. He felt no threat from the rock, he felt welcomed by it. He felt it was asking him to join it. This lure held his attention long enough for him to reach the far side of the rock, its long side. It was much more than a mere kopje, this was an almost unbelievably complex series of rocks, boulders and stones of every shape and size dominated by a long promontory that shot out reaching for the clouds some ten or more metres over the plain. Yet even that was dwarfed by the upward thrust of the tower, a seemingly unassailable mass of solid stone. The promontory seemed to have fallen away from the tower, collapsing onto the plain below strewn boulders three or more lengths long on all sides as easily as Nengwalamwe parted the grasses. They made Nengwalamwe feel small. The great rock tower made him feel tiny but welcomed and wanted. This then, he felt, was surely his great Priderock.

Amongst all the confusion of boulders he could just make out a route, twisting and rough, leading to the flat of the promontory. He had at last found the way up. In seconds he leapt up the winding path and inside of a minute stood on the flat area in front of the massive tower. It felt almost like having arrived home. Nengwalamwe thought that this would be the perfect place to live, even if there turned out to be no lionesses around. It was as perfect a home for a pride as he had ever imagined and, lionesses or no, it was all his.

The lion spent most of the night searching along every path and in every cave of the rock, there was even one that drove right through the outcrop, opening onto a wide ledge quite invisible from the western savannah below. Its entrance was below the ledge that ran along the eastern side of Nengwalamwe's Priderock, so that he had to jump down into its shadowy, draughty, echoing space. The earth that accumulated in some of the rocks' hollows was sufficient to support small trees, even a miniature acacia: a perfectly foreshortened version of its savannah cousins.

He searched and scented every cave save one: the one that promised to be the biggest and most exciting. It lay at the foot of the tower and probably extended far into its bulk. Nengwalamwe could find no way in, its entrance was blocked by a mass of sharp rocks far heavier than Nengwalamwe could possibly hope to move. 'I'm gonna need an elephant to move that lot.' He cast around. 'No, a whole herd of them! That other cave has an entrance from the other side which you can't see, then maybe there's another way in. Perhaps they're in there... somewhere?'

By the first light of morning he was certain he had searched the whole rock, except the great cave. He could guess its size from the echoes of his scrabbling and the cool air that oozed through the rocks, but there was only the faintest hint of lion's scent on that air. Yet there it was, it was the only scent of any kind, apart from the lion's down at the base, that he caught all that night. He began to wonder if the young cub Yali had not been leading him on some kind of wild cattle egret hunt. Possibly she had been deliberately pulling his tail to hide from him where her mother really lived. Nengwalamwe lay down on the

promontory and set to thinking. In a few short minutes, just as the sun's flaming glow crept above the distant horizon he fell asleep for the first time in half a day.

Nengwalamwe woke to aching hunger. He licked his off-foreleg and looked about. The rock appeared very different in the full light of day. He could now take it all in one look. Yet it still appeared never-ending to the young lion, much as the mountains had done. Whereas up there he had given up hope of ever leaving, here he was reassured by the rock's inviting warmth and massive permanence. A sudden, very unfamiliar and unsettling thought struck Nengwalamwe: for a moment he thought about lying on the promontory watching his cubs play in the safety of the rock. 'I must be getting very hungry. What a nightmare, I had better find something to eat - fast.' He was pulled away by the unmistakable sounds of the climax of a Wild Dog hunt drifting up from the plain to the east of the rock. There may not have been any lionesses to share a kill with but that was no reason not to find an easy meal. As his father used to say, "A good kill is any you don't have to make for yourself." Dogs would present no challenge. Many a time Nengwalamwe had been with his father when they had come across a dog kill. He knew there would most likely be no more than six dogs. A quick roar and maybe a swipe or two of a forepaw and the meat would be his; dogs were no match for lions. Hyenas could be more difficult, even to the point of being dangerous. They were far more persistent, they bit harder and their chatter was far more annoying but dogs gave many lions easy pickings. Young males just didn't tell their mother too much about it: if they knew what was good for them.

The dog's howls grew in volume and frequency. It seemed to Nengwalamwe that they must be quite close, though he had not yet realised that the rock magnified and distorted the sounds of the savannah. He got up and sniffed the air but scented nothing.

Within a minute the young lion, perfectly preened with his beautiful bouncing mane flowing over his shoulders, loped down the rocks and was striding out over the savannah, sure of satiating his hunger at the expense of a few mangy wild dogs. The sounds of the dogs grew louder and appeared to change direction, moving more round to his left, as he drew away from the rock. Now it was clear that the sounds came a kopje a little way off but clearly visible over the scattered bushes. He broke into a trot. Dogs are quick eaters, gulping down huge hunks of flesh before dashing off back to their den where they would feed the pack mate and the pups. Nengwalamwe knew he had to hurry if he was not to end up with just bones. As he neared the kopje he slowed to a gentle walk and even stopped to check his paws were still clean. 'Right Dad, now I've got to do it for myself. Pity you ain't here to see this. There again, if you've talked to Llasani then perhaps it's a good thing you aren't here,' he thought, smiling mischievously. 'Sorry Dad.' He shrugged, lifting his shoulder blades so that they rose well above his spine, even though, or indeed because, there was no one nearby to see. Then he moved off towards the lowest slope of the nearest rock.

A few seconds later he stood motionless on the rounded top of the rock and looked down onto five wild dogs, their deeply coloured patchwork coats mingling into one as they huddled intently around a partially devoured gazelle. They had not heard the young lion's approach. As he slipped down the rock, Nengwalamwe was careful to keep his claws tightly in to avoid them clicking on the hard rock

surface. It afforded him no grip other than what little his pads gained but he wanted to maintain surprise. He decided to risk jumping down the last metre to the open savannah floor, but still the dogs showed no sign of having heard him. Either they were deaf or stupid; probably the latter. He closed to a couple of lengths and stood for a moment before rumbling quietly to announce his presence, just as his father had done. He was confident that the dogs would turn round, whimper pathetically and scatter leaving him to their kill. His father's voice once more came to his mind, "The weak have only themselves to blame."

Not a single dog moved in response to his subtle call. 'Deaf AND stupid? I can get to like living here,' he thought. He growled, loud enough for even deaf dogs to hear him. One pricked up his ears and lifted his head from the kill. Nengwalamwe thought on, 'Yep, deaf and stupid. Oh, this is gonna be fun!' The dog turned slowly to face him and stared at him incredulously.

"Bleedin'ell! 'Ere, Eddie, would you look at this!" The dog swiped at his neighbour's hindquarters with his forepaw. Eddie was clearly reluctant to stop gulping down the flesh of the gazelle's shoulder. "Eddie, get your snout out of it mate! This is really somefin'."

Nengwalamwe began to wonder if these dogs were quite the same as those he had met before. For a start he had never seen a wild dog that knew so much as a single word of his language, let alone such an almost comprehensible dialect. The dog's closest companion, presumably Eddie, belatedly turned round to face the lion. His face was bloody from the kill. He licked his cheek noisily with his long tongue before speaking.

"Well lads, look what George has found. If it ain't a lion..."

"Naa mate, look at it. He ain't no norm'l lion. Hey you! Is that a mane or what?"

Nengwalamwe stood still, taken totally by surprise by the dogs; he felt rather put out.

"Yeah, he's just a Dandy Lion! Did you ever see anythin' so dolled up as that?" George laughed; something Nengwalamwe had never heard any other animal do. "Ere darlin' do yo'wanner see what a real male can do?" George thrust his hindquarters forwards and back repeatedly. Nengwalamwe stared back, at first confused then incensed by the dog's insult. Inside, the pressure built up into a roar that should have put the dogs to instant flight. It had quite the opposite effect.

"Is that it pretty kitty? Oi! Charlie and Mary, get him out of here. He's getting on my wick." One of the other dogs stopped feeding and joined George and Eddie in staring ominously at Nengwalamwe, then jumped forwards at him with its ears flat and head down. Another, with a heavily spotted coat, immediately joined it. Nengwalamwe neither knew nor cared which of them was Mary or Charlie, both adopted the typical head down, ears forward posture of dogs on the hunt. Nengwalamwe stood his ground for a moment before realising with some alarm that he was the 'kitty' and that he was their prey. He hastily backed away. George followed his two pack colleagues with his mouth hanging open and his tongue wagging in time to his panting breath. His ears were pricked and he held his head and tail high and alert.

The lead dog bared its teeth and let out a rasping 'Grrrrr'. Nengwalamwe watched its teeth shine in the sun. It was only at the last moment, from the

corner of his eye, he saw George leap for his neck. His teeth were in full view in his wide-open jaws. Nengwalamwe just managed to tear his neck away from between the dog's jaws before it had had a chance to bite deep. Manes, he had now found, were not just for show, they had other functions, such as hiding the true extent of a lion's neck. As the lion drew away he turned and lashed at the dogs with his forepaw. He felt no contact. As soon as he touched firm ground he pushed away and leapt forwards fearing that the dogs would try to grab at his hindquarters and pull him back. The dogs seemed surprised that he was trying to run away and for a moment they faltered, unsure of what to do next.

"Gerr'outo'it! You ain't nothin'. Do'yer hear?" shouted George. "This is our turf!" the dog growled before twisting to his paws and jumping up from the ground.

Nengwalamwe ran back up the kopje rock as fast as he could. As he reached the top he heard Eddie's gruff voice followed by a yelp of pain.

"Sod you! Shift it you lot. Go on! Get off yer arses and get after 'im!"

Nengwalamwe dare not stop running. As he ran he clearly heard the clicking of the dogs' claws on the rock as they scrambled after him. He had got away with barely a scratch, certainly not enough to put off any of the more friendly lionesses he hoped he would soon encounter. He wanted his coat to stay as unblemished, clean and unsullied by battle scars as his father's had been.

He ran on back to his rock without stopping, knowing that he could hide in one of the many caves for as long as it took for the dogs to give him up. That could well be most of the rest of the day. He ran fast, easily stretching the gap between him and the closest dog to twenty or more lengths before he reached the shadow of the rock. He expected them to follow him up the boulders snapping at his heels: the inedible in pursuit of the impeccable. He half-expected to use all his strength in leaping up to one of its highest points to escape them, or worse, to turn and strike them down. However as he reached the flat of the rock he risked a glance to the plain below back, only to see the dogs sitting, gasping and panting for breath, well away from the base of the rock. They had not followed him up the boulder path; indeed they appeared fearful of even approaching the rock. The lion slunk away but returned a few moments later to watch them as they rested after the chase. They were now sitting down; waiting in the heat with their tongues hanging from their gaping mouths. He slipped away again. Later still, the three were lying down, looking up at him with mournful eyes.

So it went on through the rest of the day. Nengwalamwe began to fear that he would be trapped up on the rock, until his hunger forced him to brave the dogs once more. He felt quite secure on the rock, he even tried to get some sleep, but he could not sleep for long on such an empty stomach. The morning turned into afternoon and in turn into evening. He looked around for something to occupy his mind and his claws. He went once more to the pile of rocks, wondering where they had come from. It was obvious that they were the same rock as the tower itself, hard and smooth, but he could determine very little else about it. Powerful thoughts grew in him of getting through them and into the cave beyond. If he had thought about it further he would have realised that it was impossible for a lion to move such heavy stones, yet he felt that he must try, and try, and try again.

As, at last, the sun fell he heard distant calls of a wild dog pack, possibly his captors. He left the unyielding rocks for a while and slipped back to see if the dogs were still below. He was surprised to see that they had left, there was no sign of them; he was once more alone. Within minutes he was once more fast asleep on the flat of the rock. It had been an unusual and exhausting day.

4. The Meeting

Nengwalamwe woke suddenly in the chill of the night. For a few moments he felt lost and disorientated as deep shadows crept toward him, oozing and slipping over the confused surfaces of the loose rocks that had so fascinated him a few hours before. It was almost as if the darkness that lay beyond the impenetrable boulder barrier was leaking out to claim him and draw him back into its icy heart. He felt the cold licking his back while from below the heat of the day poured from the mass of the rock slope to challenge the chill of the darkness. He felt torn between the heat of the day and the cool of the night.

His nocturnal instincts were slowly but steadily taking him back. He did not fear the dark; it was something that he embraced as an old friend. He was so familiar with the night that it held less uncertainty than the brightness of day. He had spent most of his waking hours in darkness. He welcomed its anonymity, its cloaking cover under which he could move more freely than in the harsh glare of savannah daylight. He knew his curiosity would never be satisfied until he had ventured and explored beyond the sharply jagged rock wall. He also felt that he might never be courageous enough to enter and explore its deepest recesses. He wanted to go in so much that he feared to do so, as it might engulf him. The rocks that lay between him and the cave just taunted him. They challenged his authority, his intellect and all that his mane stood for. They dared him to go further while barring his way - he knew he had to find a way past, even if it meant clawing the stone away grain by grain.

Through the thick of night came a sound Nengwalamwe had not heard for some moons, a sound that filled him with a mixture of pleasure and pain and set his pulse racing. For a moment he was not certain if he had really heard it at all. When it came again, rolling over the plain he felt a gust of life flood over him. His ears strained forward to pick up any traces of the sound he thought he had heard, but there were no more; nothing except the grumbles of a distant herd of wildebeest, unsettled by something unseen.

Nengwalamwe half dropped his ears and let his hind paws relax as he lay still on the warm slope of the rock. A few moments later he reassured himself that he had heard nothing but the call of a distant leopard for its cub.

He turned his ears back but dared not drop them to lie flat on his head. He took two deep breaths, filling his chest with the cool, fresh night air. He wished the tense pounding of his heart would subside as it filled him with surging energy and ripped away any hope of sleep. His back grew cold and clammy as his tension; similar to that he experienced as he prepared for the final leap at his prey; began at last to ebb away. Then, from the most distant edge of the darkness it came again, faint but unmistakable. This time he was sure that it was not a leopard. It was the call of a lioness guarding her kill. Nengwalamwe's pulse rose instantly and pounded in his mind, forcing him fully awake. He had to leave the rock and search for the source of the call. No matter how much Nengwalamwe tried to deny it, he was a social animal; he could not live cut off from his own kind for long. Now Nengwalamwe knew was no longer alone.

The sun began its daily climb into the sky. The herbivorous inhabitants of the dry grasslands that were the plains of the Pridelands allowed themselves some relaxation from the tension of night. With the coming of day came the realisation that they had survived the dangers of the darkness and the unseen predators that lay hidden within its depths.

Not all had survived; to the east, close to the gorge that rent the Pridelands in two, a wild dog pack clustered noisily around what was left of an adolescent hartebeest. They ate urgently, gulping down great hunks of still warm flesh ripped off the bone by a flick of the head. They remained alert to the nearby pacing of a pair of hyena who waited impatiently, watching. Suddenly one of the dogs, frustrated at being shut out of the feast, decided that the hyenas had watched for too long. She rushed at them yelping madly, her tail high and ears pointed. A couple of her more sated relatives looked up from their meal. They shared her feelings and rose to join the chase. They did not have to go far; the hyenas turned and loped off without any signs of resistance. Within seconds the dogs returned to their kill.

Elsewhere an adult gemsbok had shared the fate of the hartebeest. It had not died exhausted at the end of the dog's relentless pursuit. Its end had been quick and clean, but lung-burstingly painful. It had died fighting for breath as a lioness crushed its throat in her jaws. However these were isolated islands of violent struggle and conflict on the otherwise calm sea of the plains.

A lone lioness padded resolutely, hungry but not intent on hunting. She walked at an even and unhurried pace; each step clearly separated from the last. As she lifted each paw she allowed her pads to roll off the ground beneath. Each hung limply at the end of her leg for a moment before she swung them forward and down to make the next contact with the earth, placing them precisely in the pawfall of the one in front. At every fourth paw fall she hesitated momentarily, though if she felt any discomfort her expression did not show it. Her experienced and hardened gaze was fixed on the way ahead. It revealed nothing of the emotions and feelings of the lioness within.

Her coat, once a rich glossy cub-spot mottled sunset brown above underfur of purest light sand, hung loosely, dulled by world-worn age. Countless small groups of healed parallel scratches marked her shoulders and sides. She had long since forgotten the source of most of them. Her ears, greying but still dark chocolate at their tips and behind, stood easy. Between her lips, partially held open to allow her to more easily take each breath in the growing heat, her teeth showed browned and thin and seemingly brittle. The dulled once piercing points had glowed white, but now they reflected little of the undiminished spirit that still burned within her. Her time-hardened, crack-crazed pads held her firm, feeling little now, felt all before. The animals she passed knew her, or knew of her, and saw that she was not in the mood for hunting. Her hearing remained sharp; the distant sounds of mother zebra telling their foals not to underestimate this oldest of lionesses still caught in her dark ears.

A few of the individuals she passed turned in alarm as she closed, but none raised their voice to sound a warning. She continued onwards without hesitation. The only sounds were a hesitant stutter of hooves and low muffled grunts. She knew where she was heading and why, her age may well have dulled

her coat but not her mind. She had had an eventful life even though her steady progress suggested she might have always lived her life at such a subdued pace.

Her name was Shaha, though it had not always been so. She had taken the name years before as she followed in the family tradition as a teller of sunset tales to cubs. It had been a long time since she last had had any cubs to entertain. The last was her own daughter, Falana, but she was years out of cubhood. It was to join Falana that Shaha was walking; in response to her call that signalled the successful end of her lone hunt.

The two lionesses knew the abundant land well. They had both been born there. They had only recently returned after a year in the sparse grazing of the high plateau far to the east. Their prey, the vast herds of zebra, wildebeest and other antelopes that roamed these plentiful, fertile plains, had moved on, forcing Shaha and her daughter to follow in search of food. The herds led them back into the long cold shadow of a barren towering rock that loomed over their long, pain filled memories. Hunger is a powerful force, powerful enough to drive those uncomfortable memories from Shaha for a time at least. All that interested her was a share of her daughter's kill, a kill that still lay some way off. Her thoughts of food suppressed more than just her painful memories. She passed the trunk of a dead tree left to crumble on the savannah floor after a drought many years before. Dulled by her preoccupations rather than her age, her nose failed to detect the faint but distinctive five day old scent of a young male lion.

Falana called out impatiently over the plain, "This is getting beyond a joke. Mother, where are you?" There was no immediate need for any concern. So far there was no sign that her fresh kill, the gemsbok lying by her hind paws, had yet attracted any of the numerous scavengers that roamed the plains for carrion. The tip of her tail touched the carcass' unnaturally twisted neck. The antelope's last view had been that of the clear morning sky.

A warm drip of blood trickled down the back of the lioness' nearhind leg. She turned her head to look back along her right flank. She saw that blood had begun to well up from the gashes left by her teeth in the gemsbok's neck. It was dripping steadily onto her leg. She dropped and shook her head slowly, closing her eyes as she turned back. She chuffed to herself quietly. She stood square and firm, not stepping forwards nor moving her legs away from the blood that began to congeal in her fur. After a few seconds she raised her head and opened her mouth to roar to her absent mother once more: "Come on! Get a move on! I've waited enough already!"

"That's from over..." but Nengwalamwe could not match the apparent direction to any ground feature visible against the intense low shafts of early morning sunlight. "Ahh, what does it matter? It's only a lioness." He smiled for a few seconds and then looked at his fore legs and paws. Suddenly he reached down to lick a black spot from the fur of his paw. 'Ah well,' he thought, 'as its wet I might as well just check my mane.' He reached down and licked the back of his

leg again, slightly above the paw joint, and turning it over, reached up to the top of his head. He pushed his head forwards while holding his overturned paw steady, running it through the length of his mane. He repeated this four times, leaving a ribbon of depressed clinging hair that he felt sure would soon dry in the sun.

He jumped up and stepped forwards before seeing the back-breakingly sheer to the cracked and shard-strewn base of the rocks below. He blinked and gingerly stepped back a few paces before turning with a jump, launching himself back down the slope to the tantalising rock pile. He gave it a short piercing look and thought as he turned at its foot, 'You've not beaten Nengwalamwe yet. You'll see.' Then he surged away, bounding over the overgrown boulders that lead from the slab of the promontory.

A couple of seconds later he reached clear ground and picking up speed, ran off over the short, browned dry grass towards the source of the roar. It shouted 'food' and, though not quite so insistently, or so Nengwalamwe thought, 'company'.

When she heard her daughter's impatient call Shaha let her legs and paws walk on for a moment, not wanting to break her rhythm. 'Falana - I'm coming, don't lose your tail.' She looked to where the call had come: a low rise just ahead topped by scattered, grey, weathered stones no bigger than a lioness' paws. It seemed likely that Falana was waiting just out of view beyond the summit. She stopped and looked back, behind and to both sides to check that nothing was following. She was concerned about attracting scavengers and other opportunist feeders.

All around, the savannah lay still as the air filled with threads of steamy mist in the first heat of morning. Her ears pricked and she wondered if she heard, against the incessant haze of morning sounds, the crunch and crackle of heavy padded pawfall some distance behind her. She strained her head against her flank but heard nothing more unusual than the beat of now distant hooves of gemsbok on the hard ground of the plain. 'So that's what she's brought down,' she thought as she turned back and set off up the rise. 'Falana, you're good. You're very good, but don't ever think you know it all girl. Life's too short to go throwing it away.'

As she crested the summit she caught sight of her daughter. The back of her head and her pronounced black spinal line showed plainly in the backlight. Equally plain was the dramatic broken line that showed red down from her shoulder to below her rib cage. Shaha stopped the instant she saw the wound: her kill had not died quietly.

Detecting a familiar scent on the breath of wind from the rise Falana turned to her mother, trying to show that there was no cause for any alarm.

"And where were you, Mother? I thought you said you were going to stay close? How long did you take to get here, huh?"

“I came as soon as I heard your call. What more do you want? You’re too old for me to hold your paw.” Shaha’s tone softened, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” replied Falana pointedly.

“That wound looks painful. You had better clean it up, it’ll soon go bad.”

“OK, OK, I’ll see to it later, all right? Now then, can we eat now?” She turned to the kill without waiting for a response. She crouched down to break through the kill’s hide with her teeth.

“What would you do if I were a lion? You wouldn’t turn your back on a lion like that.”

Falana paused and chuckled quietly. “I certainly wouldn’t crouch down with my back to you like this, that’s for sure! Come on; let’s eat while it’s hot.” She crouched lower, turning her head to match the contour of the kill’s haunch.

Shaha saw a ripple of discomfort flow through her daughter: her sides heaving as her breath shortened. She knew better than to expect Falana to do anything about the wound for herself, even though it would clearly trouble her for some days. Shaha hoped there would be time during their dozes through the full heat of the day for her to clean it for Falana.

Shaha thought that as the gemsbok had clearly put up strong resistance they had better give it the respect a fallen adversary deserved. Falana brought her instinct to bear on the carcass, opening it over a length of half a metre and began tearing away the flesh of its haunch. Shaha settled beside her daughter, laying full length. She began to sate her gnawing hunger with the warm, bloody flesh.

For a few minutes the pair ate intently. Occasionally Falana pulled her head back sharply, knocking her mother who responded rapidly with a toothy growl or a shove of her foreleg. Shaha felt her daughter’s tail slap hard on her hindquarters. She looked behind, raising a hind paw and, when the sting came again, thumped it down. Falana cried out in confused pain.

“Aeeeergh! Get off!”

“Well now girls. Thank you so much for keeping it hot for me; and the gemsbok too.”

Falana totally forgot the pain and turned her head sharply to look behind. When she saw from whom the voice had come she tore her tail from beneath her mother’s paw and tucked it neatly behind her.

“Which rock did you just crawl out from?” She snapped, “What do you want?”

“I’ve been here a while or so and I want to make you happy, but first...”

“Get out of here! Come on, move your tail! This is my kill.”

The lion stood firm with his head up, his mane flowing with each slow breath.

“Now then, is that any way to treat a lion? Now you two - you had better step aside so that I can share this kill with you.”

Falana’s ears turned forwards. Her eyes, almost as yellow as the sun, burned into the lion. She had worked hard and suffered for the gemsbok and there was no way she was going to step aside for anyone. Not even for this young and admittedly handsome male lion who must have weighed at least a quarter as much again than she did. She held herself low and, turning her forequarters away from the kill, slid her body tightly round, advancing on the lion who stood

close to the top of the rise. The fur rose on her back. With bared her teeth and exposed foreclaws, she closed on the stranger. For a few moments he seemed surprised that she dared to threaten him, and then he began to laugh.

“Oh, so you like to play hard to get, do you lioness? I can play that game too, if you want - but I really think you...,” he paused with widening eyes. He grew agitated as Falana, no more than a length from him, stopped and growled fiercely. He shuffled uncomfortably from paw to paw, shaking his mane and twitching his tail. “Err, I think you may be going a little too...” He never managed to finish the sentence. Falana sprang at him with the full force of her forequarters, pushing up irresistibly as her head hit his exposed neck. “ge - eggghft!” choked the lion as the force of Falana’s spring threw him up and over violently on to his back. He became disorientated, his eyes desperately trying to find the horizon. The ground shook as he landed heavily on his back, his spine crashing down onto the slope of the rise.

She pulled her foreclaws tight, sending searing, stabbing pains shooting into his shoulder. He gasped for breath as Falana’s jaws exerted a sharp pressure on his neck. She scrabbled her heavy clawed rear paws on his hindquarters as she fought for another hold. She felt his heart pounding through his hot fur pressing against her chest. The lion’s eyes closed tightly and he froze beneath her. She felt her victim’s helplessness and increased the downward pressure with her hind paws.

“No!” He croaked. “I don’t...”

Falana pressed again with her off hind.

“No! You win - you can... have it!”

She stared hard at the lion beneath her. His breath, surprisingly sweet, washed over her forehead in short, increasingly shallow pulses. She eased her jaws open and the lion gulped for air. She let his semi-asphyxiated neck drop from her teeth, but she did not let him rise to his paws.

“What do you want?” she scowled.

“I -” he coughed dryly between urgent gasps for air, “I was hungry.”

Falana was taken aback. For all the lion’s great appearance he was lying helplessly under her claws, she could taste his blood on her teeth and feel his wounded flesh under her claws and what was this? Was he afraid of a lioness?

“I was just,” he sniffed sadly, “hungry.”

“You want my kill? You want it do you? Do You? Go on, say it!”

The lion blinked at her face, dark against the brightness of the sky, and sniffed again, “Please, may I share your kill?”

She growled loudly and extended her claws a little further into the lion’s flesh.

“Falana!” called Shaha firmly.

Falana drew her head up and pulled her off forepaw from the lion’s shoulder. She did not look across to her mother but after a moment folded back her ears.

“Falana! Let him alone! Let him get up!”

For a second she remained motionless, weighing up the consequences of her mother’s sharp interjection, before lifting herself up slowly from the lion’s sprawling mass. As she released him from under her hind paws she swiped at his

muzzle with a forepaw. The flash of white and sand across his face brought a whimper and he clamped his eyes tight shut.

“Aaah - you’re not worth wasting energy over!”

“Falana!” Shaha growled firmly, “Leave him.” She turned to the lion, who seemed fearful of even rolling back over onto his paws. “It’s all right. We won’t hurt you;” she turned to Falana, “will we?”

Falana growled in vague agreement, padding back in agitation to her mother’s side. The lion’s eyes asked pleadingly to be allowed to regain some of his dignity and stand up on his four paws again. “Get up - get up.” Shaha, almost smiling at him, raised a forepaw with each ‘up’.

Falana ignored the stranger and set back about the kill roughly.

Shaha continued, “Who are you and what do you want here?”

The lion, still on his back, rocked his paws back and forth in the air twice. The second time he continued the movement, rolling on to his side and, when his paws contacted the ground, right over back onto all fours. Once up, he shook his mane in a vain attempt to clear the dirt and dry grass that betrayed his defeat.

“I’m...” he shook again, “Nengwalamwe; son of Nengwala.”

“And?”

“And... I want to eat.” He paused for moment then added hurriedly, “Please. If you don’t mind that is.” He managed something approximating a half-smile. Shaha could see that this was something of an act, probably a deception put on to ingratiate him. There was still a scent of defiance about him. She could also tell he was unlikely to repeat the word ‘please’. He looked as though he had lost a battle in a war that had barely begun.

“If you stay there and behave I think there might be something left after we have finished. Yes Falana?”

Falana noisily tore off a great chunk of flesh in an exaggerated fashion as much as to stress to this Nagwalm... or whatever, that she was quite capable of causing him pain. “Yes, well, you just stay there Neng...”

“Nengwalamwe,” he said firmly, eyeing Falana suspiciously.

“Ah yes. Nen-gwa-lam-we,” said Shaha pre-empting her daughter. She turned away from him and rejoined her daughter at the kill. Both presented their backs to the now silent young lion. The elegant fullness of Falana contrasted sharply with the bony angularity of Shaha whose fur seemed borrowed from some other, rather bigger, lioness.

A short time later Falana felt she had to make sure the lion... no, the cub was behaving himself. She had heard slight sounds of him moving and wondered what he might be up to. She glanced back to see him lying down with his forelegs stretched straight out in front of him towards her. He was looking rather too intently at her hindquarters. She snarled at him angrily, “What do you think you’re looking at?” She adjusted her tail to ensure that it continued straight on and down the line of her spine.

The young lion seemed taken by surprise and stood awkwardly and turned, only to lie down again facing up the slope of the rise. Shaha paused and watched her daughter who turned back to the meat complaining and grumbling under her breath, “He’s just asking for trouble looking at me like that. It’s bad enough he wants my meat, let alone...” She stopped and dropped her head to the kill as she met her mother’s gaze. Peace, of sorts, settled over the uneasy trio.

Falana made a point of gorging herself on the gemsbok so that she felt full and bloated. She wondered if this is being a hundred days with cub might feel like, 'Someone remind me never to lie for a lion.' She stood up heavily, pausing for her meal to rearrange itself. 'Ha! He's had to wait for his meat, that's for sure.' She stepped away, feeling uncomfortably unsteady. She turned to the lion, her eyes closed, "Oowh - I won't eat for a week! Mother, are you done yet?"

"Stop that Falana. He's gone."

Falana opened her eyes and stared at the empty space where the lion had been. Neither of them had heard him get up, still less leave. She looked about; lifting her head high over her mother's to get a better view. There was no sign of his flowing mane, his powerful shoulders, his unmarred flank fur or his smooth and flexible tail. Falana rushed as best she could with splayed hindlegs to the top of the rise, her stomach swaying rhythmically beneath her. The effort made a little of the gemsbok catch in the back of her throat. She stood and forced it back down. Then she looked to the now brilliantly lit savannah. For a moment she could see nothing but the herds her mother had passed through before their meal. Then, picked out in the distance by the early morning light, she caught a glimpse of the young lion's back amongst a scattering group of zebra. He was heading for the waterhole.

"At least that's the last we'll see of him," she remarked caustically.

"Falana, I wouldn't be too sure about that. I don't think he's the sort of lion to give up without a fight."

Falana looked back to her mother, closing her eyes, sighing and shaking her head.

"Oh no... that's all I need!"

5. The Waterhole

Hooves pounded and rumbled. Dust billowed and swirled. Zebra scattered in alarm as Nengwalamwe swept in among them, growling and snarling angrily. The barks of the herd drowned under the lion's roars. He rushed a couple of the stragglers, swiping ineffectively at their hindquarters as they kicked up their hooves and accelerated away. Knowing from bitter experience that the lion was not hunting did nothing to reduce their fear or their exertion.

The lion thrashed left and right as the stragglers split away from him. In a few seconds they had escaped his rage and were running; the herd splitting to either side of the waterhole. Most dropped down the slope to the left, weaving amongst the low scrub; the rest pounded over the summit of the rise. The waterhole cut into the side of the rise, it was bordered by a shallow cliff on one side and flowed into the plain on the other. During the rains it extended to a paw-shallow marsh, now, with the rains overdue, there was precious little muddy water left.

Already the head of the surging herd was beginning to coalesce from the slopes onto the open plain beyond. Nengwalamwe slowed and stopped, his chest heaving, his mouth wide open. He stared at the zebra as they thundered away across the bare banks of the waterhole. The dust hung thick.

"You're nothing but a load of dung beetles! Come back and be eaten!" he roared. "What is it with this place? Don't none of you know how to behave to a lion: Falasha, Shana, the whole lot of you!" He sat back, exhaling heavily. Then, to one side, he saw a olive baboon sitting alone no more than ten lengths away, "What do you think you're looking at bald-arse?" The baboon stared hard at him for a moment then grunted haughtily and scuttled off chattering. His arms and legs, so out of proportion to his body, reminded Nengwalamwe of his younger brother Talashi. He almost managed a smile; then it melted and he dropped down onto the earth, filling himself with memories.

The morning grew stifling, the rains were late this year and the earth was cracked and dusty. Soon the winds would come, the rains would fall in their wake. When they did, the earth would rise up into great dust storms that scoured the savannah, until the sun returned to beat down and starve the ground of water. The waterhole had dried to a shallow muddy pool. Nengwalamwe's outburst had left him thirsty. He had lain alone for over an hour, baked by the sun as he wallowed in his memories.

He looked up, then all around. He was alone. He rose, forequarters first, placing his paws and stretching his forelegs out straight ahead. His hind rose up forming a wedge sloping down to his forepaws. He yawned and then brought his forelegs back under his body, placing his paws fore and aft almost in a line directly under his shoulders. He looked around again. As he was still alone, he opened his mouth and licked his dry lips. He blinked, dampening his eyes a little, before trotting off towards longer grass that lay between him and the waterhole.

He had gone some twenty paces when he suddenly noticed something grey sitting on the ground directly ahead. He stopped instantly and slipped down, belly to the ground, folding his legs tightly into his sides.

‘Aaaah! It’s another bald-arse,’ he thought, his mood lifting, ‘I could get a taste for baboons. They aren’t so bad, if they’re fresh.’

The baboon held a short broken stick awkwardly in his hand, his crinkled fingers gripping the thin wood stiffly. He poked at something on the ground. He blinked and recoiled, then watched as it moved forwards. He poked the ground again. Nengwalamwe silently eased half a length forward. The baboon looked up, his close-set eyes scanning from left to right over the long ridge of his nose. He turned his head round in Nengwalamwe’s direction and stared for several seconds then inexplicably turned back and poked at the ground again.

‘Not a stupid one! Why me? Why? Come on bald-arse, you must have seen me.’ He slipped forwards again. He was now within striking distance. It would be a quick kill: the baboon had nowhere to run. The bank of the waterhole lay no more than four lengths beyond the monkey. On the closest bank the ground rose and the sandy gravel formed a sheer cliff a couple of metres high. To either side the ground sloped down gently but offered little cover.

Baboons are exceptionally agile and, for prey, remarkably intelligent... well perhaps not. They are not fast and lack endurance. A lone baboon, split from the protection of the numbers of its troupe, stands little chance in a straight chase against a lion on the flat. Nengwalamwe could taste him already.

Nengwalamwe’s patience ran out and he sprang. The ground flashed beneath him as his spine bent and flexed, springing strength down his legs as he burst from cover. He covered the first lengths without a touch of pad on the ground.

The baboon dropped the stick and flashed his head round to the blur of fur and eyes - and smiled. In an instant he swung away from the lion towards the bank of the waterhole.

‘What?’ thought Nengwalamwe as he covered the fifth and sixth lengths. ‘Where’s he going?’ He expected the monkey to scramble to a halt at the edge and dart away, probably to the left, down the slope. Instead, without any hesitation, the baboon leapt off the bank and dropped from sight. Nengwalamwe tried to slow down; pulling his head back in panic, but the bank came under him terrifyingly quickly. He could do nothing but launch himself over the edge.

The lone tree that sheltered hidden below the gravel bank at the edge of the waterhole had never grown tall. It was still young but bushy, fed by the near continuous supply of water seeping through the thick mud bottom of the waterhole. It had suffered much over its few years. It was used to abuse. The drinking herbivores nibbled and pulled at it, playing, even jumping and leaping from its branches. Nothing could have prepared it for being landed on by a fully-grown lion.

Nengwalamwe crashed belly first, his eyes tightly shut. His legs slipped and scraped neatly around the tree’s bushy branches. Its hard twigs dug painfully into his belly and loins. His tail thrashed desperately, he was as helpless as the day he was born. The tree, while just strong enough to hold his weight was pliable enough to offer no pawhold; he was ungracefully, painfully stuck.

He lay in the breezeless still of the morning sun. For a while he could not work out what had happened. The ground had simply disappeared and been replaced by a thousand hard points that inexplicably held him from the mud

below. He didn't understand how he could be so far from the ground and yet not fall any farther. Before he could fathom what force could do this a movement caught his eye. He looked to the bank where the ground fell, meeting the water gently. A baboon stood at the water's edge - that same stinking bald-arsed baboon.

The baboon stooped down, scooped up a handful of brown-clouded water and lifted it to his mouth and slurped it noisily. As he drank he looked warily back at Nengwalamwe. He reached for another gulp of water. He dropped his head down a little on hunched shoulders, but never taken his eyes off the beached lion.

"YOU!" Nengwalamwe called furiously. "What are you doing here?"

"Drinkin'. What's it look like?"

"You got me up here, you can get me down!" roared Nengwalamwe, his eyes aflame with rage.

"How? Come on? What do'ya think I am huh?"

The tree shook violently as the lion roared again, "GET ME DOWN NOW!!"

"Kay, kay, cool it big boy, the whole darn world don't need know you're stuck up there." The baboon flicked his wet fingers at Nengwalamwe. A sharp bark rose up out of the distance. The baboon suddenly grew tense and looked around anxiously. "Yeah," he said quietly, "keep it down. I'll think of sometin'. Just hang out bro." He turned round to face across the pond as another bark reached him. "Yeah, yeah. I'll think of sometin' quick."

"You had better! Well? What are you going to do bald-arse?"

"I told ya, I'm thinking, what do you think I am? An elepha... yeah, that's what I need. Yeah...."

The baboon lurched off, Nengwalamwe called after him, "Where do you think you're going? Come back here and get me down!" He thrashed his tail again. The baboon stopped and looked back with fear in his eyes.

"Calm down. How am I meant to save you huh? I'm just a baboon. How's a baboon meant to be able to get a lion down from up there? Come on, you tell me! Just stay there and chill, otherwise I ain't gonna help you at all. You can fry up there alone."

"No - no, don't leave me up here. Look, I'll do anything if you get me down, just do it quick."

"OK, I'll do my best, but you're not going to like this." The baboon laughed to himself, "Just hang loose bro" as he ran off leaving Nengwalamwe stranded like a beached whale. Nengwalamwe thought he caught the baboon's words as he scuttled away: "No wonder they ain't nuffin' around here! And they call me dumb!"

The whale struggled to gain a paw hold. His claws caught on the branches below, but they bent when he tried to put any weight on them. As the sun beat down on his back, the tree stuck up through his underfur. He lay looking at the still water of the hole. The few animals that had been drinking, smaller grazers mostly, had long since scattered. Even the birds had put to flight at the terrifying sound of his unrestrained roaring. There was no one to help him. Even the lionesses had not answered his panic calls.

“I’ll teach them to make a fool out of me. That baboon’s going to make lunch when he’s got me down from here. When he comes back he’ll learn not to mess with Nengwalamwe, son of Nengwala. If he comes back at all that is. He’s got to be addled or something. If I were him I wouldn’t save anyone but myself.”

The sun burned into Nengwalamwe’s back. He tried to roll over but he was sure he’d fall if he did, and the ground looked a long, long way. His view of the waterhole was unfamiliar and unsettling. He had only ever seen water from just above the surface as he stretched down to drink. Looking down at such a steep angle on to the ever-changing flashing and scintillating surface was out of the lion’s experience and imagination. The unknown frightened Nengwalamwe, raising his aggression uncontrollably. He roared repeatedly, his roars carried over every hillock, every kopje and every gully. Despite the fury with which they were made, they carried hope and light into almost every animal that heard them. It was as if they had seen the first break in the last storm clouds of the rains.

As Nengwalamwe roared, he imagined in blood-red detail what he would do to the baboon. He saw every sinew as he ripped the ape apart in a fury and ferocity so strong that it consumed him totally. The tree swayed and shook under the thrashing lion, but it stood firm under the onslaught. A lion’s fury, however fearsome, is a short-lived outburst of intense feelings. It cannot last, particularly when it has no physical outlet. When Nengwalamwe realised that no one was there to hear and that no one was going to come to help him, his fury began to abate. It turned to fear when something cracked loudly. His hindquarters lurched sideways. He tried to grab hold of something; anything to steady himself but it was no use. He slid, scraped and scratched over the treetop, gathering speed uncontrollably. Seconds later he grabbed desperately with outstretched claws as the support of the tree finally gave way to free-fall. Moments later his rump thumped stingingly onto the ground below, his forequarters swinging through the air towards the water. Lion and waterhole met with a chaotic splash as his head and mane fell heavily into the murky water. The already brown water turned misty as the settled silt that lay over the soft mud of the bottom of the water hole rose and swirled. In his panic Nengwalamwe thrashed about, sending the soft mud and slimy water cascading for lengths around.

Somehow he managed to regain his composure sufficiently to right himself. The water, now thick with silt, settled around his forepaws. He was soaked through from nose to tail-tip. He stood up and, with drooping head, dragging tail and dripping, sodden mane, breathed heavily.

“At least that dung-smelling bald-arse wasn’t here to see that.”

“D’ya mean me?” said a voice from a length behind him.

Nengwalamwe turned to partly face the baboon. He thought for a moment then, with a tremble that started high in his neck, he shook himself as dry as he could, showering the onlooker with barely liquid splatters.

Nengwalamwe knew there was no chance of taking down the baboon now, not stuck in the mud. Stuck in the mud? What was a lion doing in mud? It suddenly struck Nengwalamwe that a lot of things that were happening were unusual: the talking wild dogs that didn’t whimper and run from lions; the baboons who lay dead and yet untouched by scavengers; the lionesses who couldn’t care less about a lion and then this - a baboon just standing there. Even

that Shalafa was, well – strange. Not that she was different from other lionesses where it really mattered of course. She would do her bit for Nengwalamwe all right.

‘What’s the point?’ he asked himself. ‘This... animal,’ he thought shaking his head sadly, ‘...doesn’t matter a damn. I’ll just get out of here and clean up this stinking mess.’ He lifted a forepaw, dragging it out of the clinging mud with a shluurp. He looked intently at the ground, looking for firmer ground. His rear paws slipped and he slapped his waving forepaw down into the mud to steady himself. It sank down to the wrist. He pulled the other forepaw up and lurched forward. Now there was no question of picking the best spot to place it down, he just thrust it forward and dug into the mud as quickly as he could. His lower belly slid clammily over the mud as he pulled repeatedly on his hindlegs, trying to lift them free. When at the fourth pull one did slip free he tipped forwards, his muzzle pushing down into the slime. Over on the bank the baboon laughed, turning his head away and biting his lower lip.

Nengwalamwe slipped, slid, fell, grasped and scrambled his way over and through the few lengths of mud. The baboon’s intermittent laughter continued. When, tired and smothered by half the bottom of the waterhole, he finally reached firm, dry ground he pulled himself to full height and stood still, great clarts of wet mud dripping from his belly. ‘I might look like a pratt, but by the stars above, I’ll not act like one,’ he thought, ‘No baboon’s going to get the better of Nengwalamwe... and live.’ He turned to the baboon and looked at him, opening his mouth to expose his teeth. Then he stepped forward. His pads slipped sideways and he lurched to one side. While the lion barely managed to keep himself from falling, the baboon certainly didn’t manage to keep himself from laughing.

Nengwalamwe regained his balance and began closing on the baboon in unhurried menacing paces. He held his head low to the ground and locked his eyes on to his prey. He just wanted to scare the smile from the monkey’s long face. He grumbled an extended growl, yet still the ape smiled self confidently. When Nengwalamwe got within a couple of lengths, the baboon simply scurried away. The lion stopped. Then, with a louder rumble, he shook his head, rolling it about the axis of his neck.

‘There’ll be other times,’ thought Nengwalamwe, ‘you’ll see... you’ll see.’ He twisted smoothly round, lifted himself back to full height. His forepaw slipped but he managed to regain his footing. He walked off gingerly towards the nearest acacia grove. He tried to hold his tail straight and unwavering.

As soon as he was sure he was out of sight among the trees he stopped and sat down, twisting his head round to clean his belly and hindquarters. The mud caked his fur in a thick, already hardening layer. This was not going to be a quick lick or two, this was going to take serious cleaning - hours of work to undo the damage done by that bald-arse.

He lifted a hindleg, claws extended a little, up to his chest in an attempt to scratch away the mud. His claws broke through the soft crust and raked through the ooze below, all he succeeded in doing was to spread it farther. He became desperate and scratched repeatedly at his once beautiful fur. Its gentle shining creamy white smoothness had all but gone, now it was deep brown, gritty and stank like a warthog.

Around him the everyday sounds of the savannah rang out; the rasping of insects; the grunts of wildebeest and even, in the distance, a few high ‘mewwwrps’ of shy and reclusive serval kittens. Another sound reached Nengwalamwe’s ears, the excited yelps of a hyena as he, no... she, finally closed in on her prey. It was a sound that reached into him and pulled him out of his desperation. He looked up and around, letting his hindleg drop back to the ground gently.

He reflected on the events of the morning, ‘I could have hung around until they’d finished, but why should I; I mean me, a grown lion; give that Falasha the satisfaction. A lion’s got to eat... and hyena kill is meat just like any other, he mused on what the kill might have been, ‘how many are there?’ He listened on; the hyena’s yelps died down and became muffled. After a pause, another yelping started. ‘Two. No problem, I’ll have that kill off them before they can turn to run.’ He hesitated for a moment, ‘Do they have to see me like this?’ Then the second yelping died down. ‘Pity, I guess so.’

He got up and headed for the edge of the thicket where the ground rose up in shoulder high knolls and ridges. Some were no more than bumps barely as wide as his shoulders; others were two, three or more lengths. Some stood bare; others were thick with vegetation. Beyond, the thicket thinned before giving way to the plain. In-between laid an area of rough ground, some ten or more lengths wide, covered in low thorn bushes. Now, before the rains, they were little more than leafless woody twigs covered with claw-long thorns. They offered the lion good cover as he wound amongst them. They also partially blocked his view of the open ground beyond. With each turn he regained sight of the hyenas, only to lose it again on the next stride.

Nengwalamwe approached the last rise. Beyond the ground opened out and dropped down gently. The hyenas, and that all-important kill, lay a little way off, hidden from view in a hollow. For precious seconds he couldn’t see anything other than the thorn-covered ridge ahead. When his nose had cleared the rise he paused and looked on in dismay as an unpleasantly familiar voice drifted to his ears on the heat haze.

“...zi, you’re well out of order. Come on, shift your arse out of here.”

Nengwalamwe could only make out the ears of one of the hyenas, and no more than a length away, the blotched head and tail of a wild dog. The hyena stood firm. The lion edged forward.

“You got cloth ears or what?”

By their raised backs and tense ears Nengwalamwe felt sure the hyenas were about to rush the dog, yet they made no move. Two hyenas were more than a match for a lone wild dog, back on Kolata such an encounter was sure to end in a decisive strike by the hyena. The dog would be lucky to escape with its life, all for a piece of wasted bravado. Hunting Dogs were capable of harassing hyena, but only through pressure of numbers. Lone dogs had to be careful to avoid trouble, this one was clearly asking for it.

‘It’s one of those dogs! What are they doing here?’ thought Nengwalamwe, raising his head to get a better look. Sure enough, as he had thought, two hyena stood firm over a kill: a young gazelle. There were also not one, but three wild dogs, the same ones as had tried to chase him the previous day. There was no point in wasting energy chasing off the hyenas and the dogs. As his father used

to say, "The weak have only themselves to blame." He decided to let the hyenas do all the work for him.

The lead dog, which Nengwalamwe now recognised as Eddie from the encounter on the kopje, broke the silence, "What yer waitin' for Dung-scratcher? The end of the rains? I said move yerself!" The dog growled, exposing his teeth. Nengwalamwe looked on in astonishment as the hyenas dropped their ears and tails and backed away. The dogs advanced and fell upon the carcass eagerly. The hyenas turned and ran away without even baring a tooth.

Nengwalamwe was amazed, and, though he would not admit it, afraid. The scene he was just witnessing was incredible and disturbing and he wanted no part of it. 'I need to get clean, that's much more important than eating right now.' He dropped back below the ridgeline. 'Yeah, I'll just go back into the thicket and sort out my fur.' He retreated slowly, shaking slightly. His heartbeat filled his chest. There was something about the scene he had just witnessed that terrified him, yet he could not put his paw on what.

He slipped back shakily into the thicket. In its depths he lay down, cloaking himself in the stifling heat and stillness of midday. He consoled himself by grooming: licking - drawing his moist, rasping tongue through his belly fur over and over with a flick of his head at the end of each stroke. With each stroke a breath drawn in and held to the flick. Again and again, washing, swashing, swishing, and wishing it clean until the world around melted away in the heat of the afternoon.

6. *Llasani*

Nengwalamwe looked up as the momentary sounds of his brother's approach reached the soft fur-fringed tips of his ears. He didn't have to look; the sounds alone told him that the young lion was coming. He knew he would soon feel his brother's breath on his cheek and the rasp of his tongue through his fur. Nengwalamwe turned round to see his younger brother, Talashi, approaching slowly.

Talashi stopped by his brother's side and lowered his hindquarters, bending his knees as he gently slid his hind legs across the bare earth beneath him. When the warmed earth touched his belly he dropped his chest and forequarters, placing his head by Nengwalamwe's, his tongue stretched out between his black-edged lips. As Nengwalamwe had predicted, Talashi reached out and licked him from cheek to ear, tasting the salt mingled with the dust in the short fur. He left a damp swath of slicked back hair that showed to all that, as long as he presented no threat, he loved his brother. Nengwalamwe tried to appear indifferent to his younger brother's affection. He remained quite still for a few seconds then began to purr very gently just for his own satisfaction. He felt sure that Talashi could feel the vibrations through his flank. Talashi made as if to lick again. For a moment holding his head over his brother's, unsure if another lick would be welcome. His eyes brightened and he suddenly nipped Nengwalamwe's inviting ear.

"Hi, Nengwe!"

Nengwalamwe pushed himself up roughly, opening his jaws and rolling a gently voiced warning that carried far from the hollow. Talashi jumped up and bounced away, pushing up and to one side with both forepaws, carrying his head from any danger.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you." Talashi cowered at the sight of his brother's long flesh tearing teeth that shone yellow-brown in the harsh, piercing light of midmorning.

"Watch it, Talashi! Hey, what do you think you're doing bothering me anyway?"

Talashi ventured forward holding his head low, exposing his neck to his brother's teeth.

"I only came to ask you if you wanted to come out with me and the others."

"What? More cub games? Come on, I'm much too old for all that. Leave me alone, and quit biting me." He swayed uneasily from side to side, rocking on his fore legs, shifting his weight from one side to the other.

"Llasani is coming." Talashi spoke quietly; he wasn't sure how his brother might react to the promise of their lithe and sensual cousin. Nengwalamwe paused from his head waving and closed his mouth, his cheeks relaxing and his ears turning back a little.

"She is? Are you sure?" His eyes opened wider and he dropped his gaze to the ground for a moment. "Well, perhaps..." He stepped forwards and sat back, tucking his tail around his hind legs. "Perhaps, I'll..." He thought better than to show just how much he would have liked to come along. "Be along in..." Then he felt something else happening which told him that he had better not get up just

yet. He was sure it would show his impressionable younger brother just how much he really liked his cousin Llasani. "Yes, well, I'll just be along in a moment. There, you - err, come on Tashi, help me out here! You 'run along' or whatever it is that you cubs do. I'll be along in a moment." He slumped down to the ground, somewhat embarrassed.

"Are you all right Nengwe? Are you coming or what?"

"Tashi, I'm, er... fine. I said I'll be along in a moment, you go on."

Nengwalamwe shifted his weight uncomfortably, pulling a hind leg from under his stomach. "And Tashi?"

"Yeah, Nengwe?" said the adolescent as he turned to leave, quite unaware of his brother's awkwardness.

"Quit calling me Nengwe - I'm a lion now, so call me by my name: Nengwalamwe, son of Nengwala."

"OK, Nengwa... lamwe, see ya later!" Talashi turned to go then swung his head back, "Do ya think I'll get my mane soon too? I hate being a cub all the time."

"Tashi, there's more to being a lion than just having a mane."

Nengwalamwe answered warmly, though he was now adult, he still felt a strong bond to his only brother.

"Yeah, I guess so, but it helps. Right?"

"Yes Tashi, it helps a lot. You'll get your mane soon, don't worry."

"Yeah? I hope so. Then we can go away together like we said."

"Sure Tashi, just like we always said."

Talashi smiled and bounced off: all gangly legs and flailing tail.

Nengwalamwe couldn't help noticing just how lanky, ungraceful, weak and common his brother looked, though he was gaining weight. Nengwalamwe by contrast was now practically at full adult weight, though it had not entirely settled into the right places. He had filled out greatly in the previous few months. His mane was a deep, rich earthy brown laced with filaments of gold and black and now fully covered his neck. He knew Llasani and a few of the other lionesses too were attracted to him, just as they should. What was it his father told him? "'Did she like it? LIKE IT?! She should have cried all the way back to her mother.'" He often dreamt of what he would do to her if they were ever alone for a time together. He also knew that that's all it could ever be - just dreams - while he lived in his father's pride.

The pride took its name from the seasonal stream, the Kolata, which flowed in the weeks after the rains. It ran from the foothills of the mountains and on out to the south of the pride's lands. His father, Nengwala, was a powerful pride leader and well known for protecting his lionesses, the young barely turned adult Llasani included, against the unwanted attentions of all other males. He called his brand of protection 'vigorous persuasion', which seemed to amount to taking a bite out of any lion that even sniffed the air coming from the pride. He had recently 'vigorously persuaded' an adolescent, barely older than Nengwalamwe, to leave the Upper Kolata. He had died soon after on the fringes of the Kolata's lands. "Weakness comes from caring" his father told Nengwalamwe when he asked what had happened.

Nengwala regarded the pride lionesses as his personal possessions. Even his younger brother, Llasani's father, had to ask permission, very tactfully, to

pass anymore than the time of day with any of the pride. It was perhaps astonishing that he had mated with Llasani's mother at all; there was much whispered talk of a long-standing unpaid debt that he had called in from Nengwala. The whispers said that it must have been a very great debt indeed, for Nengwala paid dearly with his own pride.

The pride territory was open to the savannah on three sides and took a lot of protecting. At night the roars of the neighbouring pride males, whom Nengwala always called 'The Enemy', could clearly be heard uncomfortably close on the warm and full night air.

The rains were close, Nengwalamwe could almost smell the clouds gathering, folding and rolling over the mountain peaks that dominated the Kolata hills. Confused thoughts jumbled and jostled in his young lion's mind. He had recently had his first encounter with a lioness, the type of meeting he dare not discuss with his parents. She had been from the Lower Kolata pride, which, thanks mainly to Nengwala, had only one adult male lion to look after eight lionesses. He tried valiantly to keep them happy and with cub but it seemed he spent more of his time asleep recovering from his activities than he did doing them. Not surprisingly, sometimes one or other of his lionesses had strayed far afield in search of male company. One such had encountered Nengwalamwe out alone in the tall grasses by the dry Kolata streambed and had introduced him to the pleasures of adulthood. She had shown great patience at his first awkward, sweaty and for both rather unfulfilling efforts. Though he tried desperately hard he was unable to complete until the third day. Then the power of his ardour finally overwhelmed his youthful frustration; his pent-up desire for lionesses suddenly took physical form and flowed uncontrollably out of him into her. He felt that he was now a real lion. Throughout what remained of the day he took every opportunity to prove it, even when his once willing tutor began to protest at his continued advances. Later that night, Nengwalamwe fell asleep after thirty-four hours continuously awake; when he woke with the dawn he found he was alone. He never saw the lioness again.

From then on he looked upon all lionesses with fresh eyes that looked more at their hindquarters than their faces. His mother caught the way he looked at Llasani and cuffed him across the muzzle for it. She told him that if she ever caught him drooling at his cousin again she would cuff him again, with her claws out. He had then become very careful to lust only when he was sure there was no one around to see. He imagined all sorts of situations where he might happen to be in the right position to take Llasani by surprise. Though he had always taken great care over grooming he made extra sure he was always looking his best for the lucky Llasani. He spent hours keeping every part of his fur and mane spotlessly clean.

In his dreams she instantly succumbed to his masterly advances and cried out for him and told him how wonderful he was. Yet despite all his plans, when he got close to her she would turn to him and ask, "Is there some way I can help you Nengwe?" or "Yes? Do you want me for any reason?" or "Come on Nengwe, out with it!" His dreams melted and he felt as though his mother had caught him; he could almost feel her claws rake deep through his magnificent face. He could not bear to tell Llasani what he really wanted, far less to take her in the manner of his dreams. He could only run off or worse still, bluster incoherently.

His mother clearly saw the signs that her oldest cub had become a red blooded young lion. Yet she could not know that he had had any practical experience on what he described vaguely as his recent 'hunting trip'. She thought her 'little leopard' was just simply full of the joys of adolescence. His brother, Talashi, could see that Nengwalamwe spent a lot more time close to, and even following, Llasani, but he had no clear idea why. To find out he decided to keep a close eye on his older brother, from a discrete distance of course. He wanted to try and see what Nengwalamwe found so interesting now that he was beginning to tire of fighting and biting games at flame-red-flooded sunset.

The oppressive heat of the day was passing and the time for a little rough and tumble approached. Nengwe's mane made such a great target for the younger cubs that Tashi tried to persuade Llasani to come along to lure his reluctant brother into being a pouncing partner again. However she merely laughed at Tashi and shooed him away with a twitching tail and bristling whiskers.

Nengwe tried to put his heart into the games he had once played tirelessly all day, but as soon as he realised Llasani was not going to turn up he excused himself and wandered off. He settled down to watch from a low rise a little way off downwind. Tashi shrugged and took over from his brother. Nengwe half-heartedly watched him wait silently for his brothers and cousins to appear from out of the grasses. He saw one of the youngest males creep stealthily and low towards Tashi whose ears twitched continually to ward of the flies that heralded the coming of the rains. Before the cub leapt, Nengwalamwe felt another of the flies land on his own left ear. Like his brother, he twitched it, reaching up with a paw to brush it away. He had to close his eyes as he drew the paw across his tilted head.

"Not joining in then?"

Nengwalamwe looked up suddenly and turned round to the voice. He felt a gently painful mixture of elation, stupidity and strange warmth that came from deep within and tied his tongue. The under-fur smooth voice was that of Llasani.

"Eh, I... Well, you know. I'd much rather be with you." He lost his nerve and suddenly couldn't bear to look her in the face and decided to feel a twinge in his left shoulder. "Oooh, too much hunting again. Oow!"

"Hmmm, it never hurts me. It must be that lions are different somehow."

"Well, we are bigger you know," he said softly still looking slightly away from, and self-consciously beyond his cousin.

"Ah, and getting bigger all the time."

Now he was glad that fur covered his face as it hid the redness growing beneath. He felt hot all over and again had to fight the urge to stand.

"You're a growing lad, but I think you could get bigger still."

He shut his eyes and pulled his head away.

"Eh, what's wrong? Don't you want to join in their games?" She pushed her head closer to his. He did not fail to catch her delicate and inviting scent.

"Naa, they just play stupid cub games," he said in an attempt to change the subject; it failed totally.

"Oh yes? And you want to play lion games I suppose? Hmmm?" Llasani brushed her cheek over his sensuously.

"I don't," he coughed quietly; "I don't know what you mean."

“Oh, I think you do... I think you do.” She raised her head and drew forwards a pace so that she stood over him, looking down at a patch on his mane that was even darker than rest. She drew in his scent, closing her eyes in a warm half-smile. Then her smile broadened and she opened her eyes a little. “Why don’t you get up and join me? Is there some more grown-up game we could play together? Perhaps you want me to teach you one?”

He was not sure whether she was teasing him; was she just pretending not to realise how much her scent drew him on?

“I don’t think you can teach me anything Llasani - that I don’t already know that is. I’d rather just sit here if you don’t mind, I’d much rather be alone. I have important things to think about.” He lied of course but just could not face being embarrassed by Llasani. He felt things for her that he knew might get him forced out of the pride, or worse. His mother had seen to it that he knew how to hunt; his father had seen to it that he could defend himself and down by the streambed a lioness had seen to it that he could do everything else a lion needed to do. What more could a young lion need to know? His fourth year had just started and his mane was beginning to darken as it grew to cover his neck and forequarters. Llasani’s intimate scent was temptation beyond resistance and it appeared she was willing to do more than just tempt. He smiled to himself, ‘But I can teach you something Llasani. Yeah, let’s see if you know how to treat a real lion,’ he thought, ‘Time to show that I’m no longer a cub.’ He stood up suddenly, causing Llasani to turn to look elsewhere. She saw why he had been reluctant and giggled thoughtlessly.

“My, you are a little pleased to see me!”

This achieved what Nengwalamwe could not. He rushed off, as near to tears as he had been at any time since his second year. He felt ashamed at himself and anger at her who had so humiliated him. He had failed when it had mattered most and he determined he would never look at another lioness as long as he lived. He felt certain that would not be very long if his father caught him. He had seriously thought he might have loved Llasani, now it was evident that she just thought him no more than a fool. He vowed never to look at her again and to make sure no one else could.

In his confused pain, Nengwalamwe ran blindly. He had no idea for how long, nor where he was or where he was going and he didn’t care. He fretted: cussing and cursing every living thing he encountered. Why should they have been happy when his world had fallen apart completely? He wandered on and on into the evening. As night fell he found himself growing tired as the effort of maintaining his anger drained him. He soon gave in to his fast growing tiredness and lay down to sleep alone in the shelter and seclusion of an acacia thicket. The hours drew on and he dreamt uneasily about a great herd of prey standing round him, staring at him, boring into him with their eyes. Running, running, running with hyenas at his back but he couldn’t run clear for dread fear of the baying hunting dog pack ahead, standing proudly, defiantly facing him.

Later he dreamed himself with Llasani again, this time he didn’t hate her and she didn’t tease him, it was just as he had often imagined he’d be with her. She looked invitingly into his eyes and turned from him. Her breath became heavy and strained as she pressed herself down to the ground, offering herself to him. Her heat and scent mingled in him and drew him forward as he crouched

over her. She made no sound as his embarrassment melted into her as she pushed back gently and completed their union. In her he felt like the lion he was sure he had become, while she felt all the lion cub he was. They were together until the passion flooded from him and pushed her into exquisite voice.

He felt her neck with his teeth, gripping the folds of her scruff by which she had been carried as a cub. He roared his triumph gently and stood up, not to her laughter but to her purrs as she rolled on to her back to enjoy the heat of his body on her belly.

“Those are the sort of games we can play,” she said softly in his dream. He laid down beside her and let the blanket of sleep descend on him, alone again.

He woke a few hours later, the moon had set and the first steely glow of dawn was just pushing away the coldness of the night. He was not cold. He felt warmth beside him, a strong fur covered warmth that reminded him of his mother; soft, enveloping and protecting. He opened his eyes, not at all sure what this warmth could be. It moved and looked back at him sleepily. It yawned loudly and turned over, pressing its belly to his back saying, “Again, please. Do it again Nengwe. I enjoy that game more than any other.”

‘Again?’ he thought in alarm. ‘AGAIN? What game?’ He shouted in near panic at the contented lioness lying beside him, “What game? WHAT GAME?”

Her rump bent the tips of his whiskers. Then he noticed the mingled scents of his passion and her contentment on her hindquarters. He drew it in and knew what it meant. He slumped down heavily and began to cry like a two-week-old cub.

“What are you crying for? That was nothing to cry about.” Llasani smiled broadly as a similar agglomeration of scents wafted up from his thighs. She seemed to be a very happy lioness who was just about ready to become even happier. She looked at Nengwalamwe pleadingly with soft, glowing eyes.

“NO! Your father will kill me.” Nengwalamwe paused as his panic rose. He had no idea what to do. The scents filled the still air all around him. “No, my father – he’ll kill me first. Llasani what have I done?”

“You mean you don’t know? Come here Nengwe; my dear Nengwe; and let me lead you through it again.” She looked up at him with eyes that melted his panic but which lead him further astray. He knew what he had done, yet he could hardly remember, he was so tired and confused. “Come, stand close behind me.” The pull of her scent was all-powerful, too powerful for a lion barely out of cubhood such as Nengwalamwe. He felt himself drawn to her. He felt himself prepare for her. He felt himself do all those things he had dreamed about and afterwards he stood over her back and felt his life ebbing away with his preparedness. It was over quickly and he felt strangely distant towards this vision of sensuality. He didn’t feel as though he had any need to spend the rest of his life with her.

As he stood looking down at her back, he knew that she had led him on to what could result in his death. He realised that he had just stolen a few pleasant moments. All he had left were blurred memories and aching muscles in his hind legs. Indeed, as she rolled over, her hind claws raking unthinkingly over his nose, exposing her almost white under-fur, he began to wonder just what he had seen in Llasani. Certainly she had her charms, he supposed he now knew rather

more about those than any other lion, but she was nothing more than any other lioness. She was alluring, pleasant and responsive to his attention but little else.

Something else began to trouble him more and more as the hormones of lust subsided in him. He was in trouble: big, deep, deadly trouble. Here he was standing over his cousin whom, probably within sight of his home pride, he had just mated. If his father were to hear of it then Nengwalamwe, regardless of being his son, would die; that was certain. If her father were to find out then Nengwalamwe would also die. That too was certain and he would surely find out when the roundness that heralded his cubs began to appear in Llasani's sides and belly. Surely his father, Nengwala, would have known about Llasani's heat? Wouldn't he have taken steps to satisfy her needs? He had often talked of how he had fought and killed other males who tried to take advantage of his lionesses. He was proud to be able to say that he, or at least his brother, was the sure father of every cub born in the pride. That was a boast few lions could make with any degree of certainty. There had been much blood spilled to make that boast true. Here was Nengwala's own eldest son taking advantage of one of his very own, very special, very accommodating, very demanding, very hot and very willing lionesses.

"Are you going to stand there all morning? Or are you going to show me just how much you really like me?" Llasani had risen to her paws and now padded over to stand beside him. She brushed her head against his neck forcefully, rubbing her scent into his mane to mark him as her mate.

"No, no, we mustn't. We must stop this now. Get away Llasani." He feared her touch, he feared what she could make him do, he feared where it must lead. "Please! We must stop now, perhaps there's still time to..." but he stopped as he could not work out what there might be time for. She wove herself around him, brushing up against him repeatedly. Her readiness was all too apparent. He turned his head away each time she tried to look deep into his eyes. He felt a powerful urge to lash out at her but he held back, knowing that he would not be able to explain away any injuries he might give her. He could do nothing but plead to her. "Stop this... you know what'll happen to me."

"So why fight it? If you're really going to die, why not die with a smile? Come on, you know you liked it. You know you loved it - I did. You were more than I could have ever imagined a lion could be; so, so much more."

Nengwalamwe had always struck Llasani as an interesting lion; rather young and with a somewhat 'little brotherly' manner about him, just right for teasing and poking fun at. His mane had made him rather more interesting; still rather young but now with vigour, strength and a lustre of his fur that would become lost as age took its toll. Llasani didn't quite know what to think of him, but he had certainly smelled good and that had made her task easier. He had performed just as she had expected him to but she suspected she might be asking a little too much of a cub to mount her again so soon and so often. She had heard all the stories of her uncle Nengwala's great feats with lionesses. After all it would hardly have been worth protecting them if those stories were not true. Certainly her older aunts and sisters were all eager to be with Nengwala when

their time came. He though had been busy satisfying another lioness's demands, and as it was only Llasani's second heat she had not merited his undivided attention. She did not really feel anything for her father so she had decided to offer herself to the Nengwala's son: her cousin, little Nengwe. She had wondered if he was quite old enough. His display by the pouncing cubs had demonstrated that he was capable of satisfying her needs and that he was not all that little after all. She hoped his son had inherited some of his father's prowess.

She had spent much time planning this with her older sister, now carrying her first litter. She had mated late, even going so far as to hide her first season so well that even their mother had not realised her daughter had become a lioness. She had not expected the burden of cubs quite that soon. Llasani however was not thinking of cubs, she was thinking of lions. Her sister's advice was to not let him get away from her and to make quite sure he knew of her state of season. Llasani had listened attentively. She was now profiting from the advice, indeed she now wanted to increase her profit.

"Come, come to me again my lion, come to me."

"NO!" Nengwalamwe shook his head in frustration and confusion, his head said run, his loins, equally primed for action, said otherwise. For the first time in his recent life his head was to rule. He jumped up and sprang away only to stop a few paces in front of Llasani. She just looked at him with wide-open eyes and an upturned tail. She held her ears forward toward him. Nengwalamwe panicked. "No! This isn't right, what am I going to do? Just what am I going to tell my father? How... how can I stay alive?"

"Stop worrying, I'll not tell him anything if you won't. Just come here..." she edged forwards half a pace to make sure her scent reached his broad nostrils, "...and do what you do so well."

"What do you mean, you won't tell him? Won't he notice?"

She edged forward again and waved her tail slowly in the soft breeze. Nengwalamwe drew the scent into his nostrils with deep breaths, pulling his upper lip back tightly over his teeth to open his nose fully to the intoxicating air.

"Notice what? My scent doesn't do to him what it does to his son, does it Nengwe?"

"He will - he'll notice it all right and what about the cubs? He'll notice those!"

"Cubs?" Llasani stared silently at Nengwalamwe for a moment, and then she burst out laughing. "Cubs? What's with you? Are you crazy? What? You don't think... You think I'm going to have your cubs? Oh come on. You can't think I'm going to conceive a litter fathered by another lion right under your father's nose? What is it with you? You think a couple of rolls in the grass and that's it, a lioness is up with cubs? You'd have to keep this up for days, which I doubt you're up to, and even then I'm not at all sure I would want to have YOUR cubs." She laughed on loudly.

He could take it no longer. He at least thought she might want him as a father, but now it seemed she just wanted him for... He rushed away into the light of what he felt must be his last day, leaving Llasani laughing alone in the

thicket. He wanted to run headlong between the trees. Perhaps he would run into one and end his pain there and then.

Before he had gone more than ten lengths he ran straight into the back of another lioness - a heavily pregnant lioness: Llasani's sister. She was running too, but not towards them, she too was running away. She must have seen them, possibly seen it all. What had these two been up to? Had she... *watched* them? Did she hold his life in her paws? He scrambled to a halt and turned to face her. She picked herself up from the dust. The heat was beginning to build. Not all the heat came from the sun. He breathed deeply and held his head low, pinning his eyes to hers while behind Llasani strode, still laughing, into view behind her sister. He wondered if he could kill them both, but quickly dismissed the thought when he considered Llasani's sisters much expected cubs.

"Well, so you've found out our little secret," Llasani said as she stifled the last laugh. "So what are you going to do now, great, late son of Nengwala? Are you going to tell daddy? Hmmm?" She paused, not really expecting a reply. Her sister spoke next, making it clear how much she had seen.

"Didn't take him long did it? Well Llasani, was he worth the effort?"

"Oh, it wasn't bad I suppose - nothing to roar about. His father was much better; he really knows how to please a lioness."

Nengwalamwe watched in total horror. Two lionesses had set him up just for a bit of fun. Llasani had led him on just so that she could add him to her tally. Now he knew they wouldn't tell anyone - except all the other lionesses.

He blurted out his thoughts in a confused rush, "You're no better than slobbering wild dogs. I knew I couldn't trust you." He started to turn away but Llasani called him back.

"Where do you think you're going, my lion?" The sisters laughed again. "What are you going to do to make sure we don't tell your daddy that you overpowered me and took me by force?" He stopped instantly and turned back in disbelief. Indeed what could he do? They held him in their paws. He couldn't kill the sisters nor could he ignore them. He could do nothing but what they wanted. If he was even to have a hope of avoiding being torn apart by his own father it lay in Llasani's paws. He was Llasani's slave and it now became clear that's just what she had wanted.

He turned away again and in despair flopped down on the dust. The light from the early sun reflected off the grains of dust that billowed up around him. They seemed so tiny, so insignificant, so helplessly carried by the lightest of air currents. He felt smaller than the smallest speck of that dust. His captor continued tightening her grip. "Good, that's better. Now first you'll have to finish off what we started back there. I think I might just let you go this evening. But you had better make it good or else I'll find something else for you to do. Do you hear?"

Nengwalamwe heard and nodded weakly in response. So began the longest day of his life....

7. Leaving the Pride

Llasani failed to keep her word. The long day drew on into a long night and on through to the late afternoon of the following day. Nengwalamwe repeatedly tried to slip away but each time Llasani called him back. It was his fear of his father rather than her sensuously furred body that kept him beside her for all that time.

For a while soon after sunset he felt drained and tired. He then decided that as he had no choice he might as well make the most of it and he began to set about his task with new relish and vigour. If this was what the lioness wanted then that was what she was going to get.

His mind turned to wondering why she had bothered to do all this. What did she really want from him? If she was after his cubs, and she was adamant that she was not, then there were much simpler ways to have gone about it. Was she trying to get at his father by turning him against his own son? Why - because he had rejected her? That seemed unlikely. So, what was it that drove Llasani? And her sister; what was that all about? It wasn't even as if Llasani was enjoying Nengwalamwe's efforts much, she grew increasingly impassive. Eventually he decided she must have wanted him to take the initiative all along. His father told him: "Take charge, you're the lion: always lead, never follow." So what she had really wanted all along was for him to get on with it and take her like a real lion should.

As hour after hour went by Nengwalamwe's rough and forceful attentions began to become tedious and increasingly uncomfortable for Llasani; not that he much cared.

He rose stiffly from her and instead of rolling over she got up from the bared earth and walked forwards, carrying on away from him without looking back. She had gone some five or six lengths before he called to her:

"Hey, Llasani! Come back here. I haven't finished yet!"

She stopped and looked back at him blankly before turning and walking away again.

"You had enough already? I'm just getting into it," he growled after her.

She walked on in silence, but he went on, "What's wrong with you? You've never had a lion as good as me have you?"

Llasani stopped abruptly and slowly turned back to face Nengwalamwe with a fixed and deadly expression.

"Don't you ever talk to me like that! Yes, I've never had a lion like you. When I'm through with you you'll never have any lioness again," her voice grew colder. "You won't even breathe again."

"Hah! You can't touch me Llasani! I'm a real lion, better than my father and don't you forget it!" He felt smug, knowing that Llasani was no match for a strong male. She ran off without another word between them. He watched her run for a few seconds before setting about washing her scent from his lower fur. He felt that he had handled the situation pretty well, all things considered. He had taken on Llasani at her own game and had won.

He could now run back home. He was fast enough; he could get to his father before Llasani. He could tell him that she had made the whole thing up -

or could he? The powerful scent of a lioness hung about him; as he licked he realised that it would not wash off. It would linger on his fur for a day at least. His confidence wilted and his desperation grew with each increasingly frantic lick at his hindquarters. No matter what he did the smell clung to him; it would betray him and lead him to his death. Could he deny being with Llasani? The scent was subtly different from that of the lioness who had initiated him into lionhood; it was stronger and had a fruity, smoky acidity. It was as distinctive a scent as any he could recall - it could only be Llasani's.

His tail swished as he saw his situation stretch away like the Kolata. He knew he could not return to the kopje of rocks clenched in an almost encircling bend of the Kolata River that he called home. He was sure to meet his father if he did. Nengwalamwe did not just respect his father, he feared him and with good reason. Everyone knew where they were with Nengwala. The great Nengwala had an opinion about everything, and voiced it often. Even when he was wrong, which was also often, no one dared question his word. Nengwala was the king of the Upper Kolata and everyone remembered it. He did not remind those who forgot, he made sure they could never forget again.

This deepened Nengwalamwe's desperation into panic. The Lower Kolata plain was not safe for this son of Nengwala. Nowhere else was safe: there was too much of the surrounding prides' blood on Nengwala's paws for any them to welcome his oldest son. The only way was to go south-west to the mountains, but that chilled Nengwalamwe's heart almost as much as the prospect of being torn apart by his own father. His choice was simple but stark; stay in Kolata and be killed by his own father, leave home and be killed by the surrounding prides' males or run to the mountains and maybe die in the endless void.

'Surely? Most likely? Maybe?' he thought. 'Maybe is about all I have left. Maybe I'll live up there in the hills. Maybe I'll find out why they're so white. If I stay here I'll be dead in a day. If I run to the other prides I'll be dead before the moon changes. If I go now to the hills I may stay alive long enough to get my own back on Llasani, maybe...'

He turned to face the hills and the distant mountains beyond and ached to roar out his frustration. He knew that his time to leave the pride should have come a long time ago but life in Kolata had been too good for Nengwalamwe. He had often walked out over the roughlands with his brother; they had talked for hours about escaping to the hills. It had all sounded so exciting as they lay in the sun together. Nengwalamwe promised Talashi over and over that he would never leave him alone. They would be together forever as brothers. Now the prospect drew darkly over him.

The time for talk was over. The time for action had come. Blinking and breathing deeply to force back the urge to roar, he stepped forward. He tried not to hesitate. His father had told him no lion would ever dare hesitate. "Don't think: do. When you do, don't stop. Never look back." He walked forwards, intending to break into a loping run. Ahead lay three or four low smooth rocks, set deep into the plain. He knew he had to run round them as he could see the summits of the mountains over the top of the rock.

He rounded the farthest rock and began to open his stride onto the thin strip of open ground beyond. He heard the unmistakable sounds of another,

lighter, lion behind him. Extending his claws, he swung round and roared powerfully, intending to show Llasani that he wasn't afraid of her threats.

The young lion he saw before him stood his ground bravely, pulling back and down onto his forepaws in surprise.

"Whoa! Nengwe! It's me, Tashi!"

Nengwalamwe stood firm, his sides heaving.

"Tashi? What are you doing here? I could have killed you!"

Talashi drew himself up and pulled himself forwards a pace.

Nengwalamwe rumbled a deep warning and Talashi stopped, dropping his head submissively. "Where's Father?" Talashi felt puzzled and stared back.

Nengwalamwe raised a paw and growled. "Come on Talashi, where's Father?"

"Hey, what's got you all up tight?"

Nengwalamwe growled again, louder and longer, baring his teeth.

"OK, OK, he's out running after some lion from the lower pride that came sniffing after Llasani." Nengwalamwe raised his paw higher.

"Honest Nengwe, he won't be back for ages. What were you doing back there anyway?"

"Nothing!" he snapped, shaking his head agitatedly. He let his paw drop back to the ground.

"Yeah? It didn't look like nothing. I guess I had better tell it to father and ask him what he thinks you were up to. Say Nengwe, you smell like Llasani."

"No Talashi! You've got to keep quiet about that. You mustn't tell anyone!"

"Right," said Talashi smiling. "What's it worth?"

"Don't you mess me about Talashi."

The brothers heard a call from his father, and close; too close.

Nengwalamwe's agitation grew with the thought that his father might be coming to sort out his sons.

"So Nengwe, what'll you do?"

"I'll run to the hills. It'll be just like we always said it would," said Nengwalamwe excitedly.

"Yeah? Great, which way we going?"

"Not we, Tashi - me. You can't come with me."

"But Nengwe you promised. Don't you remember?" Talashi seemed desperately disappointed.

"Tashi, this isn't cub talk any more, this is real. I've got to get away; I've got to get out of Kolata now, forever."

"You mean you're not going to come back? Not ever?"

"No Tashi, not ever."

"But you promised you'd take me with you when you left the pride. You promised!" Suddenly Talashi turned away from his brother and broke in to a run towards the trees at the far edge of the grassy strip.

"Tashi! What are you doing?"

"I'm going to tell Dad what you were doing with Llasani."

"NO! NO! Talashi, don't do this," shouted Nengwalamwe as he sprang after him. He was a much stronger runner than his younger brother and within a few strides he closed to less than a length. He pushed his head against Talashi's springing side briefly. He dropped back as the younger lion surged away with strengthened thrusts of his long hindlegs.

“You lied Nengwe! You promised!”

Nengwalamwe pressed forward again.

“Stop Tashi!” He suddenly struck out at his brother’s closest hindleg, attempting to break his run.

Before Nengwalamwe’s paw made contact, Talashi threw his head round, glancing back. For an instant he seemed to smile, and then his head whipped up, taken violently from his brother’s gaze. Almost as quickly as it had gone it was back, crashing down to the ground. He cried out in pain as his head hit the dry earth with a crack before bouncing up again. His forequarters crumpled under his chest as his momentum carried his hindquarters high over his shoulders in an arc over Nengwalamwe. As he rose, the fur of his haunch caught in Nengwalamwe’s outstretched claws, the flesh beneath dragged. Nengwalamwe felt a stinging pain on his back and a sharp crack on his pelt. Thrown off balance, he crashed into his brother, turning him round still further. A branch, covered with the dry grass that had overgrown it, rolled to a stop close by.

Talashi laid still, his eyes open and staring. Nengwalamwe pulled his own paws from beneath him as gently as he could. They were covered with dull purple blood that flowed easily from a paw’s width flap of flesh, skin and fur in Talashi’s haunch. His sides stilled. Gone was the joyous bounce of the curve of his back. His ungainly legs lay twisted beneath him. Nengwalamwe sniffed and stared intently at his still brother.

“Tashi? Come on, you’ve got to get up, we’ve got to go home.”

Talashi showed no sign of movement, indeed little sign of any life at all. Nengwalamwe ran his nose over his brother’s cheek, sniffing the blurred form and feeling for movement with his whiskers. Then he licked his brother’s neck with the tip of his tongue, but there was no response from the still warm flesh below. “Tashi, please, cut it out. Stop playing, come on, please. I didn’t mean it.”

A richer, louder sound reached his ears: a lion’s roar. “Father!” He nuzzled his brother’s lifeless form urgently. “Hey Tashi, I gotta go!” The sound came again. “You look after yourself,” he said as he lurched away. He knew his brother would be all right; one and a half year old cubs couldn’t die, they had all their life ahead, just like Nengwalamwe. Prey died, young cubs died, old lions died but young lions lived for ever, everyone knew that. Talashi had just been playing. Hadn’t he?

Nengwalamwe ran from the rocks and on down the gentle slopes that lead down to the Kolata River. He jumped it cleanly, even in the height of the rains it was no more than a couple of lengths wide. He had never bothered to jump it before. He had always simply waded across, taking a single stride over the pebbly gravel bed. He enjoyed the cool feel of the water on his paws.

He ran on up the opposite slope. The grass grew profusely there, though now it was thin and crack-stalk dry. At the top of the slope he saw a low grass covered bank, a bank often used by his mother and her sisters as they sunned themselves in the morning heat. He slowed to a walk and tried to recover his breath. He hoped Talashi was going to be all right, but the more he thought of his still body the more it reminded him of a gazelle freshly brought down by his mother.

As he neared the foot of the bank he glimpsed what he had been expecting. There, set against the grey of the mountains, was the friendly, caring form of his

mother. Her ears, tipped with a ring of deep, rich brown, showed plain against the white peaks and brilliant sky above. She lay still but awake, whether his pawfall had woken her or not he couldn't tell. She sniffed at her son through a smile.

"You've... been with a lioness haven't you?" she said quietly.

Nengwalamwe didn't know whether to smile proudly or hang his head in shame.

"Yes mother," he said, nodding weakly.

Melakwe drew in the scents from her son's fur.

"I knew it would be soon. Who was it? Was she someone I know?" She smiled knowingly, then she sniffed him again and her smile dropped. "No, oh my little leopard, what have you done?"

"I couldn't help it mother, she wouldn't let me stop myself."

"But with Llasani? Didn't you know she's promised to your father?"

"Yes," he said weakly, "...but I couldn't help myself. She was all over me. You know." He nodded and hoped his mother did know what lionesses were capable of doing to grown lions.

"Nengwe, you're a fool one you are. Oh my little Nengwe, couldn't you just keep your loins hidden for one minute? When Nengwala finds out what you've done he'll... You've got to go, get out of here - NOW!"

"But Mother!" Nengwalamwe protested, "Can't you talk to him for me?"

"Nengwe, you're my oldest son, but now you're a lion. You've got to live your own life. I can't help you any longer. You've been putting it off and off since the last rains. Now you've become a lion you've got to act like one and live for yourself. I can't protect a lion. I've got your brother and sisters to look after. It's time you found a lioness or two to protect for yourself."

"Mother? Won't you do anything?"

"I can't do anything now you're a lion. Lionesses protect cubs, lions protect lionesses, and you are now a lion. There's nothing you can do here now."

Nengwalamwe panicked. Melakwe was leaving him to face his father alone, "But Mother, PLEASE!"

"Go, while you still can." She turned away from her son, lowering her head.

"Please... Mother, help me!" He ran to her side. He nuzzled her shoulders and licked her cheek desperately. He rubbed his head against hers, but she didn't move or even raise her head. "Please, Mother, please..." His father roared again, even closer this time. Nengwalamwe raised his head and tried to shake his mane, fighting back the moisture in his eyes.

Melakwe lifted her head a little and said with an almost silent voice that reminded Nengwalamwe of a time before he had tasted meat, "I'll try to look after Llasani. May the stars shine upon all your hunts Nengwe. Go on, while you can, save yourself, and carry your grandfather's line with you."

Nengwalamwe turned and ran a few paces. He looked back to his mother and her companions. She roared gently to him; a roar of recognition, a roar of love.

When he turned away from his mother he knew that he had seen her for the last time. As he ran on he tried to hold that last image of her standing in the grasses roaring to him. It was how he wanted to remember his mother - strong

and independent. As she stood before him he felt that it could not really have been his mother. When the time had come she had rejected him and left him to die. She could have helped him at least; after all he was her big son.

In the hours ahead he ran over and over his mother's words, trying to work out what she really meant. His progress grew slow as he began to feel the powerful hunger return. The mountains still lay some way ahead and the ground had steadily become rougher and the grass thinner. All around the ground thrust up in great bare mane brown rocks. The path, perhaps one trod by his father even, wound round the base of one of the smaller outcrops. As Nengwalamwe walked uneasily in its shadow he felt something fly past his ear and land with a gravelly rattle to his right. He stopped, and seeing nothing ahead, moved forwards. Before he had made two strides something larger flew past his ear close enough for the air to brush his fur gently. He stopped again and looked up - nothing. Then, still looking up, he felt a third stinging stone land on his back. He roared a sharp warning. A faint but unmistakable scent of baboon fell down from the rock above.

"I know you're up there monkey. If I catch you I will kill you!" There was no reply, than he heard a rubbing sound: a sliding of rock against rock. He looked up again; a blackness fall towards his head.

Nengwalamwe's head thumped, everything pulsed red around him. He opened his eyes.

"Are you all right? I ain't never killed no lion before."

"You ain't... haven't killed this one - yet. Who are you anyway?"

"Yeah, well, I gotta run. Bye now!"

Nengwalamwe forced himself to his paws. The outcrop swirled about his head and he fell over on to his side. A baboon stopped swaggering away and stood to watch the great beast falling about.

"Stay still you... Can you stop the ground from moving?"

"Nope! Are you all right now or what?"

"Yes, I'm all right. What are you doing?"

"Watchin' you. I told ya I ain't killed no lion before." He laughed loudly, a chattering, ear splitting screeching laugh that made Nengwalamwe's head thump even more. Growling angrily, the lion lurched to his paws and rushed at the baboon who simply laughed again and turned - straight into the thin, springy trunk of a sapling. The tree slapped him twice on the head before the baboon keeled over onto the dust. Nengwalamwe staggered over to him and opened his mouth, inching his teeth around the baboon's neck. Suddenly the baboon opened his eyes and looked the young lion full in the face, nose to nose.

"Kill me kid, an' you'll die," the baboon shouted desperately.

Nengwalamwe thought for a moment then dropped the baboon and backed off fearfully.

"Why? You're not poisoned are you? Look, I -" The lion stepped back anxiously as the baboon jumped up and screeched wildly.

"I got sicknesses you ain't even heard of. Syndromes, infections and infestations - kid, I got 'em all." He picked at his hairy chest and appeared to

examine something tiny held between his fingers. He offered the hand to Nengwalamwe. "Here, you wan' a look?"

"No! No, keep away from me. I want to live, not die of... something." Nengwalamwe got up as if to go. Jumping up to the top of a rock, the baboon called him back, nodding and twisting his head in the direction of the mountains.

"You won't live up there," he chattered, "not for long anyways. Say, why you running away anyhow?"

Nengwalamwe had begun to walk away, trying to look as though he was not afraid of sickness. The baboon's question pulled him back.

"I'm not running from anything. I'm an adult lion, I'm not afraid of anything."

"Sure, like you're not afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you." Nengwalamwe tried to turn away from the baboon again.

"Yeah, so that's why you won't get on and eat me! You're scared; you're running away all right. Come on kid, you know you'll die out there."

"Maybe I want to. Did you ever stop to think I might actually want to die up there?"

"No. No you don't." The monkey's old eyes gleamed. "You want to taste revenge."

The baboon took Nengwalamwe aback. How could he have known what Llasani had done?

"Anyways kid, maybes you won't die up there. It ain't so bad."

The lion's fear turned to intense curiosity.

"How would you know? No one's ever returned from up there. No one."

"Except me kid. I've been up there. I can tell you all about surviving the mountains."

For a moment the baboon's offer seemed attractive to Nengwalamwe. Then he remembered that this was nothing more than a baboon - a midmorning snack for cubs. All baboons were disloyal liars and cheats.

"There's only one thing you're good for, but I've kinda lost my appetite right now."

"You wan' advice from me or not kid?" The lion refused to answer. "All right, say - you are listening to me aren't you?"

"Ahuh..."

"Look kid, whatever you do, do it for yourself." Nengwalamwe looked on, the baboon eyed him up before continuing: "You know what I'm getting at kid? It's you that counts, number one right?"

"But what about everyone else? My mother told me we are all part of the Great Ring?"

"RING? Don't you mean circle? You don't still believe that sh - err, stuff - do ya? Look - you're born, you eat, you grow, you mate, and you die. That's all there is see? You've gotta live while you can kid. So what about them? You ain't the king kid, so they ain't your problem. You ain't got to look after anyone but yourself. You know what I mean?"

Nengwalamwe thought; what the baboon said made some sense. If he was going to live alone then he didn't have to worry about anyone else. The only one

that mattered was Nengwalamwe. He was alone but free. A freedom he never thought he would taste.

The baboon went on, "You got that kid? What you doing here anyway?" He paused and a gleam came over his deep set eyes. "Say, I know, you've had trouble with girls!"

"You know about that?"

"Sure, what else would you be running away from?"

"I'm not running way. I'm leaving my pride."

A faint roar folded over them.

"Yeah, and I hate termites. Ahh, you done the right thing kid. You don't need them no more." The baboon saw Nengwalamwe's ears swivel to catch the sound. "Is that..?"

"Yeah, it's my father. He wants to kill me. He can't know I'm here." The lion's head shook, "He mustn't."

"Run to the mountains kid. He won't catch you there."

"Why not?"

"It bull but you think it's the end of the world right? He ain't gonna follow you if he reckons you're dead already. If he's after you he won't follow you up there."

"So I had better get going. I bet you're glad I haven't got time to eat you."

"Yeah, sorta. I wish I could come with you kid, but I'm too old for all that sort of stuff." He looked to the hills. Nengwalamwe saw in his eyes that he was glad to be out of their shadow. Nengwalamwe made to leave, but a thought turned him back.

"I can't leave you here."

"Hey kid, I said I'm too old for all that."

"No - you'd give me away to my father. I can't leave you here."

"No, I'll not talk kid." The sound of Nengwala's roar hit them again, much closer this time, drilling urgency deep into Nengwalamwe. "You've got to get going kid and don't forget to eat, you look as though you could do with a decent meal, what did ya ma feed ya on?"

"What? I'm going to die and all you can talk about is food."

"Sure, you wanna remember see. Remember that no one's gonna do nothin' for ya. If you wanna eat then you got not to care about anyone else and go and get it yourself. And then you can't have the girls if you don't eat, and you don't eat if you sit on your backside all day. It ain't gonna come to you, you gotta go out there and grab it; just like everything else. Now that's what I'm talkin' about."

"Yeah, yeah, I think I get the idea." The lion glanced around nervously.

"Look, I'll tell ya sumthin'. I ain't sick. I made that up so's ya won' eat me, see? You gonna go out there and take what you want?"

Nengwe looked at the old ape for a moment, considering, but the sound of a roar from the kopjes below decided him. "Yeah, I'm going to take it all right..." A look of ruthlessness came over the young lion.

"Hey! Don't look at me with those meat eat'r's eyes o'yours!"

Nengwalamwe stared at the baboon for a second then stood up, the fire in his eyes fading. Then he lashed out with his near forepaw, his extended claws flashing as they struck the baboon square on the neck. The blow sent the baboon

crashing to the dust with three deep-to-the-bone gashes in its now lifeless neck. A small crimson pool formed at the fallen baboon's shoulder. Nengwalamwe lost no time in picking up the body between his teeth and dragging it off. He could have left the body where it fell, but the body would have led his father straight to him. The blood still flowed and in next half hour the lion had to pause at least every minute and swallow to prevent a trail forming on to the ground.

An hour, and one elderly baboon, later Nengwalamwe came to the furthest boundary of his pride's land. It was a place he had only ever heard of in one of his father's stirring tales. Ahead, set in a circle of clear ground, stood what he immediately recognised as mane rock. It was grooved and the striations made it look, even to Nengwalamwe's limited imagination, just like the hair of a lion's mane. His father had said it stood as high as vulture flies on the afternoon's heat. Nengwalamwe chuffed and scratched at the low rock with a forepaw as he sniffed the air at its surface. The scent of his father was barely detectable, indeed had he not been so used to it he would not have smelt it at all. He drew forward and, smiling broadly, lent his own scent to mane rock.

The mountains rose ahead. They smelt of cold death, as a massive two-day-old carcass. The ribs showed way above through the broken flesh. The green fur stopped abruptly half way up the belly, beyond the skin had been stripped away revealing the flesh below. Nengwalamwe had never felt any unease when eating, yet now he felt that all the gemsbok that he had ever eaten from had melded into one and lay putrefying before him. He had been right, the mountains were no place for Talashi, and they were no place for any lion. They were the only place left for Nengwalamwe.

He left the trees far below, scrambling and scratching over the loose rocks. Despite not hearing any signs of pursuit for a few hours he did not stop. He feared the mountains but they called to him. He had almost forgotten why he was climbing. The mountains pulled him up and up. With each step the air around grew colder, he felt as though it would cover him and seep into his flesh until he was as solid as the rock itself. It was taking him in, while drawing him on, further and further, higher and higher.

He climbed until the sun shone on his hindquarters. Ahead lay a tiny col, a shallow bowl carved out between two of the lower peaks. He now realised what he had done, and was afraid. Talashi was surely dead; he had killed his own brother. He had left his pride and for what? What lay ahead? Nothing, nothing but cold emptiness. The baboon had offered the hand of friendship and Nengwalamwe had eaten it. He vowed that if he ever got out of the mountains alive, he would be a real lion, just like his father; if he ever got out of the mountains...

Nengwalamwe woke suddenly. He had not meant to fall asleep and felt foolish for letting himself slip away. He lifted his forequarters and took a couple of quick licks at his hindlegs. The mud hung heavily, it was going to need several more hours of work to clean it off. He was exposed in the thicket. The midday sun beat down relentlessly, drying the mud into a hard casing matted into his fur. He needed to get out of the sun. A grove in the middle of nowhere was not

the best place for uninterrupted grooming. He decided that the great rock was the right place; at least there he could be sure to see anything coming to disturb him. Anything might creep up on him here, particularly that Falafana.

‘If she catches me like this I’ll never get anywhere with her. She’ll think I’m an idiot. Why did I let myself get fooled by that baboon? Why?’ He thought on, ‘And by Llasani come to that. Boy Nengwalamwe am I dumb or am I dumb?’

He got up, yawned, stretched, lay down, yawned, got up again stretching his hindquarters, and then headed lazily towards the rock where he knew he would find plenty of shade.

8. Getting Priorities Right

It was already past midday when Nengwalamwe wearily climbed up the boulder path to the rock. He was still alone and he was still hungry. A thick crackling coat of heavy mud still hung from his underside from chin to tail. He reached the flat of the rock and on into one of the smaller caves to the north. He was looking for a quiet secluded spot where he could spend the afternoon washing while brooding over what to do about Shaha, Falana and above all that slippery baboon.

He had not eaten for some days. His hunger confused his judgement and telescoped the hours so that sunset took him unawares. In the shadows of the cave he found that night came sooner than on the open savannah. He was still struggling to clean the last of the rough grit from his fine underfur as darkness fell. He felt sure that he had to return his fur to pristine perfection if he was ever to get anywhere with Falana. No lioness was even going to look at him unless he was clean.

He felt mixed-up and confused. It had to be said that she was quite attractive in her defiance. He considered her a challenge to his adulthood; he knew that he had to conquer her simply because she dared to say no to him. Not that she had actually said no, Nengwalamwe had not even asked, yet he was certain that if he did then Falana would reject him. This tacit rejection was what drove his determination. One day she would say 'yes' to him, one day he would prove his adulthood to her. He did not want cubs, he certainly did not want Falana, what he wanted was to show that he was a lion who commanded respect. That done, there would be nothing left to hold him, nothing at all. So he would leave her and leave these Pridelands altogether.

The baboon was an altogether different problem. He had followed Nengwalamwe back to the rock and was spending the afternoon hanging about on the high ledges way out of the lion's reach. Occasionally he sent, whether by accident or design Nengwalamwe could not determine, showers of earth and loose stony fragments down to the lower, broader walkways that Nengwalamwe used around the rock. What was he hanging about for? What was there for a baboon here on the rock, particularly as there was no food and a hungry lion prowling about?

Nengwalamwe decided to ignore the baboon for the time being. They often hung around high spots during the day, watching the comings and goings of the savannah and hurling occasional abuse and more at anything within range before running away excitedly. However this one was very quiet. He seemed more bored than anything else. He made only one sound that Nengwalamwe heard: a frustrated sort of chatter that preceded one of the more substantial rock falls. Nengwalamwe thought about going to see what all the noise was about and had barely got up when a curtain of dry earth and sharp stone fragments dropped and clattered down from the arch of the cave entrance. He froze and waited, looking up wearily as if he could see the baboon through the roof. With the last stone, silence fell over the rock once more.

More than likely the stinking animal would wander off by itself when it got bored with whatever it was that it was doing. Nengwalamwe was prepared to

let him waste his time while he got on with more important matters: cleaning his belly fur. The baboon would pay for his part in the incident by the waterhole later, after all it would be impossible to catch him up there on the slippery bare rock that afforded no clawhold. To attempt to catch a baboon, that was much more used to scrambling over the rock, in the dark was not the sort of thing Nengwalamwe liked. What he wanted most was to get himself clean, and with that out of the way he would set his mind to filling his belly. A foul smelling baboon would suffice if needs must, but something more palatable would be far more to his taste.

In the darkness, Nengwalamwe licked himself into deep and undisturbed sleep; filled with nothing more unsettling than a dim scene of young cubs playing with Nengwalamwe's tail under a tree. One turned to him and he was half aware that he recognised her.

Sometime during the night, the baboon climbed down from the top of the rock to the ledge at the entrance to the lion's cave and peered in for a few seconds before slipping away unobserved into the darkness.

The following dawn was subdued and shrouded by cloud. It was nearly half an hour after first light before Nengwalamwe woke to the few fleeting shafts of early sunlight that penetrated the entrance of the cave. He still felt empty and drained. This, he was determined, was the day he would finally get to eat. So few of sounds from the plains drifted up into the cave that the lion thought at first that it might still be before dawn. When he had stretched and shaken he walked calmly to the cave entrance and stood, blinking in the light. The sun was struggling to break through the clouds that streamed down from the mountains. The lion yawned, finishing with a rasping light growl that was designed in part to tell the baboon that the great Nengwalamwe was awake.

To the east, on the open grassy plain below the rock, vast herds, mainly of zebra and wildebeest but with smaller groups of lighter coloured antelope, grazed forming a grey blanket as far as the eye could see. The lion's eyes picked out the movements of the lesser groups, some of which looked likely to be Thomson's gazelle - just about at the upper size limit for his hunting skills. He stood and watched for a while, partly to assure himself that the baboon had finally gone and partly to determine that Falana and her mother were not around to spoil his day.

After a minute or two his natural confidence returned and he set off along the ledge to the promontory. Less than a minute later he paused to mark an outlying boulder before walking purposely on to the plain with the sun before him and the towering rock casting its long, cold shadow behind him. From those deep shadows, a pair of hunting dogs trailed in his paw prints, careful to keep out of the lion's earshot.

It took Nengwalamwe longer than he had expected to reach the outliers of the herds. From the promontory of the rock they had seemed much closer. The sun had risen steadily and now, with merciless heat, tried to burn away the clouds that threw their shadows rolling over the herds. He was hot and breathing heavily, making it difficult for Nengwalamwe's drained mind to concentrate on any one beast. For a while he totally lost the Thomson's gazelle he had seen from the rock. He wandered to-and-fro making a few probing rushes into edges of the herds hoping to flush out any stragglers. It was beginning to

become apparent that his mane was far too visible for him to be anything other than a very minor irritation. Every time he moved on the herd, it opened up in front of him in a wide arc, he heard little more than a few grunts of vague alarm. He broke off, growling under his breath as the incessant throbbing in his head grew unbearable.

Nengwalamwe was totally unaware that he was being watched discreetly from a rise at the southern edge of the grassy plain by the dogs who had followed him from the rock. In time they tired of the ineffective efforts of the lion and eventually, with nothing more than a nod to each other, turned and trotted back the way they had come. It was clear that the lion, whoever he was, was not going to be able to feed himself for much longer if this was how he hunted. As he had been rejected by the lionesses he was not going to hang around for much longer. The dogs knew they would not have to bother about this lion for very long.

Nengwalamwe's efforts grew more desperate with each attempt. Just before midday his patience finally broke and he suddenly rushed at full stretch towards a nearby zebra, roaring as though it were an intruding lion that had discovered him alone with his lioness. He could only close to within four lengths of the zebra mare before it galloped off barking shouts of alarm. He gave chase until his legs and lungs began to burn, then he stood gasping in the stinging, airless heat. His legs could hold him no longer and he dropped down on to the grass and lay staring blindly. The heat and his hunger had finally brought him to the limit of his endurance, yet the full heat of the day was still to come.

He had had no food for many days, this would not normally have been much of a hardship for him but he was now becoming seriously dehydrated. The grass turned a foggy red in Nengwalamwe's eyes and his head pounded as though an elephant was dancing on his mane. At home the supply of fresh kill had been so plentiful that he could not recall ever drinking from the Kolata. Here, the river, much wider than the Kolata, was almost an hour's walk away across the open plain. Even now, just before the rains, it was swift flowing and dangerous with wide muddy banks. There was the ever-present threat of crocodile attack. Crocodiles were one of the very few things that Nengwalamwe really feared. The luggas that fed the river in the months after the rains were dryer than Nengwalamwe's throat. They were nothing more than parched dust gullies. The only water within his reach was the waterhole; the waterhole where he had so recently been degraded by that warthog's backside of a baboon. Here, on the wide expanses of the Pridelands he was forced to swallow his pride and return to the scene of his humiliation.

Nengwalamwe's head cleared a little and he struggled to his paws. He stood and closed his eyes to block the brightness of the sun but the all-pervading pain in his head remained. He turned slowly, dragging his forepaws through the grass. The waterhole lay to the southwest of the rock, at least a half-hour's mind-pounding slog away through the kopjes and thickets. He had little choice but to set off in the open to the nearest kopje, desperately hoping to find some shade among the rounded rocks and scraggling trees. He repeatedly had to stop and rest. His eyesight clouded over and he felt as though his head would burst. More than once he thought he would stop altogether and lie down never to rise. If it were not for the intermittent shade from the clouds then he might well have lain unseen and unnoticed on the ground as just one of the savannah fallen.

In amongst the kopje there was little shade. He moved on. In the thicket beyond he managed to stumble onwards, each pawfall growing more painful, each step draining him until he felt as though he would give himself up to any passing hyena simply because it would stop the excruciating pain in his head. Then, just as he was about to forget what he was living for, he came to the far edge of the thicket. There, just twenty lengths away, lay the remains of the waterhole, now little more than a muddy pool barely five metres across. He struggled to the mud's edge. There he found, like the day before, his paws began to sink. He was close, so close to the water when he collapsed and dropped down on the steaming mud. He had just not been strong enough to reach the pool and the mud had drained the last of his strength. He closed his eyes and felt the heat of the sun burn into his mane. He closed his eyes for what he felt sure was the last time and moments later lost all sensation, save that of the hot mud on his belly.

He woke. It was cool; the morning. He heard a strange confusion of sound: purring, treetops in high winds, chattering monkeys, everything all at once. It came from behind. He whipped round; towards him a green box slid along the ridge. It smelled of death and fire. He ran from it.

Then he saw her. She was watching something in the distance intently. Her face was dull and strained. Her coat dusty, unwashed for many days, her ears up but not high. Her tail hung down, still and limp. An almost lioness.

He stopped close by. The box screeched then stopped high on the ridge. Dust swirled. A man appeared in it, standing up. He took reached down and took up something black and covered his eyes with it. He too looked.

"What's going on?" he said, but his voice carried no further than his nose. "What's going on?!" He said no more now. Pointless. He too looked. Looked down the slope towards his rock, but it wasn't his rock. It was hers. A distant rumble rolled up. No, it was his. But that was neither a call nor a challenge. It wasn't triumph, nor joy; it was pain, unending pain. He was drawn to it.

Then he was there; at the hollow's edge. Below, out of view from the rock, lay a lion. On his side. His legs out straight and shaking, shaking, still then shaking again. His mouth hung open, panting. Eyes greyed; open but unseeing. Dying.

Another lion came. Strong, frightened. Caring, uncertain. He wanted to stop it. Did not know how. No one to stop it: shaking, drooling, staring, dying.

Thunder. The buzzards flew. The lion ran off. He stood watching. The man came. He too stood. The un-living lion saw nothing. Just breath rasping, gasping his life out. Head raised. Not much. Too much. Eyes plead. For release.

The man looked away. Looked back. Stick raised. In an instant thundered the life out. Dying no more. At peace.

Then he was walking. Beside the lioness and the lion. Going to the rock.

"Your grandfather is dead."

The lioness stopped. Head hanging. The lion looked back.

"Three days. It wasn't long, he didn't suffer." He lied. She knew.

"What killed him? The man?"

“Yes... no. I don't know.”

“Was it like the others?”

“Yes. Yes, it was like the others. The man helped him. Spared him the worst. We few are all that's left.”

“We are one?”

“You and I?”

Nengwalamwe suddenly felt something cool splash over his closed eyes. He was surprised to realise that he could open them a little and look ahead. He felt almost alive, his head still felt as though a rhinoceros was sitting it on but the debilitating weakness of his trek to the waterhole had left him. He felt the sun square on his off flank, when he felt the sun had been almost directly ahead. His thirst was unabated and burned into him stronger than the sun. He tried to get up, for a moment the mud held him back, then his returning strength won the battle and he rose to his paws.

One leg at a time he pulled his paws slowly from the drying mud and moved forwards to the soupy water's edge. He carefully drew forward so that his hind paws almost touched his front. He leaned out over the still water and reached down to the surface. He lapped vigorously, splashing almost as much of the water over his muzzle as that he managed to drink. For over a minute he drank, luxuriating in the taste of the water, never had he appreciated just how good it was to drink. He let the cooling water run down his nose and even into his mane. He didn't care about what he looked like, he just cared that he was alive.

“Bet that hit the spot, eh, kid?”

Nengwalamwe lifted his head, water running down from his chin in threads that quickly turned to drips. He looked across the surface, his eyes following the ripples that spread away from him. Coming to the opposite edge of the pool he saw that baboon sitting watching him. His head felt so painful when he moved that he immediately dismissed all ideas of chasing the monkey.

“What are you doing here?” he asked tiredly.

The baboon spit a stream of water past his ear and grinned. “Drinkin', same as you. What's it look like, I'm havin' a bath or somethin'?”

Nengwalamwe grimaced as the light breeze turned a little bringing the baboon's scent over the water, “Not that you couldn't use one.”

The baboon pulled a face. “Ingrate. That's a fine way to talk to a guy who's busy savin' your behind.”

“Saving me? YOU? You couldn't save me, I'm a lion.” Nengwalamwe was sure his head was about to explode and hoped that a simple pretence of power would impress the monkey.

The monkey rolled his eyes. “You think water splashes over you by itself, huh?”

Nengwalamwe now realised that it must have been the baboon that had woken him. Before he could stop himself he did something quite selfless.

“Thank you - for saving my life I mean.”

"Wellll..." The baboon shrugged uncomfortably. "I mean, I didn't save your life, you just had a bad touch of the sun. You'da been OK come sundown."

"Yeah? Well, I've still gotta thank you. And yeah, I needed that for sure, like I need something else too." Nengwalamwe's eyes gleamed. "Say Bald-arse..."

"What, Hairball?"

"Are you sick?"

The baboon looked agitated and fidgeted uncomfortably.

"No, I'm doin' great, whatd'ya want to know for eh?"

"Oh nothing really, I just was wondering if you might drop dead so I could eat you."

The baboons fidgeting burst into a dash to one side of the side of the pool, from where he could scurry away if the lion made a move on him.

Nengwalamwe laughed gently. It hurt. "Hey, it's OK, I wouldn't try to catch you. Not now... I owe you my life."

"Catch me?" the ape shouted back defiantly. "Forget it Fuzzbutt, you'd never do it. Anyhow, you ever heard of the code of the waterhole?"

"Yes, course I have," for a second or two Nengwalamwe struggled to recall his father's lessons by the Kolata. He couldn't quite remember anything about any waterhole code. "Bald-arse, quit calling me Fuzzball."

"Why? You got a name then?" The baboon looked surprised, as though he had not expected lions to have names.

Nengwalamwe winced, and then replied quietly: "Nengwalamwe."

"Really?" The baboon scratched absently at his arm with dexterity that astonished the young lion, picking off and popping an insect into his mouth. "Wow, that's my grandfather's. Was, kinda - he's dead." The baboon looked away adding: "Sort of."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. What happened to him?"

"Somebody decided to have him for dinner." The baboon seemed reticent. Then he gestured to Nengwalamwe, adding, "You know."

"Eaten by a..." Nengwalamwe's voice tailed off as he realised what the baboon must have meant.

The uncomfortable silence that followed was finally broken by the baboon's cough. "Yeah, well if you're done drooling water everywhere, we'd better get you cleaned up."

"Cleaned up! You clean me up? What for?" Nengwalamwe almost attempted a laugh, but the rhino in his head kept on charging. "You got me like this in the first place."

"Hey!" The baboon backed away a couple of paces. "That weren't my fault." For a few seconds he sat watching the lion. Then he did one of the most extraordinary things Nengwalamwe had ever seen. He ran forwards and leapt high, landing in the centre of the pool. Nengwalamwe looked on, totally bemused, until the splashes reached his face. The he recoiled, standing up straight, ears pressed flat against his head as he lifted it above the spray.

"What are you doing? Hey, I almost got wet for crying out loud!"

Nengwalamwe thought that he might not be the only animal to have been touched by the sun that day. The baboon seemed to have gone virtually mad and was splashing around in the water. He even seemed to be enjoying it!

"Come on in Fuzzball! It's really cool!"

Nengwalamwe grimaced. "What? Are you mad? Why in the stars would I want to go in there? It's dangerous!" Yet the baboon did seem not to be in any danger, other than from the ravenous lion standing close by that is. He actually seemed to be positively enjoying splashing around, he seemed to be... no, it couldn't be... the baboon was playing!

"Come on, it'll wash the mud off, it'll cool you down and its great!"

The young lion felt the mud hardening on his underfur. He had not yet managed to get himself fully clean from the last mud bath. What had he to lose but his dignity? If it helped to scare away the rhino in his head then that would be no bad thing too.

"Is there a bottom?"

The monkey gaped mockingly at him. "No! It's bottomless, ya doof. Of course there's a bottom, whadda I look like, a fish? I can stand up in it. Come on in, you'll love it, no one's lookin'." The baboon stopped and peered at him mischievously. "Hey... you ain't afraid of water are ya?"

Despite Nengwalamwe's rhino he was sure he could not let a challenge like that go by unanswered. He backed up a few paces and crouched to spring.

The baboon's grin vanished like lightning. "Hey, not so faaAAAHHHH!"

The lion ran forwards and jumped, landing on the water full length, sending water everywhere. The baboon shut his eyes tightly and gritted his teeth, "...st!" The water surged and rushed over the ape rolling up the muddy sides of the pool, exposing the silty bottom, then turning and slowly filling the pool again. The lion slid along the mud, coming to rest with his nose touching the crouching ape's side.

"I guess I found it huh?" said Nengwalamwe smiling. For a while the ape sat tight, saying nothing. Then he too risked opening aneye.

"Oh yeah, you found it all right," he said, shaking water out of his ears. "Boy, you sure now how to have fun don't ya?"

"Now what?" asked Nengwalamwe as he swished his tail, covering his back with cool water.

"You get yourself clean. Then we'll sort you out somethin' to eat. But you gotta do as I say. You got me, Nengwall... Nengwam... aaah, dammit I never could say it, sorry Gramps... Nengwe?"

Nengwalamwe was already rolling over, feeling the water run down off his belly.

"Sure, I'll do as you say, no problem. Say, you know - this is really great. So what's yours then?"

"My what?" asked the baboon as he splashed out of the way of the frolicking lion's forelegs. "Hey, watch it!"

Nengwalamwe laughed gently, flicking his nose up from the water at the baboon. "Your name of course."

"Aahh... yuh, we'll get you all spruced up an' then we'll go grab ya a snack." The baboon sat up on the pool bottom and looked about uneasily: at the banks, at the trees to the west, the overlooking tower of the rock, at anything other than Nengwalamwe.

"There's no need to go, I've got everything I need right here: fresh juicy fat baboon."

"HEY! You said you weren't gonna eat me, fuzbutt!"

“I don’t eat my friends, and I kinda remember the names of my friends. I don’t remember yours though, so you.. can’t be my friend, can you?” Nengwalamwe lifted a paw from the water, splashing the baboon’s face. The baboon pulled back his lips, exposing his teeth, but he made no sound. Nengwalamwe partially extended his claws and waited...

The sodden ape let his lips close slowly. “Mtundu, my name is Mtundu,” he said quietly.

“Really?” Nengwalamwe twisted and licked his shoulder absently. “Wow! That was MY grandfather’s name.” He licked again with more force, adding, “Sort of.”

“No kiddin’?” Mtundu smiled nervously. “Wow, that’s cool!”

Nengwalamwe laughed, his rhino was at last running into the distance and he felt alive again. He splashed Mtundu again by slapping his outstretched forepaw down on the water, eliciting an outraged screech from the drenched monkey.

“Got ya!” He said as he watched the muddy water run in thin trails down the baboon’s chest. “It wasn’t really: One was Ngala; the other, my mother’s father, was Mbekiswe. So, what’s for dinner?”

‘What am I doing? “Believe me,” he says. “Sure, I’ll do anything you say. I owe you my life,” says I. Never trust a monkey, NEVER,’ thought Nengwalamwe as he walked back through the kopje later that afternoon. The heat had abated a little, though it was still oppressive; the humid air clinging to Nengwalamwe’s mane. ‘What does a baboon know about catching prey? “Trust me,” he says, but he knows a couple of lionesses who do catch prey, a lot of prey - they’re pretty good at it too, or so he says. Sure, who exactly are these lionesses?’ He growled, putting a tree full of birds to instant, swirling flight. He should have spent most of the day asleep but his failure to bring down any prey had put paid to that. ‘Yep, you fell for it Nengwalamwe, son of Nengwala. Who else could it have been other than those two self-important...lionesses?’ He swung his head from side to side matching the rhythm of his stride. He was a tired, hot and irritated lion, yet through it all his gratitude for Mtundu’s selflessness stood firm. The baboon should, in the natural order of the savannah, have provided him with a decent meal, and perhaps he still would, but not in the way Nengwalamwe had earlier expected.

The lion walked on as the day around him slowed in preparation for the evening. Soon, the hush and heat of late afternoon would give way to the excitement and cool of evening, and then to the danger and chill of night: the time of the unseen predator, the huntress. He came, in time, to realise that Mtundu, as unpleasant as he may have been, was right and that his best hope of a decent meal was with his own kind. However, as Mtundu had confirmed, Shaha and Falana were the only lions for many days around. That, while having to make do with what was available was rather irksome, did not concern the lion greatly. It did, however leave him with one puzzling problem: Yali. She must have been Falana’s daughter; ‘There’s no way she’s Shaha’s, she’s well past it’ he thought. He had seen no sign that Falana had a cub ‘in tow’, though lionesses

generally left their cubs hidden when they went out hunting. Yali was a bit old to be hiding though; at her age she should have been out with her mother learning how to hunt. It was something else that was strange about this place; the baboon saving him being another.

The more Nengwalamwe thought on, the more he came to realise that there was nothing else for it but to swallow his pride and throw himself upon Faha and Shalana's mercy. A bit of the old soft eyes and rubbing along their sides wouldn't go amiss of course. 'Oh yes, mustn't forget to put on a bit of a purr, that always brings out their maternal instincts.' His fur was now in perfect condition for such a meeting; indeed it was rather too soft and seemed to stick up as if it had a life of its own.

Nengwalamwe stopped thinking for a moment and hurriedly curled round and licked down another patch on his back that had decided to stick up. He had let the baboon deal with the top of his mane which even Nengwalamwe's tongue couldn't quite reach. He might even have made a decent job of it. He had certainly spent enough time fiddling with the long dark bay fur.

Anyway, it had all been the lionesses' fault; they must have been alone together for so long they had forgotten how to treat a lion. 'I can't blame them. I suppose I ought to forgive them.'

He thought it best to play up his troubles with the incredibly aggressive wild dogs. After all, if they had attacked and chased him, then they must have given the lionesses some trouble too: 'I'll make sure they can hunt in peace. Hunt for me of course, they'll not be able to resist when they realise I'm going to save them from those dogs. That's what lions are for, to protect lionesses, and get their just rewards: warm food and the occasional warm body.' He smiled, before hoping, quietly and very much to himself, that the dogs were not going to show up and force him to do any actual protecting.

9. A First Time for Everything

Falana strode a little behind her mother. She was impatient for the fall of evening.

“Mother, are we getting going or what?”

Shaha stopped suddenly and stared ahead. Falana slid out from her mother’s wake and up to her side; sniffing her flank as she passed. Shaha stood still, ignoring her daughter totally.

Falana joined her mother in staring, open mouthed, into the distance. A large furred form passed into the thin shadow thrown from a lone acacia grazed table flat by generations of giraffe. “Just what is that?”

“Falana - That is a lion. You know - one of those big hairy things that like to lie around all day wishing you were in season.”

“Yes, but what IS that?”

Shaha paused, trying to make sense of the apparition surmounting the lion’s head and shoulders. “I really have no idea.”

It came closer and closer. When it was within five or six lengths it smiled. It neared the lionesses and paused, sat down and stared back. The lionesses’ eyes held on it, oblivious to the flies that flew about and landed on their faces. The lion seemed pleased with himself. Before the flies became unbearable, he got up and walked purposefully toward the lionesses. He smiled again as he drew close, still their eyes following him without blinking. He moved close enough to feel the older lioness’ breath on his neck as he drew himself past her muzzle. Falana closed her eyes as he slid past her, she could feel deep vibrations coming from him: he was actually purring. He turned behind her. Her fur crawled and she shivered at the thought of him brushing along her other flank. She wasn’t going to give him the chance. She turned to him, growling loudly:

“What are you doing? What do you want this time?”

The lion seemed quite unperturbed by Falana’s hostility.

“Nothing, I just thought...”

Falana snapped at him with bared teeth, “Go away, we’re busy.”

The lion stopped and jumped back out of claw range.

“B... but... but there are wild dogs about, Falana.” She was clearly unimpressed. The lion went on, “They can be very dangerous you know. I couldn’t possibly let you go hunting alone.”

Shaha appeared much more relaxed than her daughter about the lion’s presence and, as she raised and licked a forepaw, asked with only slight curiosity, “Hunting Dogs? Here? Are you sure?”

The lion turned to Shaha, keeping Falana just in view.

“Err, yes. Actually I met some just a while back, but you know how it is.”

“Yes?” probed Shaha dubiously, “How is it exactly?”

“I sent them packing with their tails between their legs.”

Falana drew back and shook her head to gain his full attention.

“You did? Oh really?” She growled at him scornfully. “Looking like that I’m not surprised they ran away.”

“Err...” For a moment he seemed to be wondering just what was wrong with the way he looked. “Yes well, sure I did. They won’t mess with me again.”

Falana was not at all convinced by the lion's bravado. "Is that right Nen... Nangw... Nemwag..." She shook her head; the flies rose as one, milling around incessantly. "What IS your name exactly?"

The lion noticeably altered his stance, raising his head proudly. "I'm Nengwalamwe, son of..."

"Nengwalamwe?" asked Falana in disbelief. "What kind of a name is that for a lion?"

Nengwalamwe breathed in deeply. "It's traditional. My father is called Nengwala. Names like mine have been in my family for generations."

"So have worms..." said Falana sarcastically, turning away from Nengwalamwe, "Look - I'll just call you... Nengwe. That sounds better doesn't it?"

"Hey, no way! It's Nengwalamwe or nothing. That's my name!" The lion seemed genuinely hurt by the jibe.

Falana looked her mother in the eye and smiled, then turned back to the lion and with a straight face. "OK Nothing," turning quickly away before he could reply.

Shaha stepped forward suddenly and hooked her head under Falana's chin, forcing her daughter's head up sharply, "Falana!"

Falana pulled her head up abruptly to stand firm with her head held high above her mother's outstretched neck.

"Hey, mother, what do you think you're doing?"

Shaha rumbled tensely. Falana went on, "Nothing, can you hunt?"

The lion fought to be heard as Shaha's rumbles grew louder.

"It's NENGWALAMWE!"

For a few moments the heat of the late afternoon swallowed them all in a dense, tense, cloud of pungent warmth. It was Falana who eventually backed down, retreating in a pair of slow and symbolic paces. She was careful to keep her eyes firmly on the lion as she lowered her head submissively. While she knew what her mother was capable of, she was not at all sure of the newcomer. As the tension fell away, Shaha's rumbles slowly tailed off into inaudibility.

"Whatever," said Falana dismissively. She expected a further rebuke from her mother. It came as a piercing glare that held the promise of the use of well-worn claws. "Well - lion. Can you hunt?"

Nengwalamwe looked surprised. "Me? Hunt? Erm, yeah, I hunt pretty good."

Falana, feeling she had the measure of her mother, continued her sarcastic attack, "Aaah, then it must be the worms that keep you so slim." She drew forward a pace and thrust her head close to the lion's ear. "Do you know the Saffi Nearside Flip Manoeuvre?"

"Sure, I know loadsa others too." He seemed almost pleased with himself. "Why, I probably know more than you do."

"Sure you do... What do you think, mother?"

Shaha just stared at her daughter. "You can't mean... Falana? You don't - do you?"

"Why not mother? Three are better than two. He can work for his keep."

Shaha studied Nengwalamwe for a moment, then she looked to her daughter and finally back to the lion. A gentle smile crept over her. "We'll be the

judges of how good you are. Just don't get in the way and let us do the work. You're young enough to be able to learn a few things. Now Falana, we have work to do."

Falana's expression hardened as Shaha turned and passed in front of her.

"Hey! I can hunt!" called Nengwalamwe as Falana and Shaha drew away from him.

"A lion? Hunt? Oh sure," laughed Falana cruelly. "Apart from fluffing up that mane of yours there's only one thing lions are good at - and I reckon you'd mess that up too."

He stood firm as he watched the lionesses walking effortlessly away. He paid particular attention to Falana, who moved with an especially sinuous and attractive ease. They had no intention of waiting for him. If he wanted to eat he was going to have to keep up with them. He took a pace forward and stopped, calling after them: "I offer to protect you and this is all the thanks I get? Come on, lighten up. I'm only trying to do what's right and keep you out of trouble."

Shaha took no notice but Falana hesitated, halting and turning her head back to the lion. "Nengwe, the only thing I've seen you do is try to get to our kill." She began to turn back but instead stopped and called into the moist, rapidly cooling air. "No, I tell a lie - there is something else I've seen you try to do, but I'm telling you now I ain't that sort of lioness."

"I am trying to protect you...!" but Nengwalamwe wasted his breath. The lionesses walked on, drawing away steadily, ignoring his protests.

Shaha leaned over to Falana as they walked side-by-side. She spoke quietly as the lion's rumbles ended. "The Saffi Nearside Flip? What is that? I've seen every one she made but I have never saw that one."

Falana giggled gently. "Nor has Nothing back there..."

Nothing much happened for some time. Nengwalamwe had decided early on that the best thing for him to do was to watch the lionesses work from a distance. "To get to know your style," he explained. Shaha kept her thoughts to herself.

He did not escape Falana's continued cynicism as he followed the lionesses away from the acacia. She knew that the lion was bluffing his way to a meal but she quietly welcomed him volunteering to keep out of the way. He tried to put her hurtful comments to one side, but they kept on uncomfortably returning to his mind.

He lay and watched the hunt from the summit of a ridge overlooking the rich grazing to the south of the rock, which dominated the distant view. At the bottom of the ridge the slope eased, continuing gently down toward the foot of the rock. Between lay many shallow depressions, some no wider than the length of a tail, others big enough to hide a whole pride of lion. The lionesses were using these to lie up unseen between strikes. The prey, a widely straggling mixed group of gemsbok and other antelope, seemed exceptionally cautious and wary. No matter what moves Falana and Shaha made, the herds managed to sense and possibly even predict them all. Just possibly it had something to do with the large lion lolloping on the distant skyline.

Nengwalamwe watched for over an hour. He lay in a strip of bare ground that extended straight behind him into the distance, paralleled precisely by a second similar strip no more than a length away. Just ahead of the lion the strips faded and then vanished entirely; he had no idea who or what had made them.

In time, long after the final glow of evening had faded leaving the stars shining in the blue-black velvet of the night sky, Nengwalamwe glimpsed Falana's back emerge from the nearest hollow. Shaha followed slowly. They were both tired, though Falana still moved beautifully. 'Hopefully,' the lion thought, 'the edge'll be off her tongue now. I guess she'll not laugh at me anymore.' He smiled in anticipation of taking her down a peg or two. Shaha dragged her tail but her daughter seemed quite unaffected by their fruitless efforts.

"Come on you two, what was that meant to be? You were far too far away for a strike that last time."

Shaha stopped and looked Nengwalamwe straight in the eyes. "Right young Nengwalamwe. It's time you stopped bragging and put that mouth of yours to work."

Falana joined her mother, "Yeah! let's see if you really CAN hunt, 'young' Nengwe."

Nengwalamwe looked about in confusion; he had expected the lionesses to call off the hunt, if only for a while, to rest. He had certainly not expected them to call his bluff.

Falana went on, "You go down there and show *us* what you can do. Go on; let's see how close *you* can get." She stifled a laugh.

"What's up with you? What's so funny?"

Falana laughed openly. "Oh, nothing..."

"If you're not going to tell me - I'm not going to show you my hunting skills."

"What hunting skill..." A well-aimed flick of her mother's tail on her hind legs silenced Falana.

Shaha glared at Falana and, seemingly satisfied that she was under control, turned to Nengwalamwe. "Yes, now Nengwalamwe, you can't just lie there and expect us to do all the work for you, can you?"

The lion hurriedly rose to his paws saying, "Well, err... no, I guess not." He looked around distractedly.

"They're that way." Falana pointed her muzzle down the slope in the direction of the distant rock.

"Yeah, I know! I know." Nengwalamwe moved forwards. His forepaws felt oddly empty. They flopped down from his legs and he stumbled as he put his weight on them. His hindpaws felt little better. He lurched away, the lionesses watching him in quiet amusement. Suddenly he fell on his nearside as his paw struck an unfelt and unseen stone embedded in the slope. His downy belly fur flashed white in the starlight as he rolled over. He let out an agonised growl, which he cut short with teeth gritting determination. He heard Falana laugh again. Nengwalamwe gathered himself up from the stony ground, and forcing a smile, turned to the lionesses. He felt a burning coldness in his paws that turned within seconds to a thousand cub claws scratching away at his bones. He was determined that he was not going to give Falana the satisfaction.

He walked away as best he could, soon dropping below the lip of the nearest hollow. He lay down as soon as he was out of sight; rolled over and waved his paws desperately in the air.

For the next half an hour Nengwalamwe wandered about the silver shadowed savannah trying to look as though he really did know what he was doing. He thought he did know how to hunt. He had caught enough small prey in the half-light of early morning and evening to survive alone for a while, but this was for real and under less than favourable conditions. Small isolated clusters of clouds eclipsed the stars of earlier. As each cloud cast its shadow he had to hold still in case of blundering into anything that might give his position away.

Faint silver shrouded him again. Nengwalamwe grimaced as yet another cramp sent lightening sharp spasms shooting up his haunch. Once he had found his paws he got up from the hollow. For a while he felt good, but bruises were developing where he had fallen on to the protruding stones. His flank and haunch troubled him each time he crept forward; he faltered then gritted his teeth. He filed the pain away in the darkest back corner of his mind, breathing deeply in preparation for his stealthy approach through the starlight-painted grasses.

Lifting his head slightly to catch the air in his nostrils, he tasted the wind again and attempted to smile. The gemsbok were almost within striking distance. Dinner would soon be served and by his father's mane, he was going to do the serving. He hurriedly tried to remember the long lessons his mother had taught him. In those early cubhood days every hunt seemed to lead to a quick and clean kill and the sun always seemed to shine down. This was very different.

Now he was alone and close to the gemsbok, Falana's face swam into his mind again. He gritted his teeth against a fresh surge of pain as another cloud cluster passed, cloaking him completely. When it had passed, in near total darkness, he dared to peek over the waving tops of the grass. He smiled as he made out the huddled forms of the gemsbok only a few lengths away. His shoulder muscles rippled in melodious concert as he crept forward, intending to close for a strike.

What he did not intend to do was stumble over the lip of one of the deeper hollows, invisible among the starlight-silvered long grasses. He stumbled forwards, taken totally by surprise. He struggled, scrabbling noisily with his forepaws to gain purchase. He managed to stop himself, upright, close to the bottom of the depression. His sharp breathing sounded loud, magnified by the bowl. As if on his breath came a powerful smell, one that terrified Nengwalamwe. It spelt danger; it told of tearing claws and ripping teeth. It was the overwhelming and very fresh scent of another male lion. No, it was two male lion; both scents were distinct but similar, brothers perhaps. He had found what could only have been strong, fresh signs of Yali's father, and whoever he was he certainly was not alone.

Roaring in confusion, he turned violently to escape the scent and the danger it brought. As he turned, his injured haunch collapsed under him and he

tumbled back to the bottom of the hollow. The pain pounded him. He lashed out blindly, scoring the ground his claws. Somehow in his panic he managed to scramble to his paws and lurch wildly, his sides heaving, out of the hollow, accompanied suddenly by the wild yelping of unseen hyena. The gemsbok herd panicked, storming away in a cacophony of dust and noise; mothers calling continuously as they sought to keep track of their young and indeed each other in the panic.

Once away from the depression Nengwalamwe's senses cleared and he remembered the lionesses watching from the ridge. He had to redeem the situation, and his lost honour. He somehow managed to hurl himself after the herd: his paws scrabbling madly in the dusty earth. His eyes watered from the dust and the stabbing pain that flowed from his haunch with each stride as he rapidly closed the gap. His breath burned in his lungs as he sought and then launched himself at a slow old male at the rear of the herd, intending to land upon its shoulders and knock and drag him down.

He misjudged the strike and leapt too late, bringing him crashing down on the prey's rump instead of its shoulders. Whether it was the scent of the lions or his fear of looking a fool in front of Falana that had unsettled him he could not tell, and did not care. The gemsbok bucked and thrashed, throwing its head up and screeching in fear as Nengwalamwe's claws desperately sought holds in his sides, but finding none. The young lion lurched wildly, growling in fear and frustration as he felt his claws lose their hold. The gemsbok's rump bounced up and slammed into his chin. He cried out helplessly. Sky, stars, clouds and earth blurred together for a second. Then they asserted themselves roughly as he slammed down to the hard earth, his breath tearing from his lungs in a ragged gasp. He lay still where he fell.

He watched blearily as the now injured gemsbok galloped away to rejoin the herd, disappearing fast into the depths of the night. Then the rolling dust around him parted and the shadowy form of a lioness coalesced from the darkness.

"Nothing?" Falana padded forward uncertainly, sniffing for the lion.
"Nengwalamwe? Answer me, damn you!"

Nengwalamwe drew in a ragged breath that burned like fire and coughed.
"Over here," he said weakly.

Falana's eyes lit up in fury. "What in that stupid name of that father of yours did you think you were doing?"

Behind her, Shaha glided silently, her expression grave and unforgiving.

Nengwalamwe looked to her with pleading eyes. "I was trying to close in like you said...."

"I never said for you to try to kill yourself! What do you think we're doing out here, playing cub games?" With a growl of frustration, Falana turned from the lion and trotted away towards the hollow, mumbling to herself under her breath.

Nengwalamwe looked miserably at Shaha; her silent form doubling, then trebling in his vision as he fought back a sudden wave of confusion. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect..."

"I know." She drew forward and gently caressed his forehead with her tongue, licking away the blood that trickled down his face from a cut on his ear.

“I don’t like mistakes; but I don’t expect perfection either.” She smiled humourlessly. “If I’ve learned anything, it’s that nobody’s perfect.”

Nengwalamwe looked at her, feeling like a cub again as if peering into his mother’s face at bath time. The soft touch of her tongue brought a weight of memories down on him. Thoughts of a time where all he knew was the warmth of his mother’s belly, the soft sound of her voice, and the gentle thrum of her heartbeat in his ear. “I’m sorry, Melakwe... I shouldn’t have left, it’s hard for me to get used to being alone.”

She broke contact and drew back. “Well, you’d better get used to it. I’m not your mother!” Her face was set. “We don’t have much time. Tomorrow I want you to work with Falana a little and get some sort of understanding going. I can’t allow another botched strike like that. It was either very brave, or very foolish. You’ve got heart young Nengwalamwe, I’ll give you that, but I think you lied about that brain.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Hey!” Falana called from the hollow. “Come on you two, look what Nothing’s found!”

Shaha’s set expression loosened. Nengwalamwe lay still. “Are you hurt Nengwalamwe?”

“No, I’m all right.” He tried to lift his forequarters from the ground. His pads slid across the earth. “Really, I am.”

“You had better be. Now then...”

“Hey? Are you two coming or what?”

Shaha turned away from the lion and started towards the call. “All right Falana, I’m on my way. What is it?”

Nengwalamwe took four deep breaths and forced himself to his paws and walked unsteadily after Shaha, his tail dragging in the dust as he followed her away.

What Falana had found turned out to be the carcass of an adolescent gemsbok. It was fresh and barely touched. It looked likely to be hyena kill, judging by the all-pervading scent that hung in the hollow. Nengwalamwe refused to follow Shaha and stayed at the lip.. Eventually Shaha dragged the carcass up the slope to where the lion lay licking his wounds. Although Falana had found it, it was obvious to the lionesses that Nengwalamwe had chased off the hyenas guarding the carcass and that it thus was his kill. Falana neither knew nor cared why the lion had then gone after the bulk of the herd. Shaha, however, paused to consider the question and to remember her own long forgotten experiences in these hollows.

Shaha took quite a time to investigate the carcass, peering at it while Nengwalamwe, having overcome his fears of the hollow, noisily ripped the hindquarters apart. If she saw through Nengwalamwe to the truth, she certainly didn’t show it; and eventually joined him and her own daughter in devouring the evidence.

The three made little sound as they ate. The savannah around them was alive with noisy life; none of which dared disturb the eating lions. Back in

Kolata, Nengwalamwe had become so used to the almost constant harassment by hyena and even jackals that he now felt somewhat disturbed by their absence. The rare treat of being able to eat in peace apparently passed as normality on these lands. Nengwalamwe felt that he would probably get used to it in time.

Falana kept on giving him foul looks and flicking him with her tail as he bolted down each and every mouthful. Falana, and even more so Shaha, ate comparatively delicately and slowly, even having time to clean their lips every now and again. After a while Nengwalamwe too thought that looked like a very good idea. As soon as his tongue touched his fur he felt the eyes of ten or more ravenous phantom hyena burning into him and he returned to the kill for another massive comforting mouthful.

He rose before the lionesses and moved away to pace back and forth along the rim of the hollow. While the lionesses ate on he looked and listened to the night and its fleeting shadows.

“What are you doing?” enquired Falana as Nengwalamwe paced past her tail yet again.

“I’m looking for hyena.”

“Why?”

“I’ve got to look after you two.”

“Go and look after us somewhere else. You’re putting me off my food.”

Nengwalamwe paused close to Falana and looked down at her; she had already turned back to the carcass. She twitched an ear as if to rid herself of an irritating fly. Nengwalamwe felt a sharp sting on his belly and heard the lioness’s tail flick back on to the ground beneath him. Shaha said and did nothing. She concentrated on eating throughout the short exchange.

When they had all feasted they began to talk about hunts and hunting. Shaha, at least, appeared quite pleased that new possibilities were opening up for the lionesses, having a lion to help might turn out to be a good thing. For a while Nengwalamwe felt as though he might have begun to win Shaha’s trust.

“Right, until you get used to working with my daughter and I, I don’t want you doing anything until I tell you to do it. Is that clear?” She looked at Nengwalamwe, more in the manner of a kindly school ma’am than a mother or partner. “You won’t do us any good if you’re trampled by the herd out there.”

“Thank you for caring about me,” he said gently sneering as his hormones returned fuelled by fresh gemsbok.

“I care about all of us. I don’t want us getting trampled because you move at the wrong moment. Do you understand?”

Nengwalamwe swallowed heavily and nodded, he realised that his optimism had been misplaced. ‘Weakness comes from caring’ he remembered. He sat up and raised a forepaw in readiness for washing it. “Yeah, I got it.”

Falana rose to stand beside her mother.

“Very well,” Shaha said, “let’s go then, shall we?” She stepped forward but then stopped. “Just what IS that thing on your head?”

“What ‘thing’? What are you talking about?” Without another word, the elderly lioness smiled and turned, flicking her tail against Nengwalamwe’s cheek and then over his head, forcing him to flatten one ear tight into his mane.

When moments later a hyena bayed a little way off, the lionesses ignored it. Nengwalamwe set off in the direction of the call, more in the hope of appearing to be doing something useful than because of any actual threat.

With Nengwalamwe gone, Shaha and Falana left the few remains and made their way back to Silent Rocks. Shaha slipped through the thin grasses with robust grace and hardly a whisper from the dry grass. Falana stepped forward and followed behind her mother, with a smug expression on her face at seeing the young male put in his place so properly. She smiled to herself saying under her breath:

“Now that’s the way to treat a cub....”

10. *Time Together*

Fed and refreshed, Nengwalamwe looked half-heartedly for the hyena for much of the night. He caught its scent, clear and foul, and followed it for a short while. It led back in the general direction of his rock. Everything seemed to be lead there, away from the lionesses. Once again, he had failed to make any positive impression on them. He decided that he had better leave them alone for a while. Falana had made a fool of him, and for that she would have to pay, but she'd do it when he was good and ready, just like his father would have done. Getting ready was going to be a problem, but first he had to rid himself of whatever the baboon had put on his mane. Who better to sort that out than he who had done the deed? Falana was going to pay for her disrespect and so too would the baboon, only sooner.

The leisurely hyena chase eventually turned into a rather more urgent and purposeful baboon hunt. This baboon was not to be prey; gemsbok tastes much better, and doesn't talk. His mother always said, "Nengwe, never eat anything that talks, their last words will stick in your throat." He had eaten baboon only three times, and two of those he had not killed. The first had appeared one evening floating amongst the white water hyacinth at the side of the widest pool on the Kolata. An aunt had called him over to share it. The young Nengwalamwe had been afraid to try it at first, but the lioness enjoying the bloated meat soon changed his mind. The thought that the baboon, an adult female, couldn't swim, for the water had somehow claimed her life, surprised him.

The second, the baboon he met on his flight out of Kolata, was the only one he had both talked to and killed. Its death had been a necessity born of survival. It had sustained him in the mountains, through both its flesh and its words, and anyway, its eyes had been too close together.

His final baboon had become a much more recent meal. Shortly after Nengwalamwe had come down from the mountains, he had come across a male lying dead on a hillock. He looked untouched and fresh, though cold. His twisted eyes, though dull and lifeless, still bore witness to a terrifying death. There were few marks on his body - other than the deep tooth cuts on either side of his neck from which his life had flown. The marks were closer together than Nengwalamwe's teeth. He suspected they might have been a leopard's, though why it had not taken the body away to eat was a mystery. It seemed to almost to be some kind of warning, though of what and to whom Nengwalamwe could not tell. He stood close by for some time, watching for any scavengers or even for the leopard, whom he felt must still be close by, watching and waiting. When he felt sure there were no signs of any other claimants, he set upon the body hungrily; nothing disturbed him.

Throughout the night, as the lion searched for the baboon, the clouds gathered and slid through the sky in great gathered and folded clumps, casting rushing shadows. Nengwalamwe eventually found his quarry high on the crags above the lion's adopted rocky home. When Nengwalamwe called, the baboon came to him voluntarily. Indeed, he was almost friendly. The lion showed his displeasure, all teeth and bad breath; the baboon soon found himself picking at

Nengwalamwe's mane, pulling out every piece of hard-dried mud. The lion had never seen, up close, any living animal with opposable thumbs; he marvelled at the dexterity and precision with which the baboon used them. They were not so much paws as hands, and were evidently capable of picking out individual fleas from the deepest of Nengwalamwe's fur. However good the baboon's hands were, however, Nengwalamwe knew it would take hours of careful licking and paw dragging to restore lustre to his mane. No amount of washing was ever going to fully restore his pride.

Nengwalamwe lay still watching the dawn, then yawned wide enough to span Mtundu's head from ear to ear with space enough between his white-faced tongue and his upper teeth to fit the baboon's legs in as well. Mtundu frowned, blinked and shook his head.

"Wooh! Am I glad I ain't no zebra..."

The lion shook his head as he brought his jaws back together. The baboon withdrew his hands from Nengwalamwe's mane as it began to buck and twist under them.

"Yo! Kinda touchy today ain't ya?"

The lion settled his head back on his forepaws, licking his dark lips. Then pushed his head forward and down, dragging his tongue over a small patch of slightly disarranged fur on the upper part of a foreleg. At the end of the stroke, he closed his eyes and drew his tongue back to his lips so that just the tip showed. He lifted his head and repeated the process.

"Cummon Nengwe, keep still! How can I pick your mane if ya do that? Huh?"

Nengwalamwe paused mid-stroke and looked up straight-faced at the baboon sitting at his side.

"Get on with it - and my name's Nengwalamwe if you remember... Your name's 'food' if you don't." He paused and looked back to the glowing horizon, marvelling at its chilled beauty. "I just... I don't understand lionesses - you know."

"Wha'dya lookin' at me foor? I don't get them either, I ain't a lion y'know."

Nengwalamwe managed a smile. "Yeah, I guess I got to work it out for myself, eh?" He shook his mane, releasing a cascade of tiny mud crumbs.

Mtundu jumped away screeching, raising his upper lip and exposing his teeth threateningly. He swiped angrily at the lion's head, narrowly missing his ear. "What do ya think ya doin'? I ain't gonna mess with you no more! Cain't you keep still? Well cain'tya?"

The lion ignored Mtundu. He had no idea that a baboon was meant to sit still when he was being groomed.

"You know, I ought to take Falana just to show her who's got the mane around here."

"Take her? Yeah, right. That's real smart - like that's really gonna make her want to bring up your stinkin' cubs."

"I'm not talking about cubs" He shook his head again, a little less mud fell to the rock. "I'm talking about her."

"Is that what you really wanna do? Really?" Mtundu paused and stood back, "Why?"

“She made me look a fool. Now I want to make her feel a fool. I’ll have her and she knows it.”

“Oh yeah. She’d feel a fool all right - the one on her back. Think - you can take her once when she don’ wan’ it - revenge might feel sweet at the time. But think how much sweeter it’d be if you could have her whenever she was willing eh? Am I right?” He stepped forward again and nudged the lion’s head with his elbow. “Or am I right?”

“What do you know? You ain’t had a lioness...” Nengwalamwe looked round suddenly and peered at the hazy, dark fuzziness that looked to be the baboon. “Have you?”

“Well, kinda. It’s not like we were promised or nuffin’.” The baboon shrugged with his arms bent at the elbows into a wide ‘w’. “It’s kinda fun - hanging out together - you know.”

“Mtundu! Who is it?” Nengwalamwe asked; his curiosity peaked by the baboon’s evasion.

“Yeah. Like I’m gonna tell you, so you or the lionesses can eat her.”

“No, I’d never do that.” The lion smiled, “Well, only if she’s fat and juicy.”

Mtundu peered down his muzzle at Nengwalamwe, tilting his head and blinking, “Huh?”

Mtundu fended off Nengwalamwe’s further probing with remarkable reticence. The need for sleep eventually drained the lion, despite his determination, leaving Mtundu to groom him until he was far away from the rock. Mtundu did not tire, flag nor shy away from his obligation. He picked through every hair of the lion’s mane as if his life depended on it, which, of course, it did.

The sun climbed higher in the sky and with it Mtundu grew increasingly anxious. He kept looking at the length of the dwindling shadows thrown by the rock high above him, as if they had a power over him far greater than that of a lion.

The lion did eventually wake, but not before Mtundu had scratched with a fearful, wavering hand at the loose fur and skin between his shoulders. Without opening his eyes the lion murmured, a gentle stirring from deep within. Then he shook and lifted his head and with half closed eyes said with a self-satisfied laugh, “Next time the earth moves Falana, it won’t be an earthquake.”

“You treat her with respect you hear!” Mtundu blurted tensely. The lion looked round, his eyes brightening rapidly until he saw the baboon standing over him. His expression changed instantly.

“You’re not still here are you?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.” Nengwalamwe groaned and shrank back to the rock. The baboon continued, “I hear she’s old enough to be your mother.”

“Falana’s not old: she’s mature.”

“So ya do fancy her. All the more reason to be cool with her.”

“I don’t ‘fancy’ her! I might well never see her again.”

“Yeah, right, so what have you got me spending half the day prissing you up for? Come on, I know what yer go’in do later.”

“Mtundu, you talk too much, and mostly from the wrong end!” Nengwalamwe smiled, raising his eye ridges, “Anyway, I might not be going to see her.”

“Right, and warthogs fly. You’re not going to take her because you fancy her don’t ya?”

“NO MONKEY! You don’t know me at all. Look, you’ll see. She’s going to know what kind of lion I really am.”

“From what you said I reckon she already does.” Mtundu looked at the shadows, and then at the sky and suddenly became inexplicably agitated. “Jeez, I gotta run. See ya!”

Before Nengwalamwe could answer, the baboon ran off scuttling over the rock in great swinging strides involving all his limbs. “What was that all about? Baboons - never eat anything that talks. Yeah, right, I should eat them all before they get a chance to talk.” He growled under his breath. ‘Now then, he had better have sorted my mane out.’ He reached down with his tongue and wetted the back of a forepaw with four short forward licks. He turned his head over on its side, closing his eyes and dragging his turned-over paw through the fur between his ears, again and again. Finished, he lifted his head up and looked down to his paw - it was perfectly clean with not even tiniest speck of mud clinging to the damp fur.

With his shadow lying nonchalantly directly beneath him, Nengwalamwe stood on the threshold of his promontory home and looked out over his kingdom. He thought he was doing well. He didn’t feel hungry. He felt safe - at least now the dogs were leaving him alone. He felt proud to be the ruler of all this, even if there were no one that know he ruled them. This rock was his throne and his home, as anything with half a nose would have sensed from fifty lengths or more. ‘All a king needs,’ he thought, ‘is here, or out there... or even a queen, but I’m never going to have cubs, no chance - no way, no way!’ He smiled, quivering slightly with his own pleasure.

“Would you please stay put, Mr. Zebra?”

Nengwalamwe smiled wryly that the familiar voice, thinking, ‘Well, no cubs of my own...’ He looked round; sure enough there was Yali, stretched out, her belly hugging the searingly hot rock, her tail curling up into the air.

“Don’t you zebra know you’re meant not to see me?”

“Oh, aren’t they?” Then he added kindly, “Sorry, I mean, aren’t I.”

“Yes you. Did you hear me?”

Nengwalamwe answered honestly. “No, not until you told me to stay still. Err, I don’t know if I really want to know this, but am I your next meal?”

“Why? Don’t you want to be?”

“Well, I’d rather not be eaten just yet. Am I allowed to run away?”

“I guess so, but where’d you go?”

Yali’s words echoed with the innocent truth of youth. Where indeed would Nengwalamwe run? If Yali had been a leopard rather than a lion cub then Nengwalamwe would have had to stand and fight. While Yali still had the camouflage spotting of all lion cubs, she was, thankfully, no leopard. The rock

perhaps wasn't as safe as he had first supposed. What he needed was someone else to lie and watch from the other end of the promontory. This was a place for a pride and not just one lion. He looked around, just in case anything had followed Yali up the rocks.

"I guess so too. So is this where you pounce on me?"

"Yeah, if you'll just eat that grass there."

He looked down and saw the bare rock, 'Hmm, wonder what it tastes like.' He moved forward slightly, straightening his forelegs as much as he could and positioning them in rough triangle in a manner surprisingly not totally unlike the animal he was attempting to imitate. His neck, far shorter than a zebra's, was less co-operative. He flicked his tail around his hindquarters as best he could to send the flies on his side, more real than imaginary, unlike the zebra, to endlessly circling flight. 'Yuerrrhgh, does anything actually eat this stuff?' He waited for the little lioness to pounce. Tashi had been right, he did make a great target.

Yali loved pouncing: butterflies, birds, snakes, tails, they are all one to young cubs. She had had few chances to practise her pounce for a long while, and if Nengwalamwe was prepared to play then Yali was going to take him for all she was worth. She dropped back a few paces, stopped and pulled back on her shoulders with everything she had. Her haunches straining and rippling in tension; her soft pads gripped tightly, adhering to the rock.

Chin to the stone, underfur almost curling from the heat below, tail - where was that tail? Down tail. Deep breath in. Up eyes, check prey - Go! Pads feel like they are tearing off the rock, claws hit hard as paws twist, joints ache and muscles quiver, Oh that tail! There it goes again! The air rushing under lifts the belly. Head forced up, rest of the body follows, streaming forward. First pace - off forepads hit hard, but soften the shock, felt high in the shoulder, right to the bone. Near forepaw falls moments before near hind. Spine bends high. Must hold tail up - it hurts if it slaps the ground. Offhind down, forced back now, let spine uncoil and tail drop. Head stays level, eyes fixed on the prey. No ground contact now, off forepaw held under, turning it down as it nears the ground. Second pace - hurts less, speed building, knees aching, tail loosing it again. Breathe - feel it burn inside. Not far, one pace more. Head down, forget tail now. Push up more than forward on the forelegs, push back with the hind: leap! If the prey doesn't know I'm coming, it soon will. Claws out, jaws gaping, go for it! NO! Claws in! Claws IN! IN! Roar OUT....

Too far, too fast, too late! Miss his tail, hit the rock - hard. Tumble over, land on back - slipping, ripping, not gripping. Hit something, something soft yet hard and warm and furry. Stop.... nice smell, strong smell, familiar smell... safe smell.

"Hey! Where are going?!"

Lie still, you're home - safe at home.

"Are you all right Yali?"

Think - feels OK, tender but all in one piece. Don't worry about tail, "Yeah, I guess so..."

“You’re not much good at this are you?”

The lion looks down at me, he’s sorta upside down. Is that ‘looks up’ then?

“I used to be better.”

“Yeah, right - so did I.”

He smiles, he bends up... no down, I feel his breath on my cheek... then his tongue rasping up, down, whatever.

“You’re nice - I like you.”

“Oh do you now? And why’s that?”

Giggle a bit.

“Heehhe Nengwe, ‘cos you let your mane down now an’ again.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean little lioness?”

“Oh, nothing.” Giggle again, ‘Yeah - nothing’s right.’

“Hmmm, so you must be Falana’s daughter. I can see a bit of her in your eyes.”

‘No I can’t laugh, I mustn’t.’ “Oh no, no, ” giggles again, ‘I am allowed to giggle a bit aren’t I?’ “Quite the opposite.”

“Eh? Who else’s can you be?”

The lion slicks back his mane, ‘Who’s he doing that for? As if I didn’t know.’ When he’s finished he looks back, twitches an ear and does it all over again.

“You like to look really cool don’t you? Is it for a lioness?”

“NO! No. I just like to look good. Not that you’d know anything about that.”

“Yeah, you got a lioness all right,” giggles again.

“No way cubbie. I’m never going to be tied down to a lioness.”

“What about three?” ‘He’s gonna be mad at me now.’ The lion stares down sternly. “Yeah, I’m gonna get the ‘cubs shouldn’t talk like that’ speech aren’t I?” His stare turns to a gentle smile. “Or any. I’m free to do what I like, when I like... with whom I... err...”

“Yeah Nengwe?” ‘Oh no, that’s gone and done it, he hates being called Nengwe, doesn’t he?’

“It’s NENGWALAMWE!” Nengwalamwe looks up in surprise, more sort of along really. That’s the thing about being a cub: you’re always smaller than everyone else.

“Yeah, whatever.” ‘He kinda looks worried now, why?’ “What’s up Nengwalamwe?”

“Err, does my mane look all right?”

“Yeah, it’s great. Like a... mane. Why? Who you meeting?”

“No one.” He draws away self-consciously and licks again. “It just got into a mess earlier.”

“You been wallowing in the waterhole again?”

“What do you mean ‘again’? Eh?” He comes close, almost whispers, “Well, I’ll tell you this: Don’t ever trust baboons.”

“Ooo right.” Yali pounces on something in the grass, just a little cubby pounce this time, “Err, why Nengwe?”

“Ooooooooooooo.” He shakes his head. He settles down and goes on, “I let one pick it for me. I think he must have put mud in it, or something.”

“Oh, so that’s what it was!”

“You saw that? Who hasn’t around here? It must have looked really stupid.”

“Sure I saw it. I thought it looked kinda cute.”

“Cute! I don’t do cute. I do...” He growls gently, “...Lion! I might be king around here one day.” He looks back quickly, “Are you sure my mane’s all right?”

“Yes, sure I’m sure. Now just stop going on about it, you’re almost as bad as my sister.”

“Sister? What sister?”

“This pouncing’s fun!”

“Ahh skip it Cubbie. Yali, look, I gotta go.”

“Why? Don’t you like playing with me?”

“Of course I do, but I gotta go and do... kingy things - you know.”

“OK, I know. I’ll see you again. won’t I? You do still like me don’t you?”

“Yes, sure I do. Look, you can see me whenever you like. But right now I really gotta run.” He turns away, bounces a few paces, and then looks back. He sees nothing.

“Mother?” Growled Falana, “Mother? Are you listening to me? You’ve got that far away look again.”

“What?”

“Mother?”

“Are you ready Falana?”

Falana look puzzled, as if Shaha was part of an entirely different conversation, “Ready Mother? You know I won’t be for half a moon yet.”

“No, not that. Nengwalamwe’ll be here soon.”

“No he won’t. He’ll not show up. I know his kind: all mouth and no claws.” she flicked the mid-afternoon’s flies from her open flank with her tail.

“I think you’ll find there’s a little more to him than that. I’m sure he will turn up.”

“Is that so mother? What makes you so sure eh?”

“Trust me. I’m your mother - he’ll be here, and you had better be ready for him.”

Falana turned away, “At least that’s one thing I can’t do anything about...”

Towards sunset the wind stirred, wavered and then gathered its strength. It took the promise of rain from the mountains and gave it to the plains below. It was full, forming a warm, heavy blanket that fluttered and flapped over the grasslands. Two lions walked steadily, one behind the other, their coats glowing in the low late afternoon sun. The sharp light picked out every hair of the male’s magnificent mane. Where they were going few around them cared, as long as it wasn’t toward them. A few took interest, however, watching from distant thickets, hollows and kopjes. The lions did not see their watchers.

One of the lions stopped and lifted her head, looking about anxiously, “How much farther is it Nothing?” The other took no notice and carried on walking, paw after paw after paw. “Hey, you - Nengwe!” The leader stopped and looked back.

“Yeah? Can’t you keep up?”

“Nengwe, we ought not be here, this is dog country.” She looked around once more, “Is it much farther?”

“Why? Is the heat getting to you lioness? You haven’t got any stamina have you?”

“Look here lion, I can match you all the way. Anything you can do I can do long after you’ve given up.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Nengwe! Just how much farther is it to this rock of yours? If my mother hadn’t insisted, I wouldn’t even be bothering with you at all, and there’s no way I’d let myself be dragged out here to see some dunghill of a rock.”

“Nengwe, Nengwe this, Nengwe that! I’m Nengwalamwe!”

“Whatever. Are we there yet?”

“We’ll soon be able to see it. Once we’re over the next ridge we’ll be almost there.”

“Shut up and lie down,” replied the lioness urgently. She dropped to the ground; her eyes fixed on the horizon way beyond him.

The lion was confused and not a little surprised and was not at all sure if he should be pleased, or afraid. Falana, it seemed, was a lioness of unpredictably changing moods.

“Why?” Then he decided he should be pleased after all and stepped towards her. “Why Falana,” he said smiling, “this is so sudden!”

She lashed a foreleg out at him, “Shut it and stow it - quick!” he lurched back in surprise. Her paw made glancing contact. Surprised, that is, that she had had her claws fully retracted and had unleashed the swipe with little force. He stumbled backwards, flailing his tail in an effort to retain balance.

“Hey, what was that for?” He growled and grumbled as he regained his composure, “What have I done this time? What is it with you? Do you hate everyone - or just me?”

She bore into him with her eyes, the sort of look an angry mother gives her wayward cubs. He sank down to the ground somewhat frightened, and a somewhat in awe of her power and determination. Even now, as she tensed ready for the pounce, Falana was graceful and controlled. She held her tail out motionless on the ground behind her. Her head was firm and precisely level and fixed. Only her sides moved with each steady, slow and silent breath.

Nengwalamwe realised was afraid of her meteoric temper. He was very much a lion of habit and the unknown frightened him, as it had in the mountains and forests during his flight from Kolata. Here was a lioness, every day as old as his mother, behaving with no more steadiness than Llasani and her cousin. That was what reached into him and stirred his fear: not her teeth, her claws nor her bone-cracking jaws.

“Food,” she said curtly.

“Food?”

“Yes, Nengwag...whatever it is, food! Now keep quiet and leave this one to me. It’s not spotted us yet. Though it must be blind, a mole rat would have seen your mane from the other side of the plain.”

'Food? Is that what she's on about - she's wasting time over a snack.' He looked into her staring eyes and saw his mother staring back. "What is 'it'?" he asked uncertainly, "Is it enough for two?"

"Baboon."

"Falana, you really do hate me don't you?"

"Not *you*, you monkey! - it!"

"Oh... so you do, I mean, don't think I'm a monkey?"

"You're not *that* stupid, though you have if the nose sit on the face..."

He half closed his eyes and looked on, feeling her moist breath land on his cheek.

She went on, "This one really is stupid - he's actually coming towards us! Keep down and let me take it."

"Don't you think I can have a look too?"

Behind Nengwalamwe, the grass gave way to rough scrub; a jumble of low bushes interspersed with patches of bare almost infertile earth. Falana was too experienced not to consider the available cover. If she said she could take it then she could, of that even Nengwalamwe was sure. Yet, for some reason she held back; tensed ready for the spring.

"It's seen us! Come on Stupid, come to mamma, you're still just too far away."

Nengwalamwe's curiosity burned him; he felt he simply had to look. He curled his head round over his off shoulder. The horizon slid round in an arc until Falana's precious prey came into view. It was scurrying towards them, and it looked as if it had indeed seen the lions, and yet was quite unafraid. Nengwalamwe suddenly stood up, smiling broadly.

"What in the rains do you think you're doing?! Get down! You're ruining everything!"

"No I'm not," he said laughing, "anyway you can't eat him."

The prey ran a little faster towards them. Falana began to shake and her breath became light and erratic.

"Nengwe, how could you tell from so far away?" she asked incredulously, "Quick let's get out of here now! Whatever it's got I don't want to catch it - it's mad, it's got to be. It's seen you, it's running towards us! I'm getting out of here - now!" She tried to back away, still crouching, though now more in fear. Her awkward and uncomfortable wriggling was quite unlike her accustomed grace. Nengwalamwe reached down to her squirming neck and closed upon it gently but firmly, just as his mother had so often done to him when he had tried to escape punishment. She stopped moving the instant the skin of her neck tightened between the lion's teeth. As was her body, so was her fear restrained by the great warmth and tension bearing down on her. Apart from a quick scrabble of her hind legs, she didn't move while the infected prey closed on them.

"Nengwe; Jeez, have I been looking all over for you!"

"Nnngngnff" He replied through a mouth full of scruff.

"You lions had better learn to talk proper," the baboon said, his amused expression breaking into a smile. He saw the lioness' head protruding from under Nengwalamwe's mane. "Hey lad, did I interrupt sometin'?"

"No you didn't!" growled the lioness angrily.

“Sore-ry lady! I didn’t mean nuttin’ by it.” He paused as she grumbled incoherently. He looked up his friend.

“Come on Nengwe, ain’t ya gonna introduce me?”

She growled again, “Introduce you? You!” She struggled again but Nengwalamwe’s grip held firm but without piercing her skin. “Nengwalamwe! Let me go!”

“Only if you’re not going to run off on me.”

“Nengwalamwe! LET GO!! NOW!!!”

He thought for a moment, his eyes looking over to the baboon giving the silent message, ‘My life isn’t going to be worth living if I don’t let go soon.’ The baboon shrugged. He had not known lions for long enough to be able to interpret such gestures, interpreting those of his own kind was difficult enough at times, particularly those of females.

The lion rose gently, keeping a tight hold on the lioness’ neck. She grimaced as she followed upwards, her expression was clear: she didn’t like this at all. Nengwalamwe paused, the lioness, still scuffed, heaving powerfully in his jaws. He looked to the baboon again.

Mtundu shrugged again, trying to add smile.

‘I guess,’ thought Nengwalamwe, ‘that means: yes, go ahead.’ He took a deep, noisy breath in through his nostrils. He suddenly let go and instantly drew back, expecting the lioness to jump up at him. She did with glaring teeth and tightly drawn back lips.

“Go on cubbie, introduce me to the loony babboonie!” She scowled angrily.

“OK,” he said, trying to manage a half-smile, “as long as you promise not to hunt him.”

She roared angrily. “Don’t push it cubbie!” Mtundu started but held his ground bravely. “Wait a moment...” She turned to Mtundu with bared teeth and hot breath. “You - Monkey - did you say something?”

“Who me? Lady, are you talkin’ to me?” He presented his array of bared teeth. “Yeah, I spoke; you wanna make something of it?”

“But you can’t, you’re stupid. Everyone knows baboons can’t talk.”

“Everyone but me lady, and my family, and friends, and heck lady, the whole damn lot of us. Hell, even my youngest brother talks, and he sure is dumb.”

She shook her head. “But you can’t - you just can’t, it’s not possible.”

“Sure it’s possible. Ain’t I provin’ it?”

She stood motionless. All her anger spent, she lay down speechless and confused.

“Nengwe. I told you she was sumtin’ else, didn’t I?”

“Yes Mtundu,” he said pointedly. “Falana certainly is something all right. Whatever it is, she sure is it.” He looked to Falana, “Falana, I’d like you to meet Mtundu. He’s my friend and... he’s a baboon.”

A little of her fierce demeanour returned. “I can see that! What are you doing with a baboon?” She shook her head and before Nengwalamwe could answer added, “No! Don’t answer that. Just don’t say anything.”

“But Falana...”

“Don’t you ‘but’ me cubbie, I’ve had it up to here with you. I’d be more than happy if I never saw you - or him - again. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you.”

“Right, you’d better have. We’ve got a job to do, if you don’t remember, and it’s more than my life’s worth not to get it done.” She rose and stood four square. “Now get him out of here and we can get on with what we’re in this forsaken hole for. The less time I have to spend with you the better.” She looked up to the sky in despair, “Mother, why did it have to be me?”

Nengwalamwe gave Mtundu a look that had universal significance.

“I guess some other time eh?” He scurried off leaving Nengwalamwe to his fate in Falana’s paws. Before he had gone ten strides he threw a parting comment into the by now blustering wind, “See you around Nengwe..alamwe! And you too, Falana. It was good seein’ ya!”

The rest of what little remained of the day passed tensely but uneventfully. Falana saw Nengwalamwe’s rock. Despite her dismissive and generally derisive comments, he could see she was more than a little taken by the great rock; she even paused at one point to push with her nose and forepaws at the rocks that covered the cave entrance.

On the way back, in the last golden rays of the setting sun, not far from where they’d run into Mtundu, Falana once more grew tense and fearful.

“Quiet Nengwe.”

“What again? What for this time? And it’s *Nengwalamwe!*”

“Hushhh! She’s coming. Sit down, shut up and smile.” He stood still, resolutely refusing to sit down.

“Quick! Nengwe, she’s coming!” Falana sat back and dropped her head to look at the ground. Nengwalamwe stood and looked on. A wild dog walked towards them, her tail held high and her wide rounded ears, one tattered and torn, erect on her up-held head in a confident, almost arrogant posture. She slowed, passing no more than three lengths from the lions, her strong scent flowing all around. She looked to the lion; not to Falana, but to Nengwalamwe; looking him up and down silently for a moment. She flicked her tail and moved on wagging it vigorously. Nengwalamwe watched her in speechless disbelief. When she was gone, he turned to Falana as she lifted her head.

“What was that all about Falana? It was only some dirty dog.”

“She’s no dirty dog Nengwe, she’s a dirty bitch and no mistake.” Then she said flatly, “She’s Elizabeth, daughter of the Queen of the Pridelands.”

“Daughter of the Queen? So when did they make lionesses rule?” He stared at Falana. “*Daughter of the Queen?* You mean the queen is a DOG. You gotta be kidding me right?”

“Shuuussssh, she’ll hear you. Keep it down!”

“Come on, I’m the lion around here.” Falana looked scared. “Huh? What kinda stunt are you trying to pull anyway?”

“I don’t know who’s the king or queen where you come from Nengwe, but here the dogs rule and you had better not forget it. Come on, let’s get out of here, the wind doesn’t smell so sweet since she went past.” Falana got up and walked off.

“Falana, you’re serious aren’t you?” he called after her. Setting off, he was by her side in couple of strides.

“Deadly serious. Believe me; those dogs can kill you with a single look if they don’t like you. And I’m not at all sure Elizabeth there liked you much.”

“How can they do that? Come on, they don’t know how to kill a lion, not with a look surely, it simply isn’t possible. Anyway, how can they rule? They don’t know anything about what happens around here. Sure, they can bite but they’re nothing but stupid, slobbering, mangy... dogs.”

“They know Nengwalamwe, believe me. They get to know everything that we do or even think. They know who you are, that’s why she looked you over. She’ll know what you last ate and how many fleas are in your mane. Don’t ask me how they know, but they do.” She paused and looked about, fearful of unseen ears that might overhear, “We should not be talking like this. They’ll find out. Now come on, we’ve really got to get out of here.”

They left, walking together for a while before splitting up and going their separate ways as the final dying-blood red glow of the sun spilled through the grasses.

11. *The Ears of the Hippopotamus*

“...I know about all that. Now tell me about something important.”

“But you sent me and Falana there!”

“Yes, but not to find out about ‘the rock’ as you call it. I know all about that.”

To the Northwest, the bed rock that underlay the ridge broke surface forming crags no more than two lengths high. They were the Silent Rocks; they didn’t rise up out of the plain they were not a true kopje. They provided some shelter and were a good vantage point from which to survey the plain below. Shaha had decided, though precisely when even she had forgotten, that this was to be her home when she was in these lands. She was often lazed on the top, forelegs dangling over the edge, dozing the day away.

She, and her daughter too, avoided the enormous rock Nengwalamwe had claimed. There was nothing wrong with Silent Rocks; it was a good enough spot for lions to call home; but Nengwalamwe’s rock was better in practically all senses, and far bigger. Nengwalamwe knew it and so felt frustrated and confused. Hadn’t Shaha herself sent him to show Falana his home? Why just Falana? Surely, Shaha wanted to know about it too? Why didn’t she already know about it, but then she had just said she did.

“What about the cave? You can’t pretend you know about that.”

“Yes Nengwalamwe. I know about that too. I was... well... I know it very well. I can even guess what it means to you. That’s why I told Falana to go with you.”

He grew even more confused. He could not see how Shaha could know about his desire to explore beyond the rocky barrier at the cave mouth. Come to that he could not see how Shaha, whose scent he had not detected anywhere on the rock, could know about a place to which she clearly had never been. The only lioness he’d seen who could have, if she could even in truth be called a lioness yet, was Yali. She seemed at home on the rock, as if playing there was as natural as being washed by her mother. Who was her mother? Hadn’t she just denied being Falana’s cub? She could not have been Shaha’s; she was surely too old for cubs and anyway, she did not behave like a nursing mother.

“She said you’d asked her.”

“She would say that, Nengwalamwe. Why is it that you always only see the ears of the hippopotamus?”

The surprise caused by Shaha’s words flew upon him like an eagle snatching a rat. He was rocked by her question. He knew that it wasn’t a question. It was a statement of a truth so plain that he would never have seen it for himself. To see it, or for it to be shown, was one thing. It was an entirely different matter for him to accept and believe it. “What do you mean? I can see what’s happening. I know where I’m at.”

“Why are you here Nengwalamwe?”

“I’m trying to tell you about my afternoon with your daughter.” He knew that that was not what Shaha wanted to hear.

“Why do you stay here? Why don’t you wander off into the night?”

“I’m a lion; I don’t have to have a reason. Even if I did, I’m not going to tell you.”

Shaha smiled to herself and raised a paw that trembled visibly.

“If you were my cub I’d cuff you from here to the waterhole for that.”

“Go on then - I’d like to see you try!”

“Nengwalamwe!” she said sharply, her patience evidently thinning, “I’m not here to trade threats with you.”

“As I said, I want to know what your intentions are?”

“What? You never asked me that. What intentions?”

“I see...” she said tilting her head and shaking it gently. “Your intentions towards Falana.”

“Oh, her...” Nengwalamwe said as dismissively as he dared.

“Yes her, my daughter.” Shaha paused, “Why else would a lion like you hang around here?” She stopped, and raising her eye ridges added, “There’s nothing else here for you, is there?”

“There’s plenty of prey, not that you seem to be able to catch it. But there’s more to a lion’s life than food, much more.”

Shaha shoulders slipped off Nengwalamwe’s insult. “What if there is, Nengwalamwe? Are you more than a lion? When I was a cub the lions I knew were kings, not just lions.”

“You were a cub? No way Shaha, you were born old, you could never know what it’s like to be young. This land’s for the young. We own it so you had better just lie down and curl up all day and let me get on with the real action.”

“Action? ‘We’ own it? Who are these ‘we’? Now listen Nengwalamwe: I’ve been there. I’ve done things that you’d scarcely be able to imagine. I hunted with kings and seen the sun set on them all. I’ve run all day and all night for my cubs and I’ve seen more ‘action’ than you’ve dreamed about. I’ve done all that and more and I can still hunt you down. You’re just like any other lion. You’re nothing special. That’s why Falana doesn’t think anything of you, because you’re just like all the rest.”

“Hah! See, you don’t know anything - there isn’t any rest! Where are these lions? You frightened them all away didn’t you? No wonder Falana hates me, with you around, I’m not surprised she’s as she is. You’re through, you won’t have long to go, then you can put your paws up forever! I’m the one. I’m gonna be the lion on the Pridelands! I’m gonna be the king!”

Shaha stood impassively during Nengwalamwe’s tirade. When he had finished, she spoke quietly and resolutely. “You may be the only lion here Nengwalamwe, but that does not make you a good lion, and it certainly won’t make you king. Here you may never be the king; there’s already a queen and she’s a dog. Falana won’t stay here forever. She wants cubs but she’ll not have a cub as their father. You had better sort yourself out if you ever want to be that father.”

“But my father is the king where I come from” he said defiantly.

“My father was the king here too, but things change. You had better change too, if you want to carry on living here. Here you are just a lion. Nothing more - you’re just a lion.”

“OK, OK, I get it! So, what do I have to do to get Falana to like me? Do I have to impress her eh? You tell me what I have to do - go on!”

“Don’t. Don’t try to impress, you’ll always fail and when you do you’ll just look like the cub you still are.”

“Oh sure! You’d like that wouldn’t you? I know what you’re up to! You get me to do nothing to attract your daughter and she ignores me. That way you two stay together just like the ‘old days’. Yeah - you’re just jealous because you ain’t my type and you don’t want anyone to take your precious little cubbie away from you! Wake up, Falana isn’t a cub anymore, she’s a lioness and she’s begging for it - she just don’t know it yet ‘cause she’s under your stiff and wrinkled paw. I’m not gonna be like you when I’m ancient, I’m gonna die before I get old!”

Nengwalamwe finally had had enough. He turned and moved off. He accelerated away and barely saw Falana approaching from the top of the closest rise. He turned and ran towards her, leaving Shaha staring after him. Fuming, he refused to look back and when he reached Falana he brushed roughly passed her and on out of sight over the rise. She looked on for a few moments as he ran off into the moonlight. Then she joined her mother in the hollow below.

“What happened out there this afternoon Falana?”

“Nothing,” she said with a shrug, “We saw his rock. We came back. That’s all. Oh yes, and we had a visitation from Elizabeth. Nothing else happened. You know what Nothing’s like.”

“Well something else happened Falana. I’m not so old as not to notice these things. Stop calling him Nothing - you do know he’s attracted to you don’t you?”

Falana looked incredulously at her mother. Not because she didn’t believe her, but because she couldn’t believe that her own mother could have entertained such a thought. Nengwalamwe was the last lion, if indeed he could in truth be called a lion at all, that Falana would let get close to her. The thought of his silken mane surging and enveloping her shoulders as his teeth points gripped her neck filled her with revulsion.

“No way mother! He’s not the slightest bit interested in me - thankfully. How could you even think that?”

Shaha looked at her daughter and wondered. What had she done to her? What did she still have to do? How could more generations of great lion than anyone could remember end with Falana? Would they end with a cynical sneer, or would they grow anew from a contented growl and a gentle tongue drawn through soft, warm, welcoming fur?

“I may be old, but I am your mother and I know you Falana...” Shaha bore deep into Falana. “Oh yes, I know you.”

Falana’s eyes lit up with a fire kindled deep within from years of frustration. Moments later it broke free from its bonds and engulfed her. She turned on Shaha, lashing violently at her mother’s head with unsheathed foreclaws. Lunging forward, her teeth touched and instantly penetrated her mother’s neck. Shaha fell helpless, kicking out with her hindlegs desperately. Falana twisted over her mother, pinning her forelegs. Bringing her free forepaw crashing down on to Shaha’s exposed shoulder, she bit harder. Shaha roared out in intense, biting pain until the pressure of Falana’s jaws stole her breath.

Shaha’s hindlegs couldn’t make contact with her attacker; they ached and grew heavier with every ineffectual thrust. Falana knew what she was doing; she was doing what her mother had taught her to do when taking down a kill: hold

on tight and keep out of the way. She knew it was only a matter of time - time that was inexorably flowing out of Shaha in runnels of rich, fur-matting crimson.

The world grew confused for Shaha. She heard a laugh; a distant, self-amused laugh. She felt the pressure ease....

When she awoke, she wasn't alone. She felt a warm tongue on her neck. She opened her eyes. It was light, a little after dawn. Mind numbing pain shot through her haunch. Her neck throbbed and burned. She barely felt the dampness left by the tongue. She knew she was lucky to be alive, had she been a wildebeest she knew that she'd have succumbed to Falana. Something had saved her, though she could not tell what, all she knew was that by some miracle Falana was licking her wounds clean.

"I heard fighting. I had to make sure you weren't hurt. I came as soon as I could. Who was it? Yali's father or some of his lionesses? Whoever it was, they weren't messing about weren't they?"

"Nengwe?" she said weakly, trying to lift her head, "Nengwalamwe?"

"Yes, Shaha, it's me. Don't try to get up. You're not going anywhere while I'm around, do you hear?"

"Where's Falana?"

"I don't know, I've not seen her since yesterday."

Shaha failed in her struggle with gravity and let her head drop back on to the ground. Her forelegs draped limply over the ground to one side, her side rose and fell with difficulty. Nengwalamwe looked at her almost lifeless form and wondered what could have brought her down. He still felt distant from her; her near-dead state was something he could not comprehend. He kept on wondering when she would get up and walk off, shaking her legs to improve circulation. He knew she was very old, and he supposed that that might have had something to do with her not recovering quickly. That she might so easily have died was not something that entered the young lion's mind.

"Shaha, you don't look so good. You'd better get some rest."

She looked at him weakly and without moving said weakly, "Nengwe, without you I might have died."

"No Shaha, no one's going to die while I'm around."

"We all have to go when it's our time. It's not my time yet. I know that - not yet. A mandrill told me that once, a very special mandrill."

"Yeah? I bet he did. What was he like?"

"Old... his time *had* come. He called me Shaha you know. He always used to make me laugh. When I was a cub, I used to laugh all the time. There's not much to laugh at here these days. It's all gone...."

Nengwalamwe wanted to hear what had gone, but as Shaha finished, her eyes closed and her breath deepened. Nengwalamwe watched her, and seeing her drift once more into sleep, he lay down beside her but did not sleep. Instead, he spent the whole of the burning day in the open beside Shaha; watching and waiting as above the ever thickening clouds rolled by.

No animals ventured close until late in the afternoon. A leopardess loped over, probably attracted by the smell of blood. She took one look at

Nengwalamwe and stopped dead. She looked disappointed as though she had expected easy pickings. She seemed to sense that the lion wasn't going to move from the injured lioness's side and after a few moments of twitching ears and tail, she sat back calmly and even found time to lick her forepaw. Nengwalamwe raised his fur, growled and bared his teeth at her, yet trying not to wake Shaha. The leopardess sat and washed for a while, casting hopeful glances at the lions. She lost interest in time and walked off, smiling and smirking cruelly.

Nengwalamwe woke with a start. It was almost dark and he couldn't remember seeing the sunset. Shaha still lay beside him in the same position she had been in all day. She was still, her breathing regular and deep. Her wounds had stopped bleeding and peered back at Nengwalamwe angrily.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing," he said without thinking.

"Oh, lioness nothing huh?"

"Sort of, not that it's any of your business." Nengwalamwe could hardly believe he was having this conversation. He felt almost surreal sense of detachment about it.

"Don't be like that, I'm your friend, remember?"

"I'm sorry. Have you ever met Shaha?"

"Well, I guess I have now," said Yali, sniffing the sleeping lioness.

"She wanted to know why I'm here. Now I might never be able to tell her. She seems to think I... err... 'fancy' Falana, or something. Did your parents ever ask you what you wanted, but you didn't know?"

"No, not that I can remember. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"You know..."

"*What? Yali, what are you talking about?"

"...you know - like Falana?"

"Well... sure I like her." He pictured her walking over the open plain. It was midday and her fur shone in the piercing sun. She slipped by effortlessly; her paws seeming to float over the ground. Her tail gracefully followed her, forming one smooth continuous sinuous curve with her back. Nengwalamwe could almost feel the warmth of her fur and smelt her scent that needed no bush to be an effective marker. She broke into a run, glancing over toward him, but she wasn't smiling, and she wasn't hunting. She was afraid but resolute. Nengwalamwe felt pleased about that, for at last Falana was shown to be as vulnerable as everyone else.

A movement brought him back to reality. Shaha was stretching out a little in her sleep; she seemed to be feeling more relaxed. Nengwalamwe felt a little more at ease.

"And you want cubs don't you. Like me?"

"Like you? I don't think I could cope with that, you're too much for me Yali. I'd never know where you were from one moment to the next." Then he thought further, spurred on by the feeling of Shaha's fur at his back. "Cubs? Well, you know... I never really thought about them."

“Isn’t that what all lions and lionesses want - cubs of their own?”

“Hey, it isn’t that simple - I suppose I’d be happy with Falana, and if cubs come along... well, they do I guess.”

“You’re like my dad, he never really wanted cubs.”

“No, surely? What father wouldn’t want you?”

“No, no, you’ve got it all wrong Silly! He said that he didn’t want cubs before he met mother, then he did.”

“I see. Well, I think I do.”

“So, that’s why you hang around here. You want Falana to be your pride, don’t you?”

“Maybe... I guess you could be right. You know I’d never thought of that, but then it’ll never work - she hates me. But what else can I do? I came here to save my life. Now I’m here there’s no way out, except back the way I came. I’m trapped here - I can’t leave.”

“Yes, course you could. You can get away over the river. I know that because over the river is this big desert, then a rocky, hilly sort of place, then it’s... well, I guess you don’t want to know about all that if you’re staying here. You are aren’t you?”

“I don’t know Yali, I really don’t know. Unless Falana bucks her ideas up real soon and sees what a great lion I am, then I guess I might just have to cross that desert of yours. I really ought to give her another chance, if I can find her. I owe that much to Shaha.”

“Oh , finding her’s easy - peasy easy.”

“Oh yes? And how is that?”

“She has this secret knoll she hangs out on, down there by those trees.” The cub gestured with her nose. She stood rather awkwardly, as if she were injured. She had always bounced around Nengwalamwe, now she just stood there as if moving caused her pain.

“What trees? Are you all right Yali?”

She ignored him, gesturing again. “That one, see?”

“Ah, right, that one,” he said hoping he had picked the right clump of trees out of the silvery gloom, “I’ll just go on over sometime, but not right now.”

“Why not?”

“Shaha’s not well, someone attacked her. Would you know anything about that?” He didn’t really expect an answer, but he felt it was worth a try just the same.

“Why don’t you go to Falana right now? Shaha’ll be all right with me. Don’t you worry about her.”

Nengwalamwe laughed uneasily. “I don’t think so, little one. Falana will have to wait. She’s been waiting for a long time already; a while longer won’t hurt her. I’m needed here.”

Yali stood before Nengwalamwe, neither spoke. The savannah all around seemed filled with sound: distant hyena calls, grunts of grazing wildebeest, gulps and croaks of frogs to the near continuous rasping and grating of thousands of unseeable insects. In time, she turned and walked off, limping from some obviously painful injury to her off foreleg. Nengwalamwe called after her. “Yali, if you did know anything about what happened to Shaha you’d tell me wouldn’t you?”

She stopped and turned back, her eyes glinting emerald. "It wasn't my father, or my mother or anyone like that. It was someone else, and they're long gone. They'll never come back and you won't chase after them. Let them go. I know it'll never happen again."

Yali suddenly knew a lot more than any cub should know. Nengwalamwe wanted to know more, but Shaha began to stir. He looked down to her, taking his eyes off Yali. As he looked at the elderly lioness he smiled. He realised that if he looked back he'd probably find that Yali was gone. Shaha opened her eyes and looked up at him. He looked on, thinking of his mother. He reached down and licked at one of her wounds that had opened slightly. When after a few strokes it was clean, he lifted and turned his head; sure enough, Yali was once more gone back to wherever it was she had come.

"There's no point chasing after her," Shaha said as Nengwalamwe gazed into the moonlight and shadows, "Let her go...."

If the days that followed were difficult for Nengwalamwe then they were almost impossible for Shaha. By morning, she had recovered enough to move, limping and lurching, to safety. She offered little and Nengwalamwe asked less. Later the next day he decided that neither of them was going to be able to keep going for long without food. That meant one thing: Nengwalamwe was going to have to hunt, and hunt well.

Once he'd made sure Shaha was comfortably asleep in the heart of Silent Rocks he ran off to find food. This time he knew he couldn't fail. He tried hard to remember everything his mother had patiently taught and re-taught him. He decided not to go after anything dramatic and to concentrate his efforts on something he knew he could take down. Warthog was his first choice, but try as he might he couldn't find any. He considered searching the thickets for a sleeping aardvark, and even thought twice when he saw a group of tree-bound vultures waiting out the day for the thermals that would let them get airborne. Then he remembered they played dead so well you could never tell if you'd made a kill or not. In the end, it was a baboon that proved his salvation. Mtundu caught up with him a while after midday and made what sounded to Nengwalamwe a surprisingly plausible proposal.

They spent much of the afternoon by the drying remains of a bend the river. The baboon's sharp eyes, the lion's endless patience and equally long claws made a good enough team. Much of the riverbed was no more than long dried mud. Mtundu stood on a boulder that would be submerged in the coming rain-swollen floods. Now, however, it stood proud of the water almost as high as the lion's shoulders.

The water flowed calmly past. It was far too shallow for crocodiles and the only irritation was the myriad biting flies that thought the lion offered too good a feast to be flown by. The first few fish Nengwalamwe caught he ate whole, barely troubling his teeth with breaking them up. He knew what he was looking for, and before too long he found it.

With the last, and biggest, fish dangling from his jaws, Nengwalamwe set off back to Silent Rocks with the baboon scurrying beside him, talking excitedly

about nothing in particular. If Nengwalamwe hadn't had his mouth full, he'd have silenced him.

When they were in sight of the rocks, they made an unsettling discovery. In a hollow, one of many formed by the roots of long fallen trees, Nengwalamwe found the scattered but uneaten remains of a wild dog. He was walking ahead of Mtundu in the hope of escaping the worst of his chattering and saw them first. Earlier that day he had walked within a few lengths of the hollow but had not looked in. On the way back he was simply following the shortest path, one that led him to the dog carcass.

The dog's almost severed head lay bent back over the bloody remains of its forequarters. It was still recognisable as an individual, indeed Nengwalamwe was sure it was one of those that had chased him at the kopje. What seemed odd was that something had obviously attacked it with power, strength and repeated strikes. Not one bone, other than the skull remained unbroken. The body lay crushed and opened to gruesome effect, yet not one part was missing. It was uneaten - destroyed but not for food. Nengwalamwe knew of no savannah animal that did that. Not even the most callous of leopards.

Mtundu didn't have the stomach to face the terrible sight; he ran off as soon as he caught sight and smell of it, leaving Nengwalamwe to take the fish to Shaha alone. When he got to where he had left her sleeping, she was gone. At first, he thought she might have gone off to find somewhere quiet to die. When, moments later she returned, alive and evidently much the better for her long rest, Nengwalamwe felt relieved, as if a heavy burden of guilt had been lifted from him. She ate the fish as best she could. Her throat was very tender, and she could only manage to swallow every mouthful after a lot of chewing, and even then not without considerable pain. The fish's bones did not help. She still said nothing. The lion accepted that, as it would obviously be as painful as eating. While Shaha had to eat, she didn't have to speak, nor roar, growl, churr, and certainly not purr.

As Shaha grew steadily stronger, Nengwalamwe spent more and more time away from Silent Rocks. He tried hunting again, and managed to bring down a gazelle just after sunset: a very credible attempt for a relatively cumbersome and visible male. He dragged it for over an hour back to the rocks before even taking a bite. Shaha smiled at him and for the first time since the fight, ate with only slight discomfort. Afterwards she got up and walked around, stretching muscles unused to such exertion.

"Go find Falana Nengwalamwe. Go to her. Bring her home."

"Where is she anyway? Did whoever did this to you frighten her away?"

"You'll find her, I know you will. Go on, find her and tell her I need her back home, and that you do too."

Nengwalamwe didn't want to leave Shaha alone unless he had too but Shaha insisted, saying that she was nearly well again and would soon be hunting again for herself. So, Nengwalamwe set out in search of a lioness.

He didn't have to search for long. He remembered what Yali had said, and walked over to the trees which she had pointed out to him. He didn't expect to find Falana there, after all Yali was only a cub, and one with an active imagination at that.

He approached from the south just after dawn. Almost bare trees framed the knoll. There, sitting on the top was the unmistakable form of a lioness: Falana. She was gazing out towards the big rock as if she was waiting for something, or perhaps someone. The lion stopped and raised his head above the grasses. The lioness sensed the movement and dropped down on to the knoll. She looked around fearfully, her fur standing tense over her shoulders. At first she didn't look in the lion's direction; continuing to look to the rock. When she finally saw him her fear subsided and she slowly rose up on her forepaws.

Nengwalamwe knew that Shaha's attacker had indeed frightened her too.

"Where have you been Falana?" he said as he approached upwind, "Shaha wants you to come home, she needs you."

"She does? How can she?"

"Yes, she does, and..." he paused, unsure of what best to say, "...so do I Falana." He dropped his head, adding quietly, "Please."

"If Shaha really, really needs me then I'll have to go to her, but as for you Nengwalamwe... dream on! There's no way you and I will ever get together. No way! Ever."

She looked away and went back to staring, waiting for something to come from the rock. Nengwalamwe knew that she was serious, that she really didn't think there was any hope that they could ever be friends, let alone mates. He growled at her, but she didn't even look round. He turned and walked away. A modest distance away he stopped to lick his pride, and his off-hind thigh.

Falana's strange preoccupation stirred him into thinking what might be happening to his rock. He thought again of the cave with its blocked entrance and imagined the rocks melting and flowing away under his paws to let him enter.

That afternoon was cooler than usual. The sky filled with a thick blanket of billowing grey clouds that rushed across the plains. He followed them, empty pawed, back to the ridge and Shaha. She was sleeping when he arrived, so, as he had done for much of the past few days he slept by her side. When she woke, she pressed him to try again to urge Falana to come home. He began to feel that he was slowly becoming no more than a hunter and messenger for Shaha. When he told her so, she smiled and repeated her request.

The next day came early, soon after midnight. Shaha lay sleeping in the darkness while Nengwalamwe tossed, turned, curled up, uncurled, got up, turned round, stretched and lay down again. He could not get comfortable enough to sleep, so he got up one last time and padded out of the cover of the Silent Rocks.

As he walked, he thought he heard sounds of another animal close by, possibly watching or even following him. It sounded slightly clumsy, more like the footfall of a primate than the pawfall of a feline. He couldn't understand why anyone would want to follow him. He slipped into a patch of undergrowth for a moment; he emerged and stumbled into Mtundu.

"Mtundu! What are you doing here at this time of night?" He asked in surprise, "Look, I think something might be following me. Just keep your mouth shut and come on. We're going to see Falana."

The baboon shrugged and tilted his head. He reached out, picked off something from Nengwalamwe's nose, and ate it.

“Do you think Mtundu,” Nengwalamwe asked as he rose and set off, “that it could have something to do with those dogs?”

“No Nengwalamwe. NO!”

That was that, Nengwalamwe could get Falana to say no more. Though she didn't say anything, she made it clear that she didn't want to say anything more in the presence of Mtundu.

Shaha patiently listened to Nengwalamwe's story, and even to Mtundu's version of events. He seemed quite at ease with Shaha; gone was the fidgeting nervousness with which he had met Falana. He clearly knew of Shaha, and possibly thought she was well past being a threat to a nimble baboon. When Shaha suggested, no, told Nengwalamwe that he would be going to Falana again the following day he almost told her to go herself. She was now moving around quite well and with little pain or discomfort. She still limped noticeably, but she was managing more than just a hobble. She would be able to spring in a few more days if she kept on recovering as she had so far.

Nengwalamwe's thoughts turned back to his rock. He felt he was neglecting important things. He had not been home for some five days, and a lot can happen in five days of a lion's life. When Mtundu had gone he told Shaha of his concerns. In reply, she told him that once Falana was home she would have no need of Nengwalamwe and that he would be free to go wherever he pleased. She told him that he was always free to do whatever he pleased, that he was not her prisoner and that he owed her nothing.

“I stay here because I want to Shaha, but I need to go home too - I need to be there. I had wanted to go there with someone, but I guess it's not going to happen.”

Shaha reached up with her injured foreleg and placed her paw on his shoulder, she held it there for a moment before the aching forced her to let it slide down his warm fur. “I know how you need to go back. If I were younger, I'd go with you. Go to Falana again and make her see she's wanted and needed too.”

Nengwalamwe knew that Shaha would be better off with her own daughter. If that daughter didn't want him then there seemed little point in hanging around any longer. The rains were coming, and with them the moment would come when the young lion would have to decide where his future lay. That time was coming closer with every cloud that gathered over the savannah.

“Whatever the question is, the answer is ‘No!’ so don't even bother asking.”

“But Falana!”

“I told you never to ‘but’ me cubbie. Now get out of here!”

“Shaha needs you.”

“We'll see about that! Now go!”

Dejected, disillusioned and disappointed, Nengwalamwe turned from Falana and walked away. He roamed over the plain with no idea where he was going or why. Everything was confused in his mind: the dogs, Falana, Shaha and

even Mtundu. There was no one he could rely on, no one he could really trust, no one he could pour out his heart to, no one. It all came from the place; it all flowed up from the ground, into the rock and into their souls. Maybe it would flow into his too if he stayed much longer. He decided he should go back to Shaha one more time, if nothing else than to say goodbye.

He walked slowly back to Silent Rocks along the top of the ridge. As he got close, but still out of sight, he stopped for a moment of private peace. As he licked his foreleg, he heard voices. Two voices, Shaha's and... Falana's: the two were together; the two were home.

"I'd have died without him. Nengwalamwe's a good lion Falana, he's got a lot of heart, and he's hunted for me without a word. Few lions would ever do that for you; my father wouldn't have, and nor would yours. Give him a chance, he deserves it, and you've got to admit his mane's... cuddly."

"But mother, he's so young!"

"Don't you 'but' me cubbie!"

Nengwalamwe slowly brought his head up from his leg and stood still, listening.

"I'm sorry mother. I am..."

"I know, and what's wrong with young? I know he'll be good with cubs. Which reminds me, what are we going to do about something to eat?"

His faith restored and his time with Shaha over, he turned and walked back down the ridge. His job was done. He had seen a little of what lay below the ears of the hippopotamus.

Once well away from Silent Rocks he turned into the late day sun and headed for home.

12. *Gathering Clouds*

Nengwalamwe was calm, walking steadily; his shoulders rising rhythmically. His job was done. What job was that? Re-uniting mother and daughter? Was that all he was here to do? Was that really all these weeks had been about? Was that why Yali had come to him again and again? What about Mtundu? What about Falana. He saw her walking in the distance, her every muscle inviting him, her every movement seducing him. Yet she walked alone, always keeping out of reach yet close enough to fill Nengwalamwe with her intoxicating smell. What about the rock? What about the cave? What about the dogs? What? Who? Why? Questions, questions; all unanswerable. His pawfall became uneasy. His felt his pads more than usual, and through them felt every ridge in the ground. The grasses felt harder and dryer. Above the scurrying clouds threw their shadow over everything. Even the rock fell under the deepening shadows' dance.

As sunset neared he wandered, nowhere felt right, nowhere seemed welcoming, nowhere, even the rock felt like home. In the lion's mind invisible barriers sprang up all around. No matter what he thought, no matter which way he turned, there was something blocking his path. He needed to move, to be free to roam. He decided to patrol, to look for signs of encroachment through his borders. He turned north, heading once again toward the distant highlands. To the lands of his first pawfall.

Everything around him sounded close but subdued. Calls passed him by; hooves rattled and rushed. Above the air filled and heaved with insects. The evening closed in.

Now the sun dipped below the horizon. The clouds changing from dank grey to golden orange, touched with whites and red. Through the hum of the insects a new sound reached him. He couldn't make it out at first from amidst the hubbub of evening. It appeared to come from over some low rises to on his offside. He decided it could be an intruder. He turned toward it, climbing the nearest rise.

At the top he paused and waited for it to come again on the heavy air. He turned his ears, scanning the distant uplands. There... there it was again. Difficult to hear: indistinct and distant. No, no, it wasn't distant, it was closer. Muffled, almost hushed. It came from a thicket just a minute or two's walk away through low scrub.

As he closed he slipped into a bouncing lope. For the moment the questions stopped nagging. The voices became clearer. Suddenly a trio of gazelle burst out of the scrub to his left and crossed his path, on seeing the lion they proned away in panic. Something must have spooked them; it certainly could not have been Falana, nor less the still weak Shaha. Could there be another lion? On Nengwalamwe's land?

The scrub thinned, ahead stood a few spindly acacia, then, assumed Nengwalamwe, everything would clear. The scrub and the mystery, though maybe not the clouded sky still tinted with the very last light of sunset.

He slowed and stopped by one of the trees. Ahead, over a shallow re-entrant was a scene that swallowed him whole. Sheltering under the trees lining

the far side were, two, no three adult elephant. They looked down into the valley to where, on the slope, stood seven or eight dogs in a loose, ragged pack. Some Nengwalamwe recognised. At the centre one stood out clearly: a bitch with rich chocolate and white ears and very light patches on her hind legs. On the far flank was something the lion found especially odd: a leopard.

Maybe it was his scent. Maybe it was something dry-cracking as he leant forwards better to catch their talk on the still air. Maybe one of the elephants saw him. It was the leopard, ah, a leopardess; her head held high, her tail slipping down behind her, holding its tip off the ground; that turned and saw him. Now he heard them clearly: a yelping as the dogs turned; a twisted growl and belly-shuddering rumbles. A great elephant twisted his head in violent agitation.

Nengwalamwe sized them up. He thought he could take three, maybe four of the dogs. After that he would be on even terms with the leopardess. He might be just be able to escape if he took them on, though they might just as easily take him down; but with the elephants backing them up he stood no chance, and if he did get away any remaining dogs would hunt him down. No matter where he ran, no matter what he did or where he hid they would get him. Maybe not this day, nor the next, but eventually, one sleepy noon day they would catch him. Nengwalamwe knew the only way out was now, and he was determined not to stay around long enough to make sure. He spun round and ran back into the scrub pursued, once again, by dogs.

Moonlight bright nights betray the huntress, to the hunted. Clouded nights confuse both, by which the outcome is uncertain. So, to hunt by the stars, is to be the huntress....

“Can we get out of here?”

“Very well Falana, but I said you wanted to go along the ridge.”

“No, not here Mother.” The lioness stopped, waving her tail. She lifted her head and swung it round in flat arc. “Here! All this. Why don’t we try south again?”

“Come on Falana, you know the drought forced all the herds here. There’s nothing for us there now. There’s everything we need here.”

“How about over the river?”

“No, I’m too weak for that journey yet and by the time I am, the river will be swollen by the rains. We’ll have to wait until the floods are over. We couldn’t cross it for at least another moon, if then.” She looked worriedly at her daughter who was padding incessantly from paw to paw. “Anyway, what’s brought on all this itchy pad stuff all of a sudden?”

“I just want to get away from here.”

“Don’t you mean away from him?”

“That lion’s got nothing to do with this!” She paused; breathing deeply while her anger subsided. “How’d he get here anyway? If he got in, then we can get out.”

“You saw how weak he was when he got here. What chance would I have? He was a young, healthy, strong and...”

“Stupid lion. Look mother, I can’t stand it here any longer; I’ve got to get away. Any way, it doesn’t matter where.”

“Come on, you know we can’t leave yet. You’ll just have to learn to live with Nengwalamwe.”

Falana’s ears dropped. “Mother, come on! Have you seen the way he looks at me? You haven’t hunted with him like I have. He frightens me.”

“Why? Because he can hunt almost as well as you can? Does it frighten you that a lion can do a lioness’s job? There’s things he can’t do you know, and there are things that he can do that only a lion can.”

“That frightens me. You know he’s after me. Anyhow he can’t hunt to save his life, which we had to do for him if you recall.”

“Is that such a bad thing? If I were your age I’d be flattered by the attention of a young, bold and rather... well, I’m not your age am I?”

“It’s a bad thing. I’m old enough to be his mother twice over.”

“Well you’re not his mother.” Shaha’s voice grew urgent. “You can still bear cubs Falana - I can’t. When we die, the Pridelands dies with us.” The clouds rolled by as the two lionesses stood silently. “You do realise that, don’t you?”

“Mother, not that stuff again. I’m too old to bring up cubs; I’m too old for anything.”

“And what does that make me?” Shaha looked sternly into her daughter’s eyes, risking her wrath a second time. “You, Falana, are the last of the line. In you lies the future of this land. You can’t leave here. Nengwalamwe’s the one, the real one. You of all lionesses must see that. You and he can restore this land as my father once did, you and he may not succeed... but you have to try.”

“Mother, why do you always lay this stuff on me? Why can’t I just be...?”

“You have to do it for the sake of the future, and for the past.” Falana stood silently as a slim glow of starlight slid over her back. “Can’t you see? The herds drew us here for a reason. Nengwalamwe came here for a reason. You are that reason and you have to stay here otherwise everything that has happened, and everything that we are, will have been for nothing. Your father and my father and their father’s before them will have all died for nothing and it will all be forgotten. One by one, the stars over our heads will go out until these lands are in complete darkness under the dogs. We are all that’s left. We have come back, now, to do a job, and I’ll not leave until it’s done.”

Falana thought for a moment, contemplating precisely what she’d have to do to complete this ‘job’.

“I thought we came here for the herds? So, what do you want ME to DO? Throw myself at him? ‘Take me! Take ME Nengwe! MY mother says she won’t leave the Pridelands until you’ve had your evil way with me so take me NOW!’”

“If that’s what it takes Falana, then that’s what it takes.”

“Mother, you have really lost it this time. There’s no way I’m going to give myself to Nengwe just because you go on and on about my father. My father was a waste of a mane. He never did a decent thing in his whole life.”

“He fathered you.”

“How? You never liked him, no one did. After he killed your father I don’t understand how you could have stood to crouch for him.”

Shaha stood resolutely, looking back over her life; considering what it had all meant. "Life's never that simple Falana. I did what I had to do." She paused, adding, "For the good of the pride. You've only ever had one lion, and he was a fly-by-night rogue who only didn't even hang around long enough to get you in cub."

"Now, mother, he had important things to do with that other pride."

"What other pride?"

"Zimmale's. He was going to lose it to Zimmale if he hadn't gone away to protect it."

"You don't actually believe that do you? Falana, he was a rogue through and through; not an honest hair on his back. Oh, he was smooth-tongued all right. He even tried it on me once, but I told him his nose was mistaken. Nengwalamwe's no bully. He's rough around the edges, but he's not like that other one you had. Nothing like."

Falana sat back, blinking and twitching her ears sadly.

"He didn't... I couldn't..."

Shaha shouldered her gently, trying to coax her daughter into confiding in her.

"There never were going to be any cubs Mother...."

Shaha stood silently. There was no need for words. As Falana slid sorrowfully to the ground Shaha moved forward and reached down and gently licked the fur between her daughter's ears. She moved to Falana's side and lay beside her.

"Are you hungry Falana?"

Falana rolled her eyes towards her mother and flicked her ears up to catch her mother's words. Then she slowly and deliberately lifted and turned her head to face her. She waited for her mother's smile to drop. It didn't, and in a few moments, Falana allowed herself to smile too.

"Now Mother that's the best thing you've said today. What's the special tonight?"

"Whatever you fancy, anything at all. I'm so hungry I could eat a whole zebra."

"Aaahh - we're fresh out of zebra."

"Any antelope?"

"Nope."

"Oh no, please don't say we got to go down the river for a hippo."

"No..." Falana laughed lightly and turned away. The clouds had thinned a little, and now the moonlight shone down intermittently. "Tonight Falana, its buffalo."

"Aaaah..."

Shaha followed her daughter through the shifting, shimmering silver heads of the grasses out on to the open plain below the ridge. High above them the moon slid out from behind the thickest clouds to bathe the lionesses in silver light brighter than the final afterglow of day.

The two lionesses covered the quarter of a mile to the fringes of the herd of buffalo in silence. The high hisses and rustles of the tall, dry grasses covering all sounds of their pawfall. The wind cut across their path, carrying their scent far from the herd.

They slipped to within a hundred lengths; stopped and sat back, looking out ahead over the dappled rippling sea of grass. The shadows dropped by the clouds slid over them from the herd. The peaceful grunts of the buffalo and lazy swishes of their tails showed that they had not yet noticed Shaha and Falana. The lionesses dropped down below the grass tops and waited quietly, speaking in gentle, hushed tones.

“Well, there they are. What do you think Mother? Shall we move closer now? They seem less bunched over there to the right.”

“Does it matter what I say any more Falana? You always do what you want anyway. I’m not up to being choosy yet, though it does look more promising over there.”

Falana turned and crept away. Shaha followed a few seconds later along the corridor of grass cleared by her daughter. They both knew it was the movement of the grass that was most likely to give them away. They both knew Shaha couldn’t run far, if at all. She wanted to keep the movement to a minimum even if they were well out of sight, sound and smell of the buffalo.

The unchanged snorts and grunts from the buffalo reassured the lionesses. They slipped nearer without risking a second look over the grass tops. They crept closer, slowing; moving paw-by-paw, ears twitching and turning to catch the faintest sounds. At length Falana stopped, moving no further forwards. The grass was thinning; the soil beneath had grown drier. They were a little more than thirty lengths from a small group of five or six buffalo. It had taken them more than twenty minutes to cover the distance from where they had last caught sight of their potential prey.

Falana stood perfectly still, her eyes fixed on the flank of the nearest buffalo that just showed through the waving stalks of the grass. Shaha edged alongside her.

“OK Falana. Which one do you reckon?”

“I can only see one, and not too much of that either.”

“Well, take a proper look. Go on!”

“OK, OK, I’m on it, don’t get your whiskers in a twist Mother.” Falana turned her ears forwards and slowly, and without even the slightest shake, lifted her head, keeping her eyes fixed on the buffalo. As she breached the grass line, she saw that the herd had moved while they had been getting into position. The small group, still split off from the main herd, was now some ten or more lengths to their right. Falana paused and looked about, scanning her eyes from her unmoving head over the sea of grass.

“Well?”

Falana dropped back down like a crocodile slipping below the water.

“There’s too many here, we’d not stand a chance. Come on; let’s move a little further on.”

“You forgot they move, didn’t you? I keep on telling you about that but do you listen? No, you can’t even trust your own mother, can you?”

This time it was Shaha that moved away, just as silently as her daughter, if a little slower. She kept her head higher, stealing glimpses of the buffalo over the shifting sands of grass. The danger was the buffalo might see the dark tips to her ears floating above the waves. In the clouded starlight it was a chance she thought worth taking. The wind blew across so they could not hear the sounds of the buffalo's hooves on the earth. The herd shifted forwards every quarter of a minute or so in search of the best of the remaining grazing. By sound alone the lionesses could not maintain an adequate map of the herd as it shuffled across the savannah. They needed to see their prey to be sure of tracking it. Within ten minutes Shaha had brought them both back to within twenty lengths of the group, now shrunk to four, which they had seen earlier. She paused and sniffed the wind then dropped down out of sight.

"Here Falana, you have a look and decide which one is the easiest."

Falana looked at her mother through half closed eyes.

"Well, thank you mother."

She turned her head back towards the group; lifting it to look clear over the cover. She dropped down again suddenly as she caught sight of the closest buffalo staring hard in their direction.

"What's the matter Falana?"

"It's looking at me. I'm sure it saw me, I'm sure it did! Come on, let's get out of here and try somewhere else."

Falana tried to turn and leave the way they had come, but Shaha raised a forepaw and patted her daughter's hindquarters.

"Quiet Falana, I can't hear anything."

"What? What do you expect to hear?"

"Alarm snorts, hooves thumped on the ground, anything... but there's nothing. Come back here, they've not seen us, they'd not see that rock of Nengwalamwe's in this light."

Falana stared back at her mother. Her hunger bit deep, she knew her mother was probably right; and in her state, they'd only get the one chance. It would take the rest of the night to set up another strike as good as this.

Falana's impatience was just another of her failings. There was more to it than that, however. She would much rather spend hours setting up new strike of her own than spend ten minutes completing the one she and her mother had already started. While her pride had held her from answering Nengwalamwe's pleading, she knew there was little to be gained by letting her feelings spoil a perfectly good hunt just because her mother had stuck her nose in. Falana knew her mother knew her many moods too well. The time when she could hide them from her had long since passed. Hiding her feelings from Nengwalamwe was much more enjoyable. She wondered if perhaps he really did feel things for her - just perhaps. At least she now knew where to find him.

"Falana? Is something wrong? Come on, we've got work to do, I can't stay on my paws all night."

Falana blinked and shook her head gently so as not to disturb the long grass.

"I'm fine mother. I'll lead."

Shaha watched her daughter intently as she brushed past and headed off parallel to the buffalo. Before Shaha could move off Falana stopped dead. After a

few seconds, she pulled herself forwards, turning effortlessly to face the prey. Her body curved round as she turned, sliding elegantly as if round some imagined obstacle that she dare not touch. Her tail swished in front of Shaha's nose. Shaha didn't pull back; she let the tip brush over her muzzle. Falana pulled it away as she moved forwards another length, swishing it back.

Ahead the grass thinned still more and the shorter, thicker grasses favoured by the grazers took over to cover the ground barely hoof high. The buffalo moved on slowly some ten lengths from the long cover, just within strike distance for lion. Yet, was it close enough for a elder lioness still not fully recovered from injury? Their best chance lay with getting as close as possible before the buffalo could raise the alarm. Then they could summon up a modest burst of acceleration, and, before reaching any real speed, catch and take down the closest buffalo as it tried to lumber away. Waiting for the buffalo to make the first move would avoid having to face their horns as they would be running away. A pre-emptive strike from cover ran the risk of the prey making a stand. If that happened the attack would have to be frontal or worse still, broken off before it had even begun. This then was a time for patience and stealth, for manoeuvring to best advantage, for not making any sound, nor creating any sight that would betray them. Time to be the huntress.

As Falana moved forwards again, she grew aware of a something new. They had been moving steadily with the herd for some time; they were now running out of cover. The patch of long grass, at one time seemingly endless, was indeed now ending, and there was not much cover left. They were deliberately moving to its long edge. Just thirty lengths to their left lay the short edge, beyond that the short grass curved round. The lionesses were running out of space to work. Time was not much of a concern; it was the confinement that really worried Falana. They would soon have to break cover or break off the attack. They were almost close enough for an effective strike, but were they close enough for a safe strike?

"Falana, what's that? There, look!"

"What?" Falana's concentration broke. "Mother, shut up will you. We'll be out of this one way or another soon, 'till then can you just keep it down - please."

Falana drew forwards again, assessing the distance carefully. She stood up higher, half expecting to be seen. She was right. The lionesses heard the distinctive alarm grunt of a buffalo, the rest of the group lifted and turned their heads from grazing as one: away from Falana. The buffalo's bellows grew louder and more urgent. The nearest buffalo reared up and swung round. As its fore hooves landed and shook the ground. It then powered forward, heading parallel to the line of the grass edge.

"Come on Mother, we're on!" Falana shot forwards from the cover of the long grass, her eyes fixed on the accelerating buffalo running to her left. She curved, putting much of her weight and power into turning to keep the buffalo in her eye-line. Shaha waited just a moment to see what Falana was on. She saw her daughter turn and surged away after her, ignoring her aching shoulder. She took a straighter, more direct line that was more efficient though less dramatic than that of her supple daughter. She soon drew close to Falana's side and slid past her onto her prey side.

“N- Not seen us yet,” Shaha gasped as the buffalo sliced across them, heading round the curve of the short grass. The group of buffalo closed up as they ran, whatever had alarmed them it certainly wasn't Falana. Now a pair of eyes brightened in panic as they caught the pair of lioness running parallel a few sort lengths away. It bellowed to warn its companions who tried to turn away in confusion. The group split once more as fear grew into blind panic.

Falana turned her head to her side as she ran, tilting her shoulders away to balance and her tail forcing Shaha to surge forward a little to her daughter's side. The dust of the plain rose up from their paws and instantly flew away into the long grass, caught by the gusting wind. Despite not looking ahead Falana ran on with supple grace and pad-perfect precision.

“What's HE doing here?”

“Who?” shouted Shaha, not daring to take her eyes off the racing buffalo.

“Nengwa-soddin-lamwe!” Falana roared, “Get out of it! This is my hunt!”

As one of the buffalo shed from the group, Shaha surged away from Falana who had slowed, staring at the lion on the other side of her prey. It must have been Nengwalamwe who had spooked the group, he had ruined hours of hard work. Falana hardly noticed her mother's bulk cross her vision as she watched the lowest part of his bouncing mane between the buffalo's hooves. Nengwalamwe so filled her mind that Falana forgot all about the strike and slowed almost to a walk. “Come on mother, let's get out of here. That lion's ruined everything... Mother?”

Falana looked to the buffalo. Shaha was closing rapidly on one of the group. It was not well separated from the herd. Three or four lengths behind, closing rapidly, ran a large male. Already it was lowering its head to bring its horns to bear on the already injured Shaha.

“Mother! What do you think you're doing?”

Shaha ran on, curving into the prey with powerful leaping strides. “No mother! Don't throw your life away like this!” Falana roared in panic as she threw back the ground beneath her and raggedly broke into a full run once more. ‘Come on, you can't be serious. Please Mother, stop now. Please Mother - pull up!’ Her thoughts flowed into her throat, “You got to pull up!”

Shaha remarkably surged again, her age and wounds falling from her much as her coat did. She managed to get a forepaw on to the side of the buffalo's rump, digging in with her claws. Behind, the chasing male closed hard. Falana saw Shaha try to pull the buffalo back down by dragging her free legs. The buffalo was not going to give up without a struggle and ran on strongly; for too strongly for Shaha. It dragged her on over the grass; she couldn't hold on, the effort was pulling her claws loose from the hide. She retracted her claws; her blood soaked paw slipping back down to the ground.

Yet, still Shaha did not give up. Falana watched, powerless to help, as she raced forward. Shaha took a couple of strides to regain her balance. She accelerated to jump forwards and strike again at the buffalo's back, this time with both forepaws, once more trying to pull it over. She was no more successful. The buffalo behind was now no more two lengths from her flailing tail. The pain in her foreleg came again. She had to drop back, dragging her claws deep through the hide of the buffalo's rump. She slowed slightly, as if intending to pull away or stop. She had not seen the buffalo moving in to take her.

She had inflicted considerable injuries on the beast's hindquarters. It stumbled, lurching forward, suddenly released of the lioness' weight. Then it lost its footing, its forelegs folding at the knuckles. It lurched over onto its right side, its head rolling under in terror stricken panic. Shaha, despite having falling back to the ground painfully, leapt forwards onto the fallen buffalo's back to sink her claws deep into its spine. Before she could bring her teeth to bear on the stricken beast's lower neck the two were thrown round violently.

When the beast finally stopped, she was thrown clear, landing on her injured side, rolling over blindly. The wind whipped up the choking dust into a stinging, throat-rasping cloud. The ground shook as the male buffalo behind rumbled past within a tail's width. Shaha felt a blast of burning air push at her fur as the beast beneath her groaned for the last time.

For a moment, Shaha saw nothing but the dust. It cleared, revealing Nengwalamwe's muzzle clamped around the buffalo's upper neck. The slightest of moon, which had been at her back now shone down through the gaps in the clouds onto her left side. Nengwalamwe's strike had been so powerful as to turn them all, buffalo and lion, through nearly a full half-circle. It had thrown Shaha clear out of the path of the chasing buffalo.

The last of the herd turned and stopped to look back on her fallen companion. She did not stand and look for long. Falana ran in roaring loudly, putting the straggler to lumbering flight.

"Falana, where did you get to?" asked Shaha, not trying to get up.

Falana stopped roaring and looked incredulously at her mother and Nengwalamwe. The kill lay still, deathly still. Nengwalamwe released his grip slowly and looked to Shaha, his sides heaving.

"Nengwe, thank you. I guess I'm not up to taking down buffalo these nights, not like I used."

"Mother? By the stars, what did you think you were doing? That male buffalo was going to gore you for sure."

Shaha laughed gently as she rolled back on to her paws. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before shaking the dust from her fur. "What male?"

Falana dropped her head, high from roaring, and turned back to her mother. As she drew close, she sniffed at her and brushed her head against her neck.

"The buffalo that was going to kill you."

"I didn't see any other buffalo." Shaha lifted her head to look at Falana and then turned to Nengwalamwe. "Did you Nengwe?"

The lion seemed a little embarrassed and tried to look away.

"Well, I... it was very confusing... the dust... the chase... I'm really not sure." He rolled his eyes and tried to smile exaggeratedly.

"Mother, you shouldn't have rushed in like that, it was a stupid thing to do."

"Now see here Falana. I didn't 'rush in'. I saw an opportunity too good to go to waste. And where were you? One moment you and I were stride for stride, next thing I know, I'm all alone?"

Falana looked crossly at Nengwalamwe, almost growling.

Shaha let out a loud warning that filled her daughter's ears. "No, no! You're not getting away with that! You keep your mind on the hunt, you understand?"

Falana let her expression soften a little and Shaha drew back.

"Nengwalamwe got me out of the mess you got me into. You must support others when you're hunting. How many times have I told you? Nothing else matters once the strike is on - nothing. Is that clear?" Shaha pulled her head back from over her daughter's neck, moving moved close to Falana's cheek, out of Nengwalamwe's sight. Falana breathed heavily, half expecting some pointed remark or even a bite. Instead she felt her mother's tongue rasp upward over her fur, ending at her right ear. "You see. He's got some good points after all."

Falana pulled her head up suddenly and looked, blinking, over to the waiting lion. He had not yet started on the kill. She stared at him for a moment before turning back to her mother.

"Come on Falana, I believe he thinks it's my kill. Who am I to disagree with a lion?" Shaha walked forwards. She turned around the beast's turned-back hind legs and joined Nengwalamwe, dropping down by his side, pressing her ribs close to his. She spoke to him quietly. "Thank you - I was down for sure. Once more I owe you my life, how can I ever repay you?"

He returned her words in similar intimate tones. Falana strained to hear but couldn't quite make them out over the wind.

"It doesn't matter. I was trying to do something; just one thing right... Just one little thing."

13. *The Water's Edge*

Falana said nothing as she ate. When she finished, she got up and walked away. Five paces later she stopped, looking out into the night, waving and swishing her tail. Shaha, looking at Nengwalamwe with a tired, exasperated half-smile, got up and followed her impatient daughter.

The moon was riding low in the sky when Nengwalamwe finally rose. He grunted with effort and no little satisfaction as his full belly swung beneath him, thankful that Falana had not stayed long. Setting off at a slow trot, he meandered through the grasslands, heading in a roundabout way for the rock and a long lick and doze. He admired the scenery, noting with some irony that things looked a lot less ordinary in the moonlight, not to mention on a full stomach. He suspected that even Mtundu might look acceptable in this light. The thought goaded him onward, leading him to the deserted waterhole. He paused to refresh himself, lapping the cool liquid with relish, enjoying the sensation as it soothed his parched throat. After crouching to drink, he lifted himself to full height and looked around.

He looked again. The waterhole really was deserted. Maybe he could. Just once, for himself.

He stepped back a pace and looked around a last time - nothing.

He leaned forwards. The lean became a pace; a springing, running pace that took the adult male lion, mane, tail and all surging into the deepest part of the pool. The water parted under and around him, leaping from his sides in arcing sheets that tattered into countless tiny droplets.

A pair of wildebeest meandering down to the hole to drink bolted in terror when they saw a mad lion rolling like a hippopotamus in the muddy water. They would possibly never use the hole again.

Later the lion ambled on, heading towards the distant yet looming rock formation that he had call begun to call home.

Ascending the rock-strewn slope to the promontory was not as precarious a job as it had once been. The path he had initially discovered had been overgrown and covered with small piles of sharp gravel that rolled and trickled down. His passing had already had a noticeable effect, slowly sweeping the small rocks aside and suppressing the less hardy of the weeds and scrub that struggled through the cracks in the rock. The sight of this cleared path pleased him, although he couldn't exactly decide why.

Reaching the top, he cast about a moment, looking again with undisguised frustration and longing at the pile of rubble that concealed the entrance to the unknown void beyond. Every way he looked his path was blocked: by the rocks, by Falana and by those dogs. Maybe even by Mtundu for all he knew.

He turned and stepped out onto the promontory. The view was always magnificent from here, and he looked about at the land below with new interest. He saw the route of his own passage through the dewy grass - a dark betraying trail. As he looked, it slowly gained more definition and darkened. A quick glance to the sky above confirmed that the sun was peering above the horizon, the sky reddening and turning bright crimson-gold. Several songbirds greeted the light with a few sharp notes, joined quickly by others until the air began to fill with

their cries. The sound rose to Nengwalamwe's ears, making them flicker as he stared into the rising sun, his eyes glittering with reflected light. It galvanised something deep inside, and without thinking, he drew a deep breath and burst forth with a roar. The sound rent the air and tattered the patchwork of bird song into momentary silence. The sound echoed off the rocks behind him, making him shiver as it exploded outward, startling a few antelope grazing below into a panicked run.

He sighed and was about to turn when he heard a cry from high above and behind, "Jeez! Turn my hair grey and take ten rains off my life, why don't you?!"

Nengwalamwe glanced around to see Mtundu bounding toward him; the baboon's features compressed into a mask of righteous indignance set at the centre of a silver sea of mane. "Here I am, tired after spending all night finding pitiful morsels to eat, and then trying to find somewhere to rest where I won't get eaten myself, and here you come, hollerin' like fit to stove in the sky wakin' up decent folks..."

"Mtundu..."

"...just trying to rest a moment before setting off again..." Nengwalamwe's attempt at a word in edgewise failed. "...with who knows what stalking me, an' here you come, bellerin' your lungs out just as smug and pert as a..."

"Mtundu! Shut UUPP!" The force of Nengwalamwe's roar nearly sent the baboon flying, the only thing preventing him being the sudden and powerfully firm grip that he secured on the lion's tail. Nengwalamwe endured this indignity stoically; just one of the many that Mtundu had introduced him to; until the baboon regained his balance.

"Now Mtundu," Nengwalamwe said in a much calmer tone, "have you seen Falana?"

"Yeah." the ape said as he smoothed down the hair on his head in a way that made the lion jealous of his ugly, knobbly fingers. He reached out and pointed with one to a small knoll some distance from the rock. There lay a tawny form, basking in the increasing light. "She's been down there since before dawn, I guess, but I guess you know that seeing you spent all night with her."

The lion turned away.

"Hey Nengwe! Where you goin'?"

The lion ignored the cries behind him and trotted down slope. Once off the path, his path, he cut under the overhanging promontory, pacing through the still wet grass toward the lioness. Even at a distance he saw she was lying almost still, sprawled comfortably, forelegs straight ahead, hindlegs one over the other to her offside. As he approached, her smooth silken coat soaked up the early morning light as she shifted now and again to accommodate the enormous meal digesting within her. Drawing his tail about him, Nengwalamwe sat down a length or two to one side and cleared his throat.

"Morning, Falana."

The lioness looked up at him, and then scanned about her, eyes squinting. "Why, I do believe you're right! It is! Just the right time for a quiet nap alone. Now if you'll excuse me..." Without waiting for an answer, she plopped her head back down on one forepaw and closed her eyes.

"Come on, Falana." Nengwalamwe shifted his paws nervously. "I just wanted to see if you wanted to... or something. Please? It's a great morning."

“And just why should I?” she said without opening her eyes.

Nengwalamwe sighed, “Because I’d like it And I thought you might too.”

One eye opened and looked at him for a moment, it shifted and narrowed. “No thanks. I have enough trouble with ticks on my rump.”

“What?”

“The last thing I need right now is another pain in the butt.” She looked pointedly beyond him at the scurrying grey black figure looming behind him. “Lose the monkey and come back tomorrow... perhaps I’ll think it over.” Her eye closed again, ending the conversation.

Nengwalamwe, feeling a warm weight on his tail tuft, turned to see Mtundu peering around one of his haunches. The baboon met his glance and cringed as he jumped to one side.

“Sorry about that...”

The lion simply looked at him and turned away, rising up and pacing off slowly. The baboon followed as best he could. When they were out of the lioness’ earshot the lion turned to the baboon as they walked, saying, “Stuff her. She doesn’t know what’s good for her. She’d probably have thought of some other excuse anyway. I really don’t see why I bother to keep on trying anymore.”

The two made off through the grass; the silence between them heavy and clinging while around them, twittering and bustling, the grasslands stirred to daylight life. Behind them, the sleek lioness opened her eyes and stared after the pair, her claws furrowing the earth in front of her. The sun climbed into the clouds.

Mtundu trotted along in silence for a while, occasionally casting a glance at the silent lion beside him. Nengwalamwe had a naturally long stride, and to counter this, the baboon had developed an odd canter-like walk upon all four legs. He fell into this now, easily keeping stride with the lion’s ground eating pace.

”Nengwe?”

“Hrm.”

The baboon looked behind them, then back at Nengwalamwe. “Uh... I hate to butt into personal stuff... but I can take off for awhile if it’ll help,” he said awkwardly.

“Hrm.”

Mtundu waited, but apparently, that was all that he would get. Giving up, he returned his gaze to the ground unrolling before them. He glanced about uncertainly, attempting to get his bearings. “Uh, hey man...”

“Hrm.”

The lion stepped over a fallen branch without breaking stride or even showing any signs that he knew it was there. Mtundu, lagging behind and feeling put out at having to watch Nengwalamwe’s rump, hesitated when he came to the branch. Then he leapt over it and chased after the lion.

“Where the hell are we goin’ Nengwe?” Mtundu glanced over at a small patch of scrub, then at a nearby tree. “I know this place, and it ain’t hospitable-like, if you know what I mean.”

“Hrm.”

Mtundu reached up and yanked on a set of whiskers, provoking a yowl of indignation from the hulking lion, but little else. “At least it’s a change,” Mtundu said under his breath. “HEY! I’m talking to you, Fuzzbutt! Quit ignorin’ me and tell me where we’re goin’!”

Nengwalamwe spun about, a growl of reaction rippling through his chest, and just as quickly fading. “Out there, somewhere,” he said, waving a paw vaguely at the northeastern reaches of the savannah. “Some place quiet.”

“Deserted, you mean.” The baboon looked at him in wonder.

Nengwalamwe was about to do what Mtundu knew he must not. “You’re leavin’, aint’cha?”

“What does it matter to you?” Nengwalamwe snapped: all teeth and hot breath. “I just need a break, that’s all.”

“A break?” Mtundu guffawed. “From what? You don’t do nuffin’ hardly at all.”

The lion spun on his paws and stalked away stiffly, his back hanging from his shoulders. “Thanks so much. It’s good to know who your friends really are.”

“Hey hey hey...” Mtundu skittered hurriedly into Nengwe’s path, blocking his way. “I’m just funnin’, Fuzzy. What’s the deal?”

Nengwalamwe glanced down, eyes narrowed. “Get out of my way.” Above, the clouds had grown as black and ominous as the lion’s expression.

“Or what? You gonna kill me, huh? The big lion kills the poor defenceless baboon huh?” Mtundu shoved his face dangerously close, until he could feel the lion’s hot breath on his cheeks.

“Yeauh, that’s how it goes.”

“What’s your problem? It’s her, ain’t it?”

Nengwalamwe bared his teeth; the baboon backed off hurriedly. “No, it’s you, its them... so what if it is? Does it change anything? I have no life here. What’s the point?” He moved to one side and pushed passed Mtundu. “It’s well past time I left this place and found a real home.”

“This is a real home. It’s your home.”

“No one wants me here.”

“Sure they do. Loads a folk.”

“Oh right. They just love having a lion around to eat them.”

“Hey, if it wasn’t you it’d be the dogs, the le’pards, the hyena. An doan’ even get me started about the cheetah.”

“What? Do you actually want to get eaten?”

“Nah, ‘course not. That’s not it. Look, we all might go any day, or night. It happens. That’s not what matters. It’s who you’re with – family, friends. It’s how ya live that matters. Not how you die.”

“Nothing’s eating me. I could take you out with a flick of my paw, or a snap of my teeth. Simple, easy and you’re gone. I’m not you, I’m anyone here. No way that’s gonna happen to me. I really don’t belong here.”

“Ere luv... I couldn’t ‘ave said it better meself,” tittered a voice behind them.

Lion and ape turned as one to see the grasses part, the blotched and spotted forms of wild dogs emerging from the cover like mists creeping in at dusk. The animals milled about; forming an arc that now cut off the two

companions from where they had come. Several of them parted to reveal a slim figure, one of her chocolate coloured, white fringed ears twitched delicately as she sized up the pair. The other hung loosely down almost over her eye. She made an odd clucking sound with her tongue and teeth. "Tuggles... and 'ere was I thinking I'd never see you mucking about with the likes of him."

"Huh?" Mtundu backed conspicuously away from the lion's bulk. "I was just hopin' to cadge a bite or two from his leftovers maybe... times are lean, Miss Elizabeth."

"Is that so?" Elizabeth looked at the lion appraisingly. "Such a big strong feller in'e; I doubt he'd leave you much. "Sides, when did you start eatin' meat, Tuggles?"

"Since your lovey-dovey decided to run me away from the trees." The bitch raised her upper lip and panted. The baboon hurriedly added, "Ma'am."

The dog shook her head. "He was learnin' you a bit of respect... something you lack big time. And what do you go and do eh? You just took the bleedin' p..."

The ape shook his head and shrugged, protesting, "I was up there. It weren't my fault he chose to walk under me."

"Shut it monkey, you're well out of order. You 'ad be'ah show pukka respect from now on, unless you wan' a see yer brother again real soon." Mtundu cringed but remained silent. Elizabeth shook her head and looked to the silent lion. "You on the other paw, look like a smart young bloke. One who might take a bit of advice from 'is betters." She sat down, moving her tail almost amiably. "Just keep on headin' the way yer headin'. There's a distinct lack of need for lions around here if you catch my drift..." She bared her canines in a grin. "...And we're gonna keep it that way."

Nengwalamwe glanced at Mtundu for a moment. Just a few short days before he would have been amazed at what the dog had just said, amazed indeed that a dog said anything at all. Now he wouldn't have been surprised had she done a back flip in tuck with branch between her teeth. He looked back at her. "That way?" he said, indicating behind him with a twitch of his head. She nodded, and began to scratch herself absently behind one ear. "When you don't see us on your arse no more, you can like, assume it's safe to stop."

The lion thought a moment, then sat up and nodded agreeably. Mtundu looked on worriedly. Nengwalamwe paused to groom a wayward lock of mane back into place and then turned southward again.

"And if you ever come back here you'll get it for what you did to Mary!"

The lion took two steps and paused, an intense look of concentration came over his features.

Elizabeth got up and trotted toward him. "Are you really thick?! Shift it I said..! GAAH!!" She shrieked in outrage and fury, tumbling backward, soaked in urine, covering her in Nengwalamwe's overpoweringly strong scent. Mtundu looked on with a trembling mixture of horror and childish pleasure. The lion turned his head to look at the dog, snorting, "Who do you think you are, eh? What does a dog know about ruling anything? It takes a real lion to handle things, and that's exactly what I am, see?" He scratched at the earth with his rear paws, sending a shower of earth atop Elizabeth contemptuously. "I didn't do anything to your Mary, whoever she was. Nothing, you hear?!" He enjoyed the effect he was having on her entourage of dogs. They just stood and stared at their

leader in shock and outrage. "Anytime you need another lesson, you just let me know."

Elizabeth rolled furiously through the patch of sand and rose, glaring at the lion so fiercely that he stepped back momentarily, dismayed by her chilling, defiantly furious stare. "If it's lessons you're after, lion, then I'll gladly give 'em." She gave three shrill yaps that flattened Mtundu's ears. Nengwalamwe stood firm as the arc of dogs closed around him and Mtundu, threatening to encircle them.

Looking around and trying to back away he said, "Lessons in keeping clean? Hmmm? I think not!"

From deep in the arc, an unwary dog barked in amusement.

"What you laughin' at George?" Elizabeth snapped. "You're grooming me tonight!"

George's laugh collapsed into a strained whimper, the other dogs holding their flapping tongues. All eyes were fixed on Elizabeth. Both her ears, torn and round, hung flat.

Nengwalamwe sprang and leapt away over the arc in a single, earth-pounding bound, covering the nearest dogs in loose earth and dust. Some rose and ran after him. Mtundu stared after him, choking in the dust.

"What are you doing sitting there Meatball?!" Elizabeth bawled at him, "You ain't no good to me sitting there! Get yer arse after him!"

Mtundu didn't wait to be told twice, in moments he was scuttling after Nengwalamwe who, with every stride, was stretching his lead from the chasing dogs; his head in the wind, mane streaming out behind him; his paws barely touching the ground. Nengwalamwe roared in laughter, at once exhilarated and shocked; he'd not quite expected this reaction from the dogs, or indeed any reaction, but rather a meek obeisance to his authority. Elizabeth had caught him by surprise, and her blatant disregard for any authority temporarily unbalanced his mind. He could so easily have turned on the dogs, killing some and putting the others to flight.

Regal arrogance was something which his father had conditioned Nengwalamwe to accept unquestioningly. When Elizabeth had lorded it over him, he had acquiesced. Now, disorientated and at a loss as to what else to do, he loped across the savannah aimlessly, content for the moment to keep the baying yaps at his tail, turning again and again as they drew close on one side or another. All he knew and all that mattered was that he was heading steadily away from them.

At length, he slowed, chest heaving with exertion, and peered back. His ears flick-flicking as he fought to listen over his own rasping breath. They'd either lost him or they'd given up; there was no trace of the dogs in any direction. Satisfied for the moment, he paused to get his bearings and orient himself.

This was unfamiliar country. He could see neither the rock, nor any of the other landmarks he was used to navigating by. He was, in a word, lost.

"You crazy or somethin'?" shouted Mtundu as he straggled up, sides heaving as he too fought for breath. "You peed on Elizabeth for cryin' out loud!! She kills animals for less'n that!"

"Hush!" Nengwalamwe stared about, nonplussed at the sight of the odd scrub vegetation all around. The ground around them was flat, cracked and

dusty; small zephyrs of air swirling sand about his paws and settling in-between his toes.

“What for? We lost the bums anyways, lucky us. They’ll be layin’ for us when we get back...”

“Who is this Mary anyway?”

“Oh her; she was the dog you wasted.”

“I’ve never killed any dog.”

“Nengwe - come on. That dog in the hollow - don’t go all innocent on me. Even I know lion claw and teeth marks when I se’em.”

“Lion’s teeth you say? Who’s? They weren’t mine.”

“One of the lionesses then eh? Shaha? She hates the dogs.”

“No chance - she was too weak. Anyway, she and they seem to have some... arrangement or something. Maybe it was one of Yali’s pride?”

Now it was the baboon’s turn to be puzzled.

“Who’s? No, Fuzzbutt, if it weren’t Shaha it had to be Falana. Who else can it have been?”

Nengwalamwe grew tired of guessing.

“We’ll never find out now anyway so what’s the point?”

“You’re right there Fuzzbutt. The dogs’ll be after you when we get back no matter who did it. Kinda takes the shine of going back dun’it.”

“They’d be after you too if we went back. And anyway, just how do we do that?!” Nengwalamwe glared at him, motioning wildly with a forepaw and showering the baboon with a dusting of sand. “Where are we, Baldarse?”

Mtundu looked around, and then back at the lion. “How should I know? You were leadin’, Fuzzbutt!”

“Don’t tell me I get all the blame for this? I was running awa... well yeah, here.”

“Naw, I was talkin’ to the lizard over there. Not you, you musclehead, despite the fact you peed on Lizzie, and you led us off on this wild romp, and you...”

Nengwalamwe snarled and shoved his face into Mtundu’s, nose butted to nose. The monkey suddenly become very aware of the lion’s size and power.

“Erm... never mind.” Mtundu grinned queasily and pushed a stray hair of Nengwe’s mane out of his eyes, patting it back in place gently. “What’s your plan, huh?”

Nengwalamwe’s mood subsided somewhat, his rage slipping away, revealing the worry beneath. “Plan? I don’t know... first things first. Let’s find some water.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned and paced off slowly out onto the shimmering flats, looking about uneasily like an ancient sailor who has taken his ship too close to the edge of the world.

Some hours later, lion and ape strode slowly alongside each other. They followed a lugga then the meandering trail of the river as it snaked its way from the distant mountains, their snowy peaks glimmering red in the twilight. The river cut a clean deep furrow into the paw burning, pad scraping flatlands. Nengwalamwe moved slowly, pausing now and again to scramble down into the

river gully to soothe his sore paws in the rustling water for a moment before moving on. The gully was too rough to follow for any distance, and he would have to scrape, slide and scabble back up to the flats the way he had come. He stood by the water, craning his neck out from the dry mud, hardened into churned ridges and deep furrows. He closed his eyes for a moment in relief as the cool water rushed over his paws, soaking the tawny fur.

“You okay Fuzzbutt?”

“Yeah... just sore, is all.” Nengwalamwe lifted a paw in cursory examination and winced; the tough pads were lined and cracked, the hard skin scraped away in places revealing raw flesh beneath. The desert hardpan had not been kind to him during his flight. A sudden wind had kicked up a brief but violent sandstorm, forcing him to huddle down with his back to it. Mtundu had sheltered in the turbulent lee of his body.

Peering down at his reflection, Nengwalamwe observed glumly the destruction of his years of painstaking grooming; his mane was tousled and caked with dust, his eyes reddened and his nose and lips chapped and wind-burned. He was bedraggled, and he fancied not even the most desperate lioness would give him a second look.

Sighing, he made his way out a few paces into the shallows, closing his eyes and letting the cool stream of water soothe his paws. The burning sensation faded a little and he relaxed, his mind roving back again over the day's events, worrying through the actions he'd taken like a dog harrying an old bone. Falana... He grimaced. If there had been any chance of his botching that up any more, he wasn't aware of it. He knew that ever since he'd met that lioness he'd played the fool, and he looked back on each occasion with increasing depression. It was becoming obvious that she wanted nothing to do with him, and considering his attitude; he couldn't blame her.

‘She's not Llasani, you idiot,’ he thought to himself viciously. ‘You can't stride up to her, shake your mane about, and have her fall over in ecstasy.’

He froze, suddenly repelled at himself. Stars above, was that all he saw? A rump with a head attached? Had that been his intention all along... to impress her just enough to allow him to spend a few moments atop her? Had it really? He looked down at his reflection, his face screwing up in a horrible mask. “You sorry bastard,” he said to himself, “you've become your father after all.”

His reflection rippled gently in answer, glittering in the late sun. It reminded him of standing by the cave on the rock; the world beyond as impenetrable and unknown as what lay under the water. So calm, always there, never changing, always the same, mocking him, telling him how small he was, how weak he was... Then it exploded in a shattering spray of water and sand. Dark gleaming jaws snapped upward, water streaming away in sparkling glittering lines as something huge lifted up and seized a mouthful of his mane. Nengwalamwe uttered a choked scream and lurched backward and upwards, lifted clean off the ground by the devastating impact and then he was snapped back down, held fast in a unrelenting grip. He was twisting through the air, rolling over as easily as Nengwalamwe flicked his tail.

From behind him, a cry arose as the baboon looked on in utter helplessness, “NENGWE!”

Nengwalamwe looked down his muzzle in panic at the huge form that held him fast. The animal's jaws were out of sight, but he felt them crushing his throat just as surely as he could feel the loathsome hide, rough and leathery, wetly matting the fur under his chin. Lifting his gaze, he met his captor's eyes, the dark unfocussed orbs alien and uncaring, swallowing his gaze and holding him horridly still. Then the eyes rolled back as the crocodile surged backwards, pulling Nengwalamwe into the now thick mud brown water.

The lion uttered a choked sob and pulled desperately, his hind legs splaying apart and scrabbling in the loose sand, his claws leaving long furrows as he was dragged inexorably forward. The water parted around his head; then closed above him, cloaking him in the brown murk of the reptilian underworld. His forepaws flailed desperately, sending up huge showers of water as he splashed helplessly about, seeking any kind of purchase and finding nothing but loose rocks and smooth, silky mud. His throat tried to release a low pitched whining sound as he whipped from side to side, rocking himself desperately, trying to gain some leverage - any leverage. By the stars that he would never see again, this thing was going to drag him in. Drag him in and eat him and there would be nothing left behind to show that Nengwalamwe had ever existed....

Mtundu rushed into the water, grabbed Nengwalamwe's tail, gripped him painfully and tugging backwards futilely. "Oh jeez, this ain't doin' nuffin'. You dumb fuzball, PULL DAMN YOU!"

The soupy water boiled and foamed angrily as the crocodile's tail, fully as long as a lion, broke surface, thrashing against a massive midstream boulder. The crocodile could go no further into the water, which was barely deep enough to cover the crocodile's back. It pulled away sideways, struggling to gain depth. In its fight to slip into deeper water, it neglected its prey. Mtundu watched and heaved. Nengwalamwe's aching hind paws suddenly found some purchase on the rocks of the riverbed, and he yanked back jerkily. His mane broke surface sending showers of silver droplets over his back as he lurched wildly, trying to snatch his life back from the crocodile's jaws.

He felt the pressure lessen and he tugged with renewed lung-burning hope, contorting insanely as he began to pull free. The crocodile gave a sudden lurch as it sensed its prey escaping. With a low grunt, it whipped its long snout to one side and rolled; twisting Nengwalamwe further off balance and sending him face first into the water once more, dragging him upstream. The world tilted sideways, and suddenly his vision filled with silver bubbles and muddy clouds of silt stirred up from the bottom. With a startled gasp he gulped down huge gouts of water. Cold fright ripped through Nengwalamwe, his body beginning to thrash wildly as he once more fought for air as well as freedom. His paws scraped across a low shelf of rock, but before he could regain his footing, the crocodile twisted again, tugging him deeper towards death.

The two spun violently. Nengwalamwe's legs careened out of the water and splashed, thrashed down, snagging the shelf of rock again. A sudden pain flared in his chest. He tried to scream, the air escaping from his muzzle in a

cloud of silvery bubbles. A tearing sensation filled him and suddenly he was floating free again. The crocodile backed off with something clutched in its maw.

Lifting himself out of the water heavily, Nengwalamwe gasped in the burning air and floundered backward, staggering about and fighting his way back to the shallows, his front drenched with water and bright crimson, leaving a ruddy trail in the muddy water. He lurched woozily up the rough, hard-mud bank, pulling his paws from the morass before pacing away in a drunken stagger. He managed perhaps two lengths before collapsing in a heap, his sodden sides heaving weakly.

Mtundu rushed back up the riverbank, He clambered over Nengwalamwe from his off side and stood before him, looking at him with an expression of sick terror. "Hey, you okay, Fuzzy? Say somethin'!"

Nengwalamwe lifted his head weakly, looked at the baboon, and vomited a sheet of muddy water on both of them.

Later, once off the miraginous flatlands, the ape and the lion paused. Mtundu looked anxiously about to assure himself something large and full of teeth was not about to erase him from existence. Satisfied for the moment, he padded slowly. He made his way to the base of a nearby kigelia tree that looked even more bedraggled than Nengwalamwe did, if that were possible. He paused to shake himself and rub at an eye. Then he sat down with a grunt, wriggling his rump against the ground. He looked at the limping Nengwalamwe somewhat wistfully; the lion was a good enough companion, but as a grooming partner he was lacking quite a bit in Mtundu's estimation. Mtundu knew he would have to clean himself up alone.

The lion ignored Mtundu for the moment. He pawed remorsefully at the raw patch on his chest. A sizeable swatch of fur had been ripped away, along with some of the skin beneath; in a few places, he could see raw weeping flesh. Nothing vital was damaged, as far as Nengwalamwe could ascertain, but his once splendid mane had literally had the heart ripped out of it. With it, obviously, had gone any chance of cubs. Whether the fur would even grow back again was doubtful enough, let alone it returning to perfect normality. Sighing lightly, he continued to stroke the damaged area absently with his forepaw, ignoring the stinging pain.

Mtundu coughed. "Erm... you're gettin' dirt in it."

"What?"

"Your wound, Fuzzbutt." Mtundu patted his chest. "You're gettin' it dirty."

"Huh?" Nengwalamwe looked down. "Oh." Settling his paw to the ground, he sighed again.

"Does it hurt bad?" Mtundu asked sympathetically. "I know I slid the wrong way down a tree once, and hit a spot... you see this right here?" The baboon pointed to a place on his rear.

Nengwalamwe nodded dubiously.

"It rubbed the fur right off! Made me raw as hell, y'know?" Mtundu shrugged. "But the fur grew back, eventually."

Nengwalamwe's head throbbed achingly. "Mtundu," he growled, "your arse is as bald as an ostrich egg."

The ape looked back with comic surprise. "What?! Hey, you're right! I never noticed! I guess it never grew back at all. Say, there's one good thing - this way no one knows whether I'm comin' or goin'!" Grinning, he looked back around, his humorous expression fading as he beheld the lion's stone-faced expression. "Hey, c'mon, it was a joke, Fuzzy... lighten up."

Nengwalamwe merely closed his eyes in response, raising his paw again to his chest, rubbing... rubbing... "It's not very funny."

"Yeah. I guess not." Mtundu sat down in a surly heap. "Too bad you just lost your hair instead of your throat or maybe your head. Must be hell having to live with a bald spot instead'a bein' dead, eh?"

"I was wrong. I am like you, sort of." Nengwalamwe's stricken expression made the baboon immediately regret his words. "I... I killed him didn't I? Tashi wasn't playing; he's dead, isn't he?"

Beneath the lion's shaky gaze, his cheek twitched slightly, his mouth opening and then closing seemingly of its own will. Trembling, he rose, turned and stalked away stiffly into the shady underbrush, leaving an embarrassed silence behind him broken only by the distant chuckling of the river.

14. *The Rains*

Early morning sunlight filtered through the trees overhead, the leaves casting dusty shafts of green-gold to the ground below. The lion, sprawled on the loam beneath, was not entirely appreciative of their beauty. The way he felt, nothing would have struck him as beautiful. The elephants that roamed the plains of his mind stampeded about his skull, consuming all of his attention. Groaning, he rolled over onto his off side, throwing one forepaw over his eyes in an effort to blot out the brightness. His aching head welcomed the cool dark.

“Nengwe?”

The lion’s ear twitched. “Mmm.”

“Nengwe... c’mon.”

A guttural growl. “Go ‘way, and by the way, my name’s Nengwalamwe.”

“I will most certainly not. Now you look at me.”

Nengwalamwe opened his eyes, his muzzle crinkling into a snarl. His hot breath escaping in short blasts. “Or what? Listen, damn it, I’m having a nap, and I’ll bloody well get up when I...”

The lioness standing next to him regarded him with a sort of endless patience that can only come through time and trial. “Yes?”

Nengwalamwe’s only answer was a dull croak. “Uh.”

“That may be quite easy for you to say.” Melakwe yawned and licked a forepaw in a heartbreakingly familiar motion. “Well, Nengwe, I’d say you’ve got yourself into a mess, haven’t you?”

“Mother?!” Nengwalamwe shook his head, instantly closing his eyes in regret as it set the elephants trampling about gleefully. “Mother, what are you doing here?!”

“Does it matter?” The elder lioness looked troubled, the familiar furrow appearing between her eyebrows in what Nengwalamwe’s father called “That Look.” Stepping closer, she eyed him squarely. “You and I need to talk.”

Nengwalamwe cringed inwardly. The last time he’d heard that tone of voice was when he had got in trouble for nipping the tailtuft of his aunt. OK, so what if ‘nipping’ wasn’t meant to include drawing blood?

“What about?”

“Don’t be clever with me.” She began to pace around him. “Nengwe... what are you doing here?”

“Well, I was sleeping.”

Her eyes pierced him. “I mean way out here in the middle of absolute nowhere.” She shook her head. “You’re a lion, aren’t you?”

He stiffened indignantly. “Of course I am!”

Melakwe shook her head. “It takes more than a mane, a loud roar and a fire in your loins Nengwe. You can sire all the cubs you want and never be a lion. You’ll just be another wandering cub with teeth and claws who scares everyone into doing what you wants until another takes your place.” She shook her head and sighed. “The last thing I wanted to raise was another Nengwala.”

Nengwalamwe’s eyes narrowed. “Father is not a wandering cub! He’s...”

“Oh please! He’s a tyrant who rules with his claw and not his mind. Nengwala doesn’t care about anyone but Nengwala.” She looked at him steadily.

“Is that what you want to be, son? Another mindless brute looking out for nothing other than himself? If so, you’re no better than those dogs back there; less even.”

He snorted. “I showed them. Miss Elizabeth got a pretty nice shower.”

“And you’re proud of that?” she blasted, her eyes furrowing deeper still.

“It was Mutt’s idea!”

“What!?! My son, the great Nengwalamwe, ruler of nothing, shows his prowess by spraying a loudmouthed beast barely a quarter of his size then runs like a threatened cub!” Nengwalamwe tried to turn away. “Now look at me when I’m talking to you! You can’t run forever. One day even those great pads of yours will stop running.”

Melakwe drew away in disgust and shame.

“What did you expect me to do, stand and fight them all?” He looked at her with amazement. “They’d have torn me to pieces!”

“And that was the only time you did use that head of yours for something other than a support for that bloody great mane you’re so proud of!” Melakwe advanced on her startled son, closing to within a whisker’s touch. “Tell me, Nengwe, where’d that bare spot on your chest come from, eh? Wear it off trying to mount your friend back there?”

Nengwalamwe’s mouth hung slack, speechless at her outburst. “Mother!”

“Don’t you dare ‘Mother’ me and look all teary eyed. You’re long past a cuffing, and there’s no time for all this self pity you seem to enjoy so much.” Lowering her voice, she nosed his cheek gently. “Nengwe, my son... I do love you. But you’ve got a paw on both sides of a stream, and you have to cross it or let the crocodiles take you. There’s a life for you here. You may yet be a lion, but you weren’t born to it you know. There’s a part of you deep down that can rise above all you inherited from your father, it has to. As I told you before, I can’t help you do it, and I can’t make you do it, but I can ask you to do it - to make your whole life worthwhile. To do the right thing.”

Trembling, he looked up, his jaw tight. “But Mother, what do I have to do?”

Her eyes bored into his, seeming to swallow him. “There is so much still be done, so much. Just remember this: the river runs deep where the rocks are dry.”

“W-What?”

Melakwe backed away from him. “Remember who your friends are, they are not your enemies, and rulers only rule as long as their people want them to. It’s time to go home now; you’ve been living a daydream Nengwe. It’s time to wake up.”

“What did you mean about the rocks? Which dry rocks? The rocks covering the cave? Those rocks?” He moved to follow her, but she retreated faster than he could follow. “Mother, WAIT!”

“It’s time to wake up, Nengwe.”

Sharp late afternoon light stabbed into his eyes, making them water and blink. He looked up into the green canopy overhead, dusty motes dancing in their own world as the sun slid down towards the horizon. He drew back, blinking frantically, as something warm and full into his eye. Lifting his head again, Nengwalamwe looked about rapidly, feeling one, then another and another of the drops land on the exposed fur of his back and hindquarters.

He propped himself on his forelegs and stared about. His muscles complained with the dull ache of limbs that have been overtaxed and then left unused for some hours. The ground about him was disturbed; stirred up all round save where he had been lying. The clearing about him was empty. No trace of a pawprint or scent broke the isolation about him, and the only sounds were the dull huff of his breathing, the steady throb of his own heart and the pattering of drops falling on to the dust.

Lowering his head to his paws, Nengwalamwe sobbed. A hot flood of tears drenching the fur under his eyes, a bitter current that carried the remnants of his old life with it. His tears flowed down and into the dust to join that which flowing from above. The lion cried, and the land cried with him. The noise of the savannah was gone, held down by the clouds that sailed overhead and in a lion's heart. The plains stood still for a moment, joining with the young lion to mourn a dead world that had forever passed beyond his reach.

The evening sun, so shrouded by clouds that one might have mistaken it for the moon, moved onwards in its timeless path across the sky. The lion and baboon below it moved almost as slowly, though their strides were no less of purpose. The rain fell evenly now. Dusty witheredness transformed to muddy slipperiness with every drop that fell. Nothing was dry, not even the underfur of a lion.

The lion and baboon had recently climbed out of a shallow gully. Out of its sheltered pungent greenness, the land opened up on either side. The towering growths of trees giving way to stubbier clumps of brush and occasional patches of low grass, neither of which was tall enough to hide what lay beyond. Only the rain, falling incessantly, could do that.

The river was here as well but, compared to the small watercourse they had encountered upstream, one might as well call the ocean a puddle. This was not a placid course that bubbled smoothly, inviting one to dip one's paws in for a moment of refreshment. Here the river was a living being unto itself, ever churning and growling, fleeting past and winking continuously with the silver light of the moon. Here and there, a rock gleamed in the torrent, glimmering bone white as the river frothed and spumed about them, wearing at them with a timeless patience as it always had. The beast was smug in its assurance that one day it would reclaim the stony intruders that had dared disrupt its course, and the beast was stirring....

The sand beneath feet and paws gave way to coarse gravel, increasing in size until lion and baboon found themselves picking their way across rocks and stones, each footfall carefully placed in deference to the sharp edged ancient granite. Nengwalamwe heard, and chose to ignore, Mtundu's quiet cursing as he sought to find an easier path amongst the rubble. Nengwalamwe's size and vastly greater strength enabled him to wend his way about easily enough, leaping from stone to stone. His keen eyesight, practised during his arduous trip through the dark mountains, was able to pick out rocks which could be trusted; of which there were precious few. The majority were unsafe; their uneven surfaces glimmering in the evening light with the sheen of mist the river had

thrown upon them. Their odd angles and sharp edges ready to slice open a paw or send the perpetrator of ill-aimed leap tumbling into more dangerous stones below.

Nengwalamwe finally slowed, then stopped with his eyes furrowed and ears laid back against the misty froth that continually hung in the air. The damp droplets clung eagerly to his mane and whiskers, slicking the fur down; what there was left of it. Ahead the ground rose in a precipitous wall jutting out into the river. The flow, broken in its rush downstream, surged angrily back from the wall to pool around the rocks at his paws. He switched his tail agitatedly for a moment, displaying his uncertainty to the baboon who fought his way to the lion's side.

"Eh? An' now what do we do, eh? Ain't no way we're swimmin' across that mess. What'd you bring us here for, anyway? There's nothin' out this way I ever heard of, except more nothin'. Pfagh." The ape spat into the current, then looked up at the lion inquiringly. "Less ya got some bright idea you ain't told me about yet?"

Nengwalamwe remained silent, surveying the current below his paws. The dirty brown-grey water rushed past him, striated here and there with white froth from fighting its way over the submerged rocks.

Though naïve in many ways, Nengwalamwe was relatively educated in a few things; being Nengwala's eldest son had procured some advantages. One of which was an occasional trip down to the lower reaches of the Kolata River. Though that watercourse had been far shallower and quite calm on those excursions than that which he faced now. His father was not the best of teachers nor even the best of company at times, but the young Nengwalamwe had relished these trips nevertheless; they were the only times that he and his father had had to themselves.

"Suppose you had to chase an intruder out of the Kolata. He's across the river from you now, but that doesn't mean your job is done," the older lion had scowled to his son, "You have to finish the job... never leave a task undone boy."

Nengwalamwe nodded sagely, the sparse beginnings of his mane beginning to show some of their coming glory. "I'm seeing it. Now what?"

"You have to cross over and get to him, of course." Nengwala lifted a paw, splashing a spray of water into the air. "Water has no muscle, no sinew to tear, but has heart and it will bear you away like a lioness carries a cub in her mouth if you don't be careful. Where do you cross boy?"

Young Nengwalamwe looked at the watercourse before him carefully then pointed with a jab of his muzzle. "Right there."

"Why?"

"Well, the water's slower there... it's easier to swim."

Nengwala growled, pacing over to loom before the suddenly frightened adolescent. "You fool. The water's slower because there's nothing for it to fight. It's deeper than you can stand, and you'll be carried off and become fodder for crocodiles as your intruder sniffs up your lionesses, like as not."

Nengwalamwe nodded, trembling. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, be right!" Nengwala's eyes bored into him. "I'll not lose my eldest over such a trivial matter like this. If you have to die; die fighting, not swallowing water and pulling for your mother's breast like a cub." He jabbed an

exclamatory paw towards a dry, sandy area nearby. “There, where the current is swift and shallow. There’s ground below the water’s surface, just within paw touch. You can walk across, and have footing if you need to dodge anything.” The lion swept a paw about. “Always look for the fast water. If you get in a tight spot, you can cross on the rocks.” An appraising eye looked the youngster up and down. “If you’re agile enough... which you aren’t, boy... let’s work on that now. Go hunt up your mother and tell her you need a wrestling partner.”

Nengwalamwe nodded, and was about to lope off when a thought struck him. “I’ve already got Tashi.”

“What? That excuse for aardvark? He’ll never be any use to you boy; he’s certainly never going to be any use to me. What’s the point in having two sons? No boy, you need to learn how to really fight - the hard way – out there, against the enemy.”

Nengwalamwe watched his father’s face intently for a few seconds.

“Are you still here? Go on boy, go run to your mother!”

The sharp cry of a nearby waterfowl startled Nengwalamwe. Shaking his head, he thrust the thoughts of home out of his mind and studied the lay of the riverbank around him. A few lengths behind him the flow of water was more constant, but still not heavy, and the rocks gave way to a gravelly bank that sloped gently enough down to the water’s edge.

“Helloooooo... is anything workin’ inside that fuzball you call a head? I said, what are we doin’?” Mtundu frowned expressively in a way that Nengwalamwe could not match. “You ain’t addin’ to my peace ‘o mind, ya know.”

“I’m looking for a safe place to cross... and you’re distracting me.”

“Well, excuuuse me!” The monkey snorted. “I didn’t know river crossin’ needed brains.”

“You’re not helping.” Nengwalamwe shook his head. “Gahhh... forget it. It’s too rough here, anyway. I’d like to go back upstream a little and see if it’s any calmer.”

“Umm, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

The lion rolled his eyes. “Oh, so now you’re the river expert now are you?”

“No, but I got ears Fuzzbutt. Listen!”

Nengwalamwe perked up his ears. He grimaced at the sharp yips reaching them from upstream. “Oh great, that does it! How did they find us? And why are they still following us?”

“How should I know? Just whatever you’re gonna do, do it fast!” The baboon glanced back upstream frantically, gnashing his teeth in terror. “They sound really ticked.”

Nengwalamwe grimaced. “Pee’d off more like. We can’t cross here. Well, maybe I could, but you can’t. It’s too fas...”

Thunder cracked overhead, drowning the lion’s statement as lightning struck out at the land, revealing the shadowy shapes of a quartet of dogs emerging from the underbrush above them. Their eyes flashed eerily in the scintillating light, the leader let out a howl of glee as their prey finally came in sight.

The quavering howl broke Nengwalamwe’s nerve. The pursuit across the desert, the crocodile, his odd dreams, and the strain of trying to be on watch for two animals at once, had all worn his endurance to a thread, and it finally

snapped at the alien sound. Bolting, he curled about his own length and sprinted for the open bank and the water beyond, leaving Mtundu screeching in protest.

“HEY!! Where da heck you goin’?”

Groaning, the lion kept running to the water. His haunches shot backwards, launching his bulk into the air and splashing him down into the churning depths. He went under immediately then returned to the surface grudgingly, allowing him to force his muzzle above and take in a gasp of air. The furious rumbling of the river filled his ears, a roar he could feel in every stand of fur, a shuddering that sunk in along with the cold, threatening to numb him and drag him down.

Dragging in another gulp of air, Nengwe flailed at the water, shoving himself along by sheer force of will, his hindquarters twisting violently as he fought the current’s insistent pull. His raw forepaws scraped across stone; he cried out; but he seized upon it desperately, claws digging into the loose gravel bed. He yanked forward, up and out, dragging himself up the bank. Shivering, the lion staggered clear of the water, glancing back the way he had come, and stopped in horror.

The flashes of lightning came rapidly, flickering across his vision, enabling him to see well enough in frozen moments. Across the river, the four dogs had cornered Mtundu against the water, encircling him in an arc that drew inward steadily. Nengwalamwe saw the baboon’s eyes flashing in panic as he kept glancing behind him, but the sheer terror of the unknown river kept him frozen in place. “Mtundu! RUN! Over here!”

One of the dogs looked up at the shout and grinned, the odd piebald pattern on its side seemed familiar and grotesque framed against the almost black of his far flank. “Don’ worry, Fuzzbutt. You just keep on goin’ the way you are... we’ll sort ol’ Tuggles ‘ere.” Charles’ tongue lolled out in a derisive laugh, Nengwalamwe barely caught his soft tittering over the roaring tumult around him. “Yeah... he’s well sorted.”

Nengwalamwe pointed his muzzle at the sky. A roar of anguish bellowed out, but was lost in the thunder as the clouds overhead unleashed their long hoarded arsenal. A solid sheet of rain pounded down upon the lion and drew a silver veil up from the surging water around him, cutting off his view.

Falana shifted restlessly and rolled to her offside, rearranging her paws under her. The humid stillness of the savannah air gripped at her like a smothering paw, wrapping itself around her form and dulling the world about her. Sound, smell, even sight seemed to fade as the air grew increasingly oppressive. Off in the distance, the thunderheads bloomed, their edges tinged with a violent purple colour that matched her mood.

That night, on a sheltered knoll a lioness waited alone. She lay alone; no one came to lie by her side, no one came to speak with her. Later, after hours of

waiting, she got up and went hunting alone; no one ran at her side, no one shared her kill. When in the depths of the night the sky burst, she got wet alone; no one shared her discomfort. Towards dawn the lioness padded a path worn by a lion, it lead to a rock out cropping so high that it towered above the tallest baobab; no one walked by her side... not even her mother.

The rock, its crevices already overflowing with water, welcomed her. She picked her way up to the promontory alone with no one to guide her. Even in the rain, its slopes, transformed to cascades, held no fear for her, yet she was not at ease. She looked for something; something she might never find. She sniffed and pawed at a mound of broken rocks at the base of the promontory. Whatever she was looking for, it was clear from her pained expression and desperate scratching that she had not found it.

She turned and looked out into the droplet-misted sky; nor could she find what she sought in the sky. She dropped her head and collapsed into the flowing, folding sheet of tepid water at her paws.

By dawn she was gone, unseen and alone, except by an elderly baboon that had the misfortune to be waiting out the rain under one of the larger lone rocks that littered the plain below the promontory. He had thought his life was soon to end when the lioness stopped in front of him, yet she had said nothing more than, "He's gone... hasn't he?" His life spared, he looked away as he struggled to collect his thoughts to reply. When he looked back, he saw that she was gone into the early light.

15. *The River*

When the bedraggled lion hauled himself out of the river, he had no thoughts other than for his friend. He watched, calling and roaring, as the dogs lead the baboon away from the water's far edge. He knew he could do nothing to help him through the grey mist of driving rain; it was a barrier as great as the rocks that covered the entrance to the cave on the rock. He stood, water dripping from his underbelly, until he could no longer see movement on the far bank. Mtundu was gone; Nengwalamwe was once more alone in a strange land.

When the rains broke there had been little wind to drive the rain. Later, as night fell, the sun invisible behind the thunderously black clouds, the breeze freshened. It brought a chill to the air that only hours before had threatened to dry up the river.

Now the rain sheeted down steadily, a grey pall that surrounded the lion with a curtain of silver cold, wrapping him in its chilly embrace. His mane hung from his neck, all vainglory vanished. It dripped and ran, an endless stream of rivulets cascading down and drizzling onto his forepaws as he walked. His paws walked an aimless path, meandering downstream at an idle pace. Each forepaw blundering ahead of the other, each pawfall sinking into dank mud.

Nengwalamwe welcomed the rain. It soaked through his fur, gripping him with a moist numbness, enveloping him in a capsule of cold containing the iciness that filled him inside. His ears, clammy and immobile, ached interminably from unending exposure to chilling dampness. The dust, now turned to claw clogging mud, wedged the digits of his paws apart painfully. His great head canted downward, thin threads of water spilling from his mane in cold rills that coursed down his muzzle to drip steadily from the end of his nose and whiskers. The sensation was irritating, but he welcomed it nevertheless. It seemed to be the one thing left he could feel, a dark touch that elicited his nerves to life, reminding him he was still alive.

His ears flicked feebly, registering the pattering sound of the raindrops striking the earth around him. A low rush of air escaped his muzzle; half sigh, half moan, as he stopped and glanced about, dimly taking in his surroundings. The river, swollen and triumphant, rolled past him steadily on his left. The water, laden with mud, looked solid, like a churning flow of glassy sand. To his right, a small bower of scrub greenery nodded in the downpour, waving about frenetically as it soaked up the welcome moisture from the skies.

He flicked his tail to one side, scattering a spray of water and mud, and paced toward the bushes. He shouldered aside a limply hanging limb and nudged himself into the scant cover the vegetation offered. His hindquarters hunched down reflexively from the dripping wetness that coursed accursedly from the sodden limbs above. He sought out the largest bush. Crouching down on his belly, he crept under its meagre cover and nosed at the plant like a cub nuzzling for its mother. A great out rush of air escaped him again, catching for a moment. It hung around him as he settled his chin onto his paws. With eyes blinking rhythmically, he stared out at the grey world around him, absorbing the impressions presented by his senses in silence.

A tickling sensation stirred in his paw. He glanced down, his eyes rolling, blinking as another errant raindrop splashed in his face. An ant trundled among the wet forest of his fur; a small fragment of leaf held in its jaws like a soldier bearing his regiment's colours into battle. The lion followed its progress with vague interest, watching as it finally descended to the ground and began winding purposefully among the puddles between his forelegs. A rill of water cascaded down Nengwalamwe's mane, feeling cool as it flowed over the raw patch on his chest. Pooling on the earth before him for a moment, as if undecided, it burst over the wet ground and rolled away. He watched as it crept forward and enveloped the ant. The insect struggled momentarily, and then was swept away.

Nengwalamwe watched impassively as the creature vanished into the mud. He lifted his head slowly and stretched a paw forward, tilted it, blocking the miniature river so that it had to flow about his foreleg. After a moment the ant appeared again, struggling gamely before gaining purchase and crawling feebly up the mountainous paw, pausing a moment on one cracked and scraped pad as if resting. The lion slowly lifted his forepaw, curling it inward carefully, and laid it upon a tussock of grass next to him. The ant wavered a moment, then ran quickly down, alighting on a stalk of grass before waving its feelers momentarily and vanishing from sight. Nengwalamwe nodded silently, staring at the grass before tucking his paw back in place and resting his chin upon it again. The great golden eyes wavered a moment, then closed slowly.

A muffled crunch reached his pain-filled ears and he opened his eyes, peering into the rain dully, feeling the cold mud soaking into the fine fur on his chest, belly and loins. A dim shape, hunched over, was pushing through the other side of the bower, snapping small twigs as it came. The lion watched apathetically, his tail sliding its own width to one side before sinking back out of sight in the mucky earth... then twitching violently. With ears held erect and the fur on his back rising, he stared ahead with unblinking eyes. The rain carried on falling.

There before him stood a baboon, one lanky arm holding a branch out of the way. The monkey's fur was sodden and drenched, in barely better condition than Nengwalamwe's. A low wheeze escaped the baboon, and then his eyes flickered and focused, seeing the hulking outline in the mud. His shoulders dropped, drawing the branch close to his head, dipping his free hand into the mud at his feet.

Nengwalamwe remained silent; his jaw hung open slightly, the rain swishing in and rolling back out over his lower lip in a runnel of mixed saliva and water. He closed his mouth with a muffled snap and pulled his head back, hunching his neck down as the baboon moved forward, approaching, swaying unsteadily before sinking slowly to his knees. Lion and baboon stared at each other for a moment in silence, each weighing the other's thoughts and wondering what the other might feel. As the pair faced each other, the rain fell on...

The lion gave first. Nengwalamwe's eyes brimmed, his vision doubling, and then trebling, the cold rain on his cheeks now joined with hot tears. His jaw trembled minutely, trying to find some word, some magic that might repair the damage done at the ford in those final moments when the lightning had sundered the world and turned everything upside down.

Mtundu found it for him; sinking down, exhausted, catching hold of a lank tress of sodden mane to steady himself. The lion rolled his head, gaping open his jaws. The ape rolled back, his quivering muscles at the end of their endurance, and sank back against the welcome warmth radiating from the lion's shoulder. His head curled down slightly, his eyes slipping closed for a moment. Opening them again as the lion drew his teeth together. The baboon peered up into amber eyes, providing all the answer needed to sate their questioning gaze.

Nengwalamwe lay quiescent, his head curled down and in, chin pressed against the top of Mtundu's hairy forehead. His ears laid flat, filled with the sound of the hissing rain, the rain... and the soft sound of a quiet broken purr.

With the increasingly swollen river carrying all within its tossing, pitching, rolling folds surging by to one side, and the barren fringe of the Western desert close by the other, the lion and the baboon travelled on. The river was never out of even the baboon's earshot while the desert was never far from the lion's mind.

By night they moved, ever mindful of the canine eyes and ears that might be lurking on the far side of the rushing swell. The lion dare not venture into the desert; the baboon would not have been able to survive there for long. By starlight, they looked for a way out: a way to anywhere. The baboon kept suggesting that they cross back over the river; a suggestion the lion cast aside. What life was there for him there other of fear and anguish? Yet, the desert held them close to the river and the life it offered. The lion thought that it never rained in the desert. Here at least, in the rains, there was water, indeed far too much, though precious little food. Where were the dry rocks? How could there be any in the rains?

By day, the pair slept. Making use of whatever shelter they could find they huddled together, lion curled around baboon, sleeping through the occasional pauses in the ear-numbing rain, or so the lion thought. The baboon often became restless during the day despite having slept little, if at all at night. He would get up and wander about, searching out whatever morsels he could find. Starved of sleep, he became increasingly nervous, often anxiously casting about through heavy eyes. When, during an evening pause in the rain, the lion spotted one of the dogs through the tangle of trees and scrub carried swiftly by the river, the baboon rushed away to hide. The wide mud and rock margins that had formed the banks of the river were gone. The four-length wide once crystal flow now swollen tenfold carried all with it: trees, rocks, bushes, even a pair of wildebeest desperately thrashing for life.

Further on the desert gave way to a thin strip of rough ground and rougher vegetation that clung on to life on the thin sandy soil. Nengwalamwe woke, a little after noon, and thought he saw movement in the distance: a running form, a small leonine form - a cub. It ran down from the closest dune and disappeared into the scrub beside the river. For a short while, it was lost to view, but then it reappeared, clear gold against the browns of the even more distant trees beyond. It stopped on the river's bank. The river was much lower than it had been for some days. It flowed gently and shallowly along channels

etched into the rocks and gravel of the bed. The cub turned, looking along the banks. It turned to Nengwalamwe who, recognising her, smiled in reply. Then she was gone once more, splashing out into the shallows of the river. Scrub obscured his view of much of the river, though Nengwalamwe felt reassured and pleased when the cub he'd come to know so well re-appeared on the sun-drenched opposite bank. She met with no dogs and, after standing to drip for a moment, ran off away from the river.

Mtundu returned a while later, though from where Nengwalamwe had no clear idea. The rain had held off since he had seen Yali cross the river.

"Nengwe, when are we goin' home?"

The lion lifted his head lethargically. "Where's home?"

"Nengwe, ya know where; over there, over the river?"

"No."

"No what?"

"No, I'm not going back."

"Nengwalamwe, you know what'll happen now they've run ya out of there - Shaha and Falana'll be next."

"Falana? ... No way. Look Mtundu, there's no way, get that? No way I'm going back over the river even if the whole pack of dogs comes over here and there's an end to it."

Mtundu reluctantly agreed, "OK, OK, so where we goin'?"

"Somewhere, anywhere - how do I know?"

"Downstream. They won't look fer ya there."

"Looking for me? What about you?"

"Yeah... right... me too I guess."

The pair set off, following the river again. The scrub steadily became lush, the forest that had been the backdrop to Yali's river crossing seemed further away than Nengwalamwe remembered. Once reached however its height and density did not disappoint, nor did it fail to strike fear into the lion's heart.

Once within its heart darkness fell, Mtundu grew tired, insisting they stop for the night. Nengwalamwe stood guard amongst the strange sounds and smells, pacing out a trail all his own until dawn came, and with it still more rain. The pair pressed on until it was Nengwalamwe's turn to carry the burden of sleep. Mtundu went off foraging; Nengwalamwe, he said, was more than big enough to look after himself.

Nengwalamwe slept uneasily on the darkened bare ground below the canopy. The forest floor smelled fresh and earthy. Though he felt every ant, thousand upon thousand, that scurried across his tail like ships at sea; leaf fragment sails catching the becalmed air of the forest, he managed some respite from wakefulness.

The rain had stopped again. The sun, way above the branches, lifted the water from the soil, leaving it to hang heavily and mustily about the tree trunks. He imagined the rubble in front of the cave steaming and glistening in the sun, the water running off on to the plains below. Could that rock too fall like the leaves? Tumbling, swaying in the heavy, moist air? In the distance, and

occasionally much closer, whelps and yowls of monkeys rang out through the leaves; none roused the lion. He was alone - Mtundu had still not returned - and determined to make whatever he could of the solitude; sleep seemed by far the most appealing pastime.

He did not sleep long. Other needs pressed on him and, in the heaviest part of the day, he got up, shook the coalesced moisture from his mane and wandered off to find a secluded spot. Before he had taken more than a few strides he started wondering why he was bothering - all the forest was secluded, so all spots were equally suitable. Still, if he was to go back to where he had been sleeping, he thought he might as well make the effort to make the rest of the day that bit less unpleasant. He looked about, spotting a patch of heavy undergrowth some ten lengths away; far enough for his purpose. With a final look about, he lifted a foreleg, took a couple of licks and slipped away into the vegetation. Had any animal wandered past just a minute later they would have seen and heard nothing.

When Nengwalamwe returned to the patch of bare ground he looked about, turning on the spot three times to find the perfect lie. He was just about to settle once more when a sound caught his attention. Many sounds in the forest were unfamiliar, so many that he had got used to ignoring any that he did not recognise. This was different; it was oddly familiar and it was not a sound he associated with baboons. It was a rapidly repeating almost inaudible rasping. At first, the lion could not place it, nor could he locate it. Then came a second sound - of leaves crumbling; as if from a slowly placed pawfall. Above the sound, the rasping came again, hovering in the humid, fetid air. Now Nengwalamwe knew what it was; it was an animal panting in the moist heat, more than just an animal; it was a wild dog.

Another leaf crumbled as the dog moved another paw forward delicately.

'No, it can't be. I'm hearing things now. No dog's going to come out here, there's no way that's a dog, absolutely no way.' He slipped down on to the ground, thinking, 'It's all got too much for me, I've got to get some sleep.'

He lay watching the shadows as he slipped off into the haziness of half-sleep. The sun streamed in almost solid beams that slipped and fell from the trees to his nearhind quarter. The bark of the trees ahead stood out plainly in the revealing light. Then a shadow passed across them, a shadow that should never have been there. Nengwalamwe lifted himself instantly from near-sleep. His sight cleared, and the shadow moved again. There could now be no doubt and he acted on it, thrusting forwards and upwards, closing on the shadow and covering it with his own. The dog hardly had time to hunch down, such was the speed of the surge, but the lion did not strike.

Nengwalamwe had no firm idea of what he was pouncing at, nor even of what he would do when he caught it, eat it most likely. Lions normally watch their prey for a long time before striking, hours even, but all Nengwalamwe had seen were a few out of place shadows. All he had heard were fragmentary sounds that could have been made by a wild dog, or any of thirty or more other animals. He sliced through the shrubby undergrowth; it parted violently, moments later Nengwalamwe's forepaws forced down an animal. He had been right; it was a wild hunting dog; and not just any dog. It was Eddie.

Had Nengwalamwe's hunting instincts been fully aroused he would have killed the dog before it had even turned, instead he slipped to a halt; dragging the dog beneath his forepaws. He raised and twisted his head and growled sharply. The dog, all breath knocked from him, struggled for a few moments then lay still, gasping, looking the lion straight in the eye.

"What are you doing here?" Nengwalamwe shouted through his growl.

"You ain't never gonna know lion!" the dog countered. "What you gonna do 'bout it?" Nengwalamwe intensified his growl. "I don't reckon you've got the guts to do me in 'ave you lion? The way you ran back there on the riverbank I reckon you're just like your mother. Yeah, you're mummy's little boy ain'tcha?"

"Keep Melakwe out of this! What are you doing here? Answer me before I kill you!"

Eddie's ears pricked up and a sparkle returned to his eyes. "Melakwe is it?" he sneered. "You ain't got no choice Melakwe's little boy, you've got to kill me now ain't you?" The dog almost laughed. "What else can y'do? I could be on me own, but can you risk it? If you kill me, I'll be out of yer way for good, but what about me mates? They ain't goin' to take kindly to you bumpin' me off are they? Am I right?" He looked away. "Yeah, too right I am."

Nengwalamwe jumped up, lifting his forepaws off Eddie.

"Get out! Go on, you're not worth dirtying my paws!"

"I thought so. Hah lion, you're just like all the rest, you know what's good for you." The dog struggled to his paws. "You can't kill me can you? You want to, I can see it in your eyes, but you can't because you know it won't stop nuffin. You'll have to kill all us dogs, one by one, 'cause we never stop - never!" He drew close to the lion, close enough for Nengwalamwe to smell his breath. "But you can stop it. You can stop it right here, right now. It's easy, no sweat. You just turn around, head away from the river and keep on going. We'll look after Falana for you." He smirked, lolling his tongue. "She's a cracker ain't she, you've got some taste I'll give you that." He leant forward and slurped the lion's cheek. "But we can't let you have lion pups running around all over the place now can we? I hear there's no danger of that yet, and that's the way it's gonna stay. So Melakwe's little lion - turn and run; run away and never come back." The dog began to laugh, nodding his head and half closing his eyes.

No one can ever know what then passed through Eddie's mind, before Nengwalamwe's foreclaws. He hardly had time to realise that he had underestimated the fragility of a lion's temper, and the speed of his paw. He had never met any male lions other than Nengwalamwe and so it may be that the ear-splitting howl that reverberated through the forest was born from surprise; it may have been from sheer terror. It was certainly the last sound he ever made.

Standing over his kill, the lion looked up red mouthed and cast around the forest. His ears stood high, each moving independently at the slightest sound. Satisfied that there was nothing there, he dropped down, belly to the ground, and set about taking his fill.

"I'll stop it all right..." A branch cracked overhead; something fell through the trees a little way off. An ear moved to locate the noise. "Let them come. One

by one if it must be. I'll just have to take that chance dog, just as you had to take yours."

It was mid afternoon when Mtundu appeared. He broke cover almost opposite the sleeping lion and made to dash over to him. Before he had gone two loping paces he stopped and sneered in disgust at a few scattered bones, picked clean by piercing teeth and a rasping tongue. The baboon gazed at the remains for a moment, as if curious as to what it might have been. The lion opened an eye.

"Nengwe? Do ya have to leave your stinkin' leftovers lying around? Anyhow, what was it? Good eatin' eh?"

"It was nothing. It wasn't here" the lion replied through a gaping yawn.

"For nothing it sure left a lot behind."

"It was nothing. You said it couldn't find us. You said they wouldn't follow us here, but there it is."

Mtundu backed away to skirt round the bones. "Nengwe, what are ya talkin' about?"

"It was a wild dog Mtundu. One of those hunting dogs you said would never follow us, never find us. So, how come you know so much about these dogs huh?" The lion reached forward and licked a forepaw.

"Hey, I have eyes and ears just like you." Nengwalamwe eyed the baboon fiercely. "OK, so maybe not like you, but I keep mine open! The dogs ain't comin' after ya."

"No? So what's that? An aardvark? Where'd you get to anyhow?"

"Come on, I gotta eat. These trees ain't got no fruit, I cain't eat here. I gotta live too."

"I guess so, but if I find you're hiding something or you've betrayed me then you'll go the same way as him - but I'll not leave your bones, there won't be a trace of you left to show you'd ever lived! You hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, I hear ya. I hear ya." Mtundu moved close to Nengwalamwe's forequarters and sat down, leaning close to the lion's head. "I won't betray you, I... I promise."

"You had better not." Nengwalamwe leant his head over, stretching out his tongue to lick the baboon's arm. "I like baboons a lot you know, though if they called me Nengwalamwe I'd like them a whole lot more. So did you see any?"

The baboon didn't answer, and even seemed oblivious to the lick. The cry of a bird echoed off the tree trunks.

"Well Mtundu? Did you?"

"What?"

"Dogs! Back there - wherever it is you've been. Did you see any dogs?"

"NO! I ain't seen any... since I last crossed the river."

"You sure? This one was alone, but he tried to make me think he wasn't. Mtundu, we have to be sure. Where we're going, I don't want the dogs to find us."

"There ain't no way they'll find out. They sure won't, I'll stake my life on it."

“Yes... you’re right there. But they will won’t they? He found us here. They’ll never stop. Never. That’s what he said. What is it with those dogs anyway? What have they got against me?”

“Nengwalamwe,” said Mtundu looking toward the trail that had brought them down from the plateau. “It’s not you, it’s all lions.”

Nengwalamwe lifted his head to Mtundu’s. “All dogs hate lions. Lions hate dogs.” The baboon said nothing. “But this is more than that isn’t it?”

Mtundu gazed on.

“Isn’t it?”

Without taking his eyes from the trail Mtundu replied distantly, “Yeah, there’s more. They’re afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of a lion who...” Mtundu paused.

Nengwalamwe felt a shiver shimmer through the baboon.

“...Who might... ya know.”

”What?”

“Damn it Nengwe. Do I have to spell it out? Mate, have little Nengwes - make a pride!”

“What’s wrong with that? Lions do it everywhere?”

“Not here. There’s not been a lion round here for that many rains. Ain’t you noticed that there ain’t no cubs?”

“Eh? What do you mean there aren’t any cubs?” Nengwalamwe raised his eyebrows as best he could. “Anyway, Mtundu, they could have got me ages ago. If they really wanted to do away with me they could have tried it anytime I was asleep on the rock.”

“No, no they couldn’t,” said Mtundu as he turned to Nengwe smiling. “They cain’t go there, that’s where the lions use’ta be, see? They cain’t ever go there.”

“Not ever?”

“No, never. While you were up there you were... kinda the ruler I guess. When you didn’t stand and fight, they reckoned they’d sussed ya. They knew you’d run then, and they were right, weren’t they?”

Nengwalamwe lifted his forequarters from the ground, paused a moment, then, looking sideways at Mtundu, drew his hindquarters up to stand full square. He closed his eyes, twitched his tail and turned his ears forwards and walked away. Mtundu raised a hand to his chin, tipping his head over onto it, fingers tapping on his cheek. His features tightened over his eyes, partially closing. The lion walked on; with a sigh and a shake of his head Mtundu got up and followed him, raising his arms as he ran, shouting, “Hey Fuzzbutt! Where’dya think you’re goin’ wi’out me?”

The trail, never far from the rushing urgency of the river, dropped down through the forest. The path was clear, though that which had made it was not. It was purposeful, direct, rarely straying far from the river’s edge. Here and there, where the path was very close to the river, smaller paths cut through the undergrowth to the banks. Yet the water was deep, swift flowing and uncrossable, the paths seemed to lead nowhere. The forest was dense and for the most part impenetrable, not that Nengwalamwe had any inclination whatever to enter its depths. It was a strange and therefore dangerous place of sounds, sights

and smells alien to the lion. He had been there before and had no desire to taste its delights again.

16. *The Return*

The languorous, bloated flood of the river had gone, replaced by a jostling, rushing, roaring, cascading mass of muddied browns and whites. As the lion and baboon took each step forward, the river overtook them, flowing urgently onward. Nengwalamwe looked down the trail, and realised that he was no different from the river. What was left of his mane sagged down about him, full of mud, leaves and probably even a few twigs. Like the river, even his whitest fur was stained brown. He could only go one way, onward. He felt for the river, as he too knew not where he was going; he was following a trail laid out for him and following it wherever it led. So the great lion and the great river, both full of confusion and forces beyond their control, flowed onward and ever downward. The earth itself drew the river. Nengwalamwe had no idea what was drawing him on.

He had had ideas about leaving Falana and the rock far behind, yet the rock barrier called to him through the mist and spray; called to him to conquer them, to force his will on them, to cast them aside. And they invited him, spoke soft words to him, needed him and wanted him. Even if they had not, then there was nowhere else to go but down the riverside trail. Occasionally he caught glimpses of the far bank. Though it was not open savannah, it was not dense forest, the grass really was greener over the river, not that any lion ever cared much about grass.

As the river dropped ever lower it sped up, gaining strength and power from the fall. The surface broke, sending the water up in snow-white shoots and sheets, only to fall in a million droplets a few lengths further downstream. The flow seemed purposeful, organised, but in haphazard way. It was no longer smooth and even, it was increasingly broken into channels that flowed around and into each other, though why it should be so was more than Nengwalamwe could comprehend. Even Mtundu was at a loss to explain it. With the change in the flow came another - the sound of the river. A gentle flowing stream burbles pleasantly, seemingly enjoying its course, yet the river now crashed and roared continuously in an anger more fierce than any lion. Nengwalamwe reacted powerfully to the sounds of the river; he kept low and silent, fearful of the river reaching out to strike him. Like his father's rage, he could not escape the river's anger and hoped it would not notice him cowering at its paws. Yet the river's rage was growing as it was confined to an ever narrower and rougher channel. Soon, thought Nengwalamwe, its anger would break free to smash all around it. The rage of thought would turn to the rage of action, and nothing, certainly no lion, would be able to stand in its way.

The slope steepened, gently at first, so that Nengwalamwe and Mtundu barely noticed the change, then suddenly it seemed to drop away before them. The path ran close to the river; the air was thick with mist. The rain had long since stopped, yet the ground beneath Nengwalamwe's pads was damp and slippery. He extended his claws a little when his pads alone could no longer hold. Mtundu slid to his side, grabbing hold of the woody stems of a shrubby bush to stop himself.

"Nengwe! Where'a we goin'?" This aint goin' nowhere but down fast!"

The lion tried to stop. His foreclaws gripped, his hind caught for a moment, then his momentum carried his hindquarters on, dragging through the soft clay slip. His hind legs buckled underneath him. The lion twisted round involuntarily. His back tightened and he struck out at the ground with his hindlegs, claws fully extended, only to feel the clay slide, clammy and gritty, beneath him. Then, filled with pain at being twisted around each other, his forepaws lost grip, and Nengwalamwe, the mighty would-be king, slid uncontrollably down the slope on his belly and near side.

Mtundu clung onto a bush, watching his friend slide from him. The expression on the receding lion's face was of terror and surprise.

"Nengwe!" Mtundu lurched back as mud spray, sent up by the lion's fall, splattered over him. Then, his grip loosened by his instinctive reaction, he too succumbed. "Ooh SHI..I..T!!"

Pain, stabbing pain in uncountable places. Back, upper hind legs, ribs, shoulder. Lie still. Lie and never get up. Lie....

"Nengwe?"

Lie still.

"Nengwe? Are you OK?"

Lie and move an ear.

"Nengwalamwe? Come on! Get up!"

Open an eye; wish I hadn't.

"You're OK. Wow! That was some ride huh? Do you wanna go again?"

Feel like eating baboon: if my sides didn't hurt so much.

"No... I guess not... Say, y'all feeling all right ain't ya? "

Lift head. Open mouth, let teeth glint in one of the few beams of sunlight that reach the ground here. Roar!

"Is that a yes?"

Keep mouth wide open. Show him who the meat eater around here is.

"Why's your tongue's all rough?"

Why bother? Close mouth. Look around. See the slope I fell down. Notice the smooth band of mud. Feel the rock that stopped me. Feel the pain it gave me. Thank the stars it saved me. Can't hear anything but noise, noise, rushing, roaring noise. Taste the moist air, cool on my tongue. Smell the water, on everything, everywhere. Reach out to the baboon before he has a chance to back away. Lick his foreleg; now he knows. Glad to be alive.

"Can we go now?"

Nengwalamwe looked around again. Through the swirling mist he could see the forest, dense and dark about them on three sides, the river flooding past them and plunging down amongst the glistening rocks on the fourth. A sinking feeling enveloped him as he eyed the slope they had so abruptly descended. No way back. The path they had been following along had vanished before his paws, cut away by the angrily pounding water. He had fallen just once, yet the river

fell over and over filling the air with a hissing flume of spray and sound, its soft patience cutting away at the hard rock. Lions, however, are notoriously short on patience.

“Mtundu, where can we go? Where else is left?”

Mtundu raised an arm to the river. “There, Nengwe. There!”

Nengwalamwe lay still on the ground by the rock that had broken his fall; thankfully without breaking his back; lifted and turned his head to the raging flow below the falls. Was it raging? No, not quite; the river opened out into a wider, calmer, probably much deeper pool at the fall’s foot, but was it swimmable? No, no baboon could ever survive that, and few lion. Certainly, Nengwalamwe would not have jumped into that water out of choice. “No way Mtundu. There’s no way we’re crossing that!”

“In case you ain’t noticed, we’ve gotta cross it. Here’s as good as anywhere. Tell me Fuzzbutt, what’s so wrong with here?”

“Mtundu, it’s too deep, too wide and too strong for you.”

“Yeah Fuzzbutt? You’re just scared. We’re here, Falana’s over there, how else are we gonna get you two together?”

“Quit this Falana stuff Baldarse!”

“What would your mother think of her little cubbie running from a lioness eh?”

“She’d... hey cut it out! I know what you’re after! Don’t think I don’t. You want me to swim across that with you on my back. You’re trying to blackmail me into it aren’t you?”

“Me? Do’ya think I’d do that to you Nengwe?” Mtundu’s voice rose almost to an insistent screech, “Come on, would I after all we’d been through?”

“Well...”

“Huh?” Mtundu said waving his arms about his head. “Huh Fuzzbutt?”

“OK, OK! Calm down. We’re not going no place all fired up, not if they are waiting for me.”

Mtundu’s upper lip curled back to cover his teeth again. “Who are they?”

“Them, you know - them!”

Mtundu half closed his eyes and tilted his head upwards. “No. Who?”

“Them.” Nengwalamwe’s mane shook. “All teeth, jaws and knobby bits. They’re gonna eat me!”

Mtundu passed his hand over his face. “Not while I’m around they ain’t. Anyways this isn’t croc country. There ain’t none here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure you’re sure? I see those jaws of teeth in my sleep and they frighten me.” At the thought of sleep Nengwalamwe yawned.

“Yeeesh. From where I’m sittin’ I can understand how ya feel. You’ll get over it,” Mtundu said, waving at Nengwalamwe dismissively, “I sure did.”

Lowering his arms, he eyed Nengwalamwe squarely. “Anyway who said anything about crossing right here?”

“What?”

“I think we should look around first and see if there’s anywhere better.”

“Where?”

“I dunno Fuzzy. I ain’t had a good look round yet! Come on; let’s try over there by the falls.”

“Mtundu! You’re crazy! What’s there but a load of rocks?”

“Yeah,” said Mtundu with a smile. “Rocks....”

When Nengwalamwe finally got up he was surprised, not at the pains, which were as sharp as ever, but at the aches and stiffness of his legs. It felt almost as if he’d been lying there for hours. He wanted desperately to stretch but knew the pain would intensify if he attempted anything but the most basic motions of standing and walking. He felt the damp ground beneath his pads. Then he floated away, his paws growing invisible to his feeling. His sight veiled in red. He could do nothing to hold himself upright. He felt himself fall from paws that were no longer his.

“Whoa! Steady there boy!”

“What’s happening to me Mtundu?” He pleaded plaintively, “Help me, please!”

“You’ll be OK in a minute. You’re legs have probably just gone dead.”

“Dead!? Mtundu, help me! I’ll do anything, just do something. I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not going to die!” Mtundu said with a gentle smile spreading over his face. “You weren’t out for long, a few moments only. Try to move your paws.”

Nengwalamwe dared not try.

“Go on Fuzzbutt. Gimme them claws!”

Nengwalamwe pleaded with his eyes. Mtundu insisted with his teeth. Suddenly the lion roared in pain.

“Ah...” Mtundu backed away, his eyes darting from side to side. “I guess the feeling’s commin’ back, ain’t it?”

Nengwalamwe roared, “Wait! I’m slipping all over the place back here!” His voice, that could carry further than the eye could see over the open savannah, was all but drowned by the falling white water. Ahead, Mtundu stopped and looked back mouthing something which the lion’s delicate ears, completely filled by the power of the falls, couldn’t catch. The baboon beckoned the lion on, then moved into the wall of water. Nengwalamwe looked on, his eyes filled with terror, his ears flattened down to block out a little of the fall’s anger. Mtundu had disappeared, swallowed by the cascading water, surely never to return.

Yet moments later he did, or at least a hairy hand and forearm did. It emerged magically from behind the spray, soaked and dripping, and waggled a finger towards Nengwe in a beckoning motion. When the lion failed to move, it uncurled and did it again. Still the lion stood, afraid and bemused at the vision of the disembodied hand. He was about to lie down when a head appeared to join the hand. The hand waved again, the head smiled then mouthed something unmistakable, “Come on Fuzzbutt! What you waitin’ for?”

The rocks beneath Nengwalamwe’s paws felt cold and slimy as he picked his way forward, the deep black surface under him covered with garish green filaments. A strange plant, thick leaved, lushly green and rooted in a crack in the

rock face, brushed against the lion's side as he passed. He paused, standing no more than three lengths from the security of the banks yet feeling days away. He tentatively reached forward with a forepaw. It slipped on the rounded green-slimed head of the boulder. He reached out again, frightened to touch it. He knew he must get on it, over it and over everything. All he needed was to get out of this place. Everywhere was rock and hard places and he was caught in amongst them all, threading his way, being lead and driven. Chilling spray blew on to his face and whiskers with each gust of buffeting wind that swirled around the rocks. Each drop told him that he was past the point of no return, yet he couldn't really remember how it had all happened, other than that Mtundu featured at every moment. Here he was again, beckoning him on into the water; calling him on, on, on. So on it was, though to what, Nengwalamwe had no idea. The lion knew now that Mtundu's world was so much larger and more complex than his own and that despite being the strongest and most powerful animal for days in any direction Nengwalamwe was the weak one. His father, he thought, might have been proud at what his son had become, yet the son now took no pride in what his father had been. Maybe Mtundu held Nengwalamwe's future in that wrinkled olive brown haired hand of his. Maybe it was time to stop questioning and to just trust the baboon. Against all his instincts, Nengwalamwe drew himself up proudly, growled loudly but silently in the roar of the falls, raised a foreleg and then stepped forward to follow the mysterious vanishing monkey.

Nengwalamwe pressed himself against the drenched, slime covered rock face. He looked down, watching intently for the right spot to place each unsteady pawfall. The rock curved away slightly; instead of going into the cascade of falling water, ready to cut any animal's back in two in a moment, Nengwalamwe felt himself slip past the white knives, behind almost. No, it *was* behind. Here there was no sound, other than the deafening fall of the water. No wonder Mtundu had beckoned; no sound made by any animal could be heard here. The rock curved away into a large cavern, strewn with rock fragments. Only a fragment of the dazzling daylight penetrated the white wall of water, chasing fleeting patterns down the dry walls and floor.

A length ahead Mtundu sat precariously on the sharply sloping yet remarkably dry rock half a length from the water. He was smiling, pleased perhaps that he had persuaded the wary lion to go behind the falls. He tipped his head, drawing his lips back to show his teeth in the way with which Nengwalamwe had grown so familiar. "Come on Fuzzbutt!" they said. "Cain't hang around yappin' here all day!" He raised a forearm and beckoned again. Nengwalamwe held back, standing in awe and wonder of the sights around him. Mtundu drew his lips back further, normally they would have been accompanied by some kind of excruciating screech, but here there was none. Instead, his arms grew more expressive, more furious, and more mobile.

Nengwalamwe's eyes, already wide taking in the incredible half-lit, flickered sights that surrounded him, flared in terror as Mtundu's flailing hand was engulfed by the water, flipping the monkey over instantly down from the cavern into the falls. One moment Mtundu had been sitting there before the lion, the next he was gone far faster than any crocodile could have struck.

Nengwalamwe didn't stop to think. Baboons could not swim; lions could. Mtundu probably would not survive the fall, Nengwalamwe might. The next moment Nengwalamwe sprang forward, leaving only a pair of wet paw prints on the dry floor. He launched himself into the flow; it instantly slammed into him and pummelled him down. It drew him below the frothing water to where there was little light and no air, and then took him further still. The pressure of the flow, even deep into the ground, carried Nengwalamwe down and held him tight so that he could not struggle. Yet he knew he must if he was to save Mtundu.

Whereas the crocodile's grip had been deathly firm, the water's weakened as the light dimmed. Above, or what Nengwalamwe assumed must have been above, the water swarmed and swirled. The sky, a brown stain in the darkness, was even and unbroken. He kicked his legs, only succeeding in turning himself over in the water. He saw the sky turn to darkness, and then grow lighter again. This time there was a shadow on it, a black monkey-like silhouette. The fall's hold was gone; the light grew as Nengwalamwe kicked repeatedly. Changing from brown to dull silver, the surface came down to greet the lion.

He broke surface nose first, expelling a huge lungful of spent air in bubbles and foam. The instant his mouth cleared the water he drew in life and air. The rest of him, hanging and flowing in hopelessly waterlogged tresses, stayed beneath the surface. All around the water flowed languorously, almost relaxing after its exertions in the rapids and falls.

Nengwalamwe could not relax. He could see little but the silver water's surface just below his eyes. A bank, sandy and gently shelving, swung into view, but Mtundu did not. The lion swum about in circles, lurching forward with each kick of his legs. Everywhere there was deep water, slow and even, but no baboon. The falls must have taken him, Nengwalamwe thought. Now he was alone once again.

He swum about for as long as his legs would keep on kicking; looking, searching, hoping desperately for Mtundu to show a wrinkled hand yet there was none. Nengwalamwe saw the falls, some way off now, and the spot where he'd hesitated before going behind them. He imagined Mtundu's arm beckoning once more, then he knew it would never do so again. The lion knew that few lesser animals could have survived the plunging forces of the falls. 'Not that Mtundu was less than me,' he thought, 'just smaller, that's all. Why didn't I listen to him when he said we should cross before? What's the point of being a lion now if I can't even save a damn baboon?'

His father called to chastise him. "Nengwalamwe! Don't save him boy, eat him!"

"No, Nengwe dear. Are you hungry?"

'No mother,' he thought.

"Then you don't need to eat him, do you?"

"No mother," he replied sadly.

"What sort of a lesson is that for a lion?" his father blustered. "If it's edible eat it! Every lion knows that!"

"And if it's mountable mount it I suppose!" Melakwe's voice lowered, "Nengwe?"

Nengwalamwe opened his eyes. His body lay exhausted around him on the sands.

“Yes Mother,” he said weakly.

“Nengwe? Come on, there’s things to do, it’s time we went home.”

“No mother. I’ve got to find Mtundu. I’ve got to find him.”

“Who? Is he a new friend of yours? He’s not from the Upper Kolata is he? You know how your father is about them.”

“No, he’s not from the Upper Kolata. He’s from....” He thought for a moment. “You know I don’t really know where he’s from, but he’s my friend and I’ve got to know if he’s still alive.”

“What about your other friends? Are they still alive too? What about that lioness... you like her don’t you?”

“Lioness...” Nengwalamwe thought; half smiling. ‘Which lioness?’ His words disappeared into the sand. The sun slipped down to touch the forest canopy on the far side of the river. Melakwe was gone. He stood alone, his mane dripping and full of silt. “What have I done?” he said sighing to himself. “Where do I go now?”

“Back I guess, fuzzy guy.”

The lion turned his head round to his left. He stared hard at the dripping form huddled beside him, scrunching down his eyes tight. The olive grey head raised his eyebrows in a way the lion often wished he could. The lion leaned over and licked the baboon, licked him over and over. Drying, cleaning him, showing him why his tongue was so rough. Welcoming him back.

“You know we gotta go back doan’ya?” the baboon giggled as the lion licked somewhere sensitive.

“Why?”

“Because Nengwe, I think ya do give a damn.”

“Caring is... weakness.”

“What? You...” Mtundu shivered. “Hey, careful there with that thing!” The lion rubbed his head against Mtundu reassuringly. “...you doan’ actually believe that do ya?”

“I don’t know. Maybe...” Then, shaking his head, “No.”

On this side of the river; sheltered by an escarpment, grey and hulking; the ground was a little more open. The day was pressing on, heating up towards noon, the sun pressing into every crack and fissure of the sandstone rock face. There was nowhere to rest, to recuperate: to groom and plan.

The pair walked slowly through the lush green undergrowth at the foot of the escarpment. Above them lay the very fringes of what had been the lion’s world. Ahead and on their nearside lay unknown terrain: strange vegetation filled with frightening noises. Such was becoming almost normal to the lion, yet that couldn’t completely allay his fear. Nor indeed could the baboon, for whom this too was a strange, unsettling land. They had no choice but to follow the cliffs southwest: there was nowhere to climb up to the plateau above, with the great rock at its heart.

Once away from the roar and fresh spray of the falls, the pair’s thoughts turned to finding some shade to wait out the searing, cloyingly humid heat below the cliffs. It was Mtundu who found the ledge, just a lazy jump above the ground. Above it, the cliff hung over, formed by searing winds long before. He called to Nengwalamwe, who briskly loped up, then looked all around, craning to look above. The overhang unsettled him. Its shadow, casting deep into the rock,

promised so much and reminded him of the great rock that he gladly settled alongside the baboon. He lay to the outside, sheltering Mtundu who, for the first time for some days, soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Nengwalamwe kept watch through the hottest part of the day, thinking of what the cave in his rock, the great rock, would be like once it was open. Would it be like this place? Nothing having approached since they arrived, he too finally fell into sleep. His mother did not disturb him.

When Nengwalamwe woke it was dusk. He had missed the dramatic slanting sunset that set the bush briefly aflame. He had missed the bats flitting forth from the cliff above. He had missed the taut heavily-set male leopard that had slunk past just a few lengths away on the ground below. The leopard paused as he passed, catching scent of an unfamiliar animal, possibly a monkey of some sort. Unable to locate its source, he shook his head and soon moved on.

As the lion stretched he felt the first pats of new rain. He was soon surrounded by dark spots on the rock. Nengwalamwe walked to the ledge, paused momentarily to spot his landing and stepped off heavily, slipping away into the bush. He soon returned. The rain was falling heavily now, but the overhang shed the worst of it. The monkey slept on, even as heavier drops began spit-spattering down on to him from the rock above. Nengwalamwe found the least wet patch and settled in as best he could. With each laden drop he grew to thinking: about Mtundu, the dogs and the rains. What had really happened at the water's edge? How had Eddie found him? What, if any, was Mtundu's part in all this? Especially now that he had shown, by his survival at the waterfall that, unlike the others of his kind the lion had encountered in Kolata, he was a more than competent swimmer.

The rain was long past. The midnight air was stickily humid. Shafts of hazy-misted moonlight slanted through the treetops, filled now with swooping, whooping and clacking calls. Shadows rustled and cracked in the nearby bush. Mtundu at last stirred. Nengwalamwe eased over to let him stretch and get up. The lion let the monkey take a few unsteady steps forward before voicing his thoughts.

"Who are you?"

"Eh Nengwe? Wha'dya mean who am I? Ya 'naw who I am."

"Are you my friend, or my enemy?"

"Whoa now! Ya'll frightening me now. What's got into ya all a'sudden?"

"I don't like having my tail pulled Mtundu. So, who, or should I say what are you?"

"I'm your friend, that's who. 'Course I am. Cummon now, whaat'is all about?"

"You've been asleep a long time."

"Yeah, nearly getting' drowned kinda takes it out o'ya."

"Where are we going?"

"Back, you know that Nengwe." Mtundu's shoulder twitched as he shuffled from foreleg to foreleg. "We're going back."

"Are we going to be met when we get there?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Yes. Exactly. And do you?" Then glanced down to his dark tail tuft. It flicked and jerked. For a moment Mtundu looked as if he might run, but he stood

his ground. Maybe he realised he would be struck down before he'd even turned. Maybe he decided this was indeed the time to explain. Maybe...

"Yeah. They won't be there. They don't know we're here." Nengwalamwe raised a forepaw, extending his claws as it came up. "Look Fuzzbutt, they don't think we're here. Honest, they probably think we're still on the other side; still running away."

The lion's sides breathed twice. He lowered his paw, letting his claws return. "Tell me more."

"Like what Nengwe?"

"Like everything, from the beginning. When did it start?"

"From the beginning. Yeah, it started then."

"I wondered why a monkey like you would hang about a lion like me. At first I thought you were mad, or ill. I mean, why would a monkey want to get himself eaten like that? Putting yourself in my way all the time. But then, everything here was upside down and sideways. Who knew what normal was anymore? Not me."

"We're... how ya say..."

"Spies?"

"Naah, intelligence gatherers."

"You, intelligent!?" Nengwalamwe smiled for the first time since the waterfall.

"Yeah, OK, OK. Look baboons are everywhere right? Chattering away here, squabbling over something there. Playing around trees, scurrying around rocks. Running across tracks. Ya know. We get around."

"OK. So?"

"We hear stuff, we see things. No one takes any notice of us. 'Oh it's only another of those baboons again.'"

"Right..."

"So, the stuff we hear is... kinda valuable to the dogs, ya see? Ya, ya all right' so we're spies."

"You too?"

"It's kinda the family business. Ain't no way to get out o'it." Nengwalamwe humphed and nodded. "My older brother tried, but the dogs found out. Got 'im real good."

"How?"

"They've got animals to do that sort of thing for them. The sort who'll do anything and not ask too many questions. They... they did real bad stuff to him... left him dying there as a message to everyone. Then..." He hung his head, breathing heavily. "Then you came and ended it for him."

Nengwalamwe said nothing. Silence seemed to say it all.

"That's when Miss Elizabeth decided I should be the one to trail you. Kinda punishment I guess."

"Trail me? You literally stood in front of me! You're either mad or stupid. At least that's what I reckoned. I could so easily have caught and eaten you. Why not just follow me?"

"Because... ya know this is gonna sound really stupid... I knew you were on the right side. You weren't from round here. You weren't part of this madness. Nengwe, I thought you were a real lion."

"I guess you were wrong."

"Oh no Nengwalamwe, I was right. I'm still right. You do care, that's why you're not running away."

"Not running away? What do you call this? What are we doing right now?"

"We're going back."

"Into a trap most likely."

"No Nengwe. No, they think you're long gone and me with you most likely. They don't know we're going back. They don't know where we at. That way they'll leave Falana and Shaha alone for a while."

"They will? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, pretty sure. They don't dare mess with Shaha. Never have. Falana... well, yeah, they've not always let her alone. That's why they left the last time."

Nengwalamwe's eyes darted about. His ears twitched round. "What? Left?"

"Yeah, they've only recently come back. A while before you showed up. They were both born here, and they'll always keep coming back, no matter how often they have to go away."

"Why? Why did they go? Where?"

"No idea where, but why? Maybes it was because they killed Falana's mate and her cubs."

"Her cubs? She's had cubs?"

"Yeah. She's probably not wantin' to go through all that again, so it ain't past supposin' she's not keen on males these days, if ya'll see wha' I mean."

"Who killed her mate? The dogs?"

"Oh yeah. Sure they did. It took nine of them but he sure went down a'right. It took a while, but Miss Elizabeth enjoyed every moment of it. Says he begged to be killed in the end."

"...And her cubs?"

"No one knows what happened to them. At least no one's tellin'. Some say Falana left them on that knoll she lies on and when she got back they were dead. Some bits gone too.... That's why she lies there, waitin'... but they ain't never gonna come home."

Nengwalamwe sat up, looking down on his paws. He closed his eyes. "Come on Mtundu. We're leaving." He got up and walked off. Moments later Mtundu hurriedly struck out after him. For some time neither spoke. Eventually, with the bush thinning around them they came to a stream running down from the cliffs. Nengwalamwe stopped.

"What have I got myself into Mtundu?" He looked the baboon square in the eye. "What madness is here in this place?"

"When we get back, we gotta make it count. Nengwe, do ya understand it? We gotta take them down. There's no way else to end this. The dogs, especially Elizabeth, they ain't for backin' down, and they ain't gonna give up."

"Eddie said I'd have to take them down one by one. How many are left?"

"Ten maybes more."

"How many took down Falana's mate?"

"Nine. He was all that too, and it weren't like it was hard or nuffin'."

"So, I can't just go in there all claws out, can I?"

“Naah. We’re gonna have to play this clever; take our time.”

“We? Are you on my side now?”

“Well, OK you, and yeah, I’m on our side. I’ve always been on your side.”

“Even when you’ve been telling the other side everything I’ve been saying, everything I’ve done and everyone I’ve met?”

“Yeah... but I didn’t always tell them everythin’ right and somethin’s I said were way wrong.”

Mtundu stepped closer to the lion and placed a hand gently on the lion’s forepaw. He slipped his head under the lion’s chin, snuggling under. Had Nengwalamwe wanted he could have crushed the baboon instantly. Instead he raised his free foreleg and slipped it over the baboon’s far shoulder, resting it. Each felt the other’s body moving in time with their breath, Mtundu felt moments of Nengwe’s slow and calm heartbeat through his forelegs. No one was going to eat anyone just yet. While the conversation had stopped for now, there would be much more to say later.

17. *The Lion, the Bitch and the Clawed Lobe*

Crossing the stream, the pair moved onward. Around them unfamiliar animals watched and wondered from what they hoped was a safe distance. The lion and baboon saw few of them, yet they were there; in the trees, under the bushes, behind the rocks. Some barely knew that the larger of the two was a lion, the others simply marvelled at the magnificent mass of fur the shone in the sun and the muscle that rippled effortlessly beneath. The strange beast's paws seemed to hang on each step, it placed them flat and even on massive unseen pads. All knew that, like as not, equally impressive claws dwelt between the smooth fur of its toes. Strength and power flowed on its scent and scattered all in its path. In its wake shuttled another beast, one totally unlike the great beast. Grey green matted fur; no, matted hair fell from its body. Legs swung about in all directions. Beady eyes peered blankly ahead along the long ridge of its nose. It looked not a little like a larger form of many of the monkeys that lived, ate and hid in the tree canopy, yet it sat and walked on the ground. While it certainly was like the forest dwellers, there was no mistaking that this creature was no more of the forest than was the great beast. Why they were there, and where they were going, no one knew. No one that saw them realised that they were unlikely ever to see their like again.

Fear is a strange thing. For many, the fear of being afraid is as great as or greater than any fear of actual danger. To be afraid is to be seen to be weak, so Nengwalamwe's father said. Fear, though, is a warning. Fear is necessary, fear is normal. To live without fear is not to live at all. Many who experience little fear in their lives often go and seek it out, or else live perpetually in the shadow of fear of imagined danger. Most animals have no need of such artificially created fear; it is around them each and every day. It's in the crack of a twig, the swish of the grass, or the shadow from the air. The animals that looked upon the great beast and his skittish companion looked upon them fearfully, seeing danger in those deep eyes and dark lips.

"Do ya actually know where we're goin' Nengwe?"

The lion's eye flicked from side to side anxiously. "No, do you?"

Snuffling, the baboon stopped, sitting back on to his bald rump and looking around high into the canopy.

"I guess so."

The lion turned his head right back, and halted. "I guess so! What's that meant to mean?"

"OK, OK. Jeez Nengwe, keep your mane on. I was only asking," asking with flitting gaze and rapid breaths. "Does this place frighten a big lion like you?"

"No! No..." Nengwalamwe tensed as he turned his ears to one side at a sudden bird call. "No," he repeated through snatched breaths. "I'm not afraid. What's there to be afraid of?"

"I dunno, but this place scares the living crap outta me. Can I groom you?"

"What? This is no time to be tick picking Mtundu," the lion said without taking his eyes off the shadowy undergrowth.

"I'll let ya lick my back."

"You will...?" The lion turned his great head slowly to his companion, a hint of a smile managing to creep over his lips.

Further on the ground rose and the cliffs grew ragged. The bush browned. Steadily, the ground rose up to the plateau so that just after dawn the two walked up through scrub emerging onto a broad plain. The ground rolled away before them. In the shimmering distance, now as familiar to Nengwe as his own scent, stood the great rock. They had returned.

As the new day turned to old it grew warm and almost cloudless; a brightness heralding the end of the rains; the steamy humidity telling a different tale. The top of the rock, hazed into near unrecognisability, still lay over a day ahead. The way back now seemed clear enough yet neither could see what lay beyond the ridge ahead. As they crested it the reason became plain. The slope broke abruptly across their path; the sun casting the pair's shadows long over the light, barren sandy soil. To the left and some four or five lengths below, golden laden by the late sun, the ground was richer, moister but uneven and broken by low rock and sparse stunted trees. They would have to either head right toward the river or along the ridge which they could see raggedly curving away into unknown and further away from the great rock, or else go back the way they had come.

Nengwalamwe walked forward tentatively. He suddenly stopped and looked down. At his forepaws the ground dropped away abruptly and darkened in deep shadow. To one side below the ground was rough; scrub littering the rises. He looked to the left, and wished he hadn't. He was on the edge of a bluff some five or more lengths high stretching and curving away to the southeast. Yet more rock blocking his way. He edged back carefully, taking shallow shuffling steps: bumping into Mtundu.

"Hey! Watch where ya puttin'it!"

The lion stopped and sat down firmly. The ground seemed safe enough, or was it? Might it not crumble under them, sending them tumbling to their deaths, burying them in an instant so that no one would ever have known they were ba....

"Nengwe, are you OK? Ya kinda look unsteady there."

"Yeah. Yeah I'm... yeah, I'm good." Nengwe tried to smile. "Just don't look over the edge."

The pair looked out from the head of the bluff toward the great rock, now bathed in the intense red-gold of sunset. Nengwe noticed, picked out by the low-slanted light, a large group, almost a herd, of buffalo drifting in a wide arc toward the foot of the bluff.

"You hungry?"

"A little, why?"

"Don' those buffalo look mighty tempting?"

"Not to me Mtundu, and way out of reach. Buffalo don't take too kindly to being hunted. Even Shaha and Falana would pass them by." Mtundu sat, concentrating on Nengwe. "If they stand their ground they can easily kill you. They're strictly big pride prey." Nengwe looked back to the herd.

"Where do'ya reckon they'll be?"

"Shaha and Falana?"

"Yeah."

The lion looked up from below the bluff to the great rock in the distance.

“Way over there, by Silent Rocks probably.”

“Why d’ya call them Silent Rocks?”

Nengwe shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s what they call them.”

“What d’ya call this place.”

“Here? I dunno.”

“No? I reckon this must be Saffi’s Bluff.”

Nengwe had heard Shaha use the name. He had nodded politely. At the time he had not realised where she meant. Though he did not know it he had once seen the bluff, an upraised fault line of sandstone, but had dismissed it as being small and uninteresting. Now, up close, it took on new meaning. He had clearly underestimated it. “Who was Saffi?”

“Saffi? I think she was one o’yours: a lioness.”

For a few moments the pair sat silent.

“So, how long do you think we have?”

“For what?”

“Until the dogs get to hear about us?”

“Half a day. A day at most.”

“Then they come for me. We won’t even be home by then.”

“For us Nengwe. They’ll come looking for us. But maybes not yet.”

“Eh?”

“Miss Elizabeth’s got a taste for dragging things out till she’s good an’ ready. She ain’t one to call a pawprint a paw print”

“You think?”

“Yuh. We got a little time to make some friends. You’re not alone in all this Nengwe. There’s many ‘ad wanna see the back o’those dogs.”

“I hope so. We’re gonna need all the help we can get.”

Nengwalamwe noticed that ahead strode a small file of the largest horned animals he had ever seen. Taller, their straight twisted horns rising yet further, and heavier, yet more elegant, smoother coated and gentler coloured than the buffalo; they wound their way easily toward the river.

Mtundu surveyed them with curiosity. “What are they?”

“I don’t know.” Nengwe shook his head; something new caught his eye. “What’s that?”

“What?”

“That. There, look way over there... it’s... no, it can’t be. That’s Shaha!”

“Where? Out here? No way. I can’t see nuttin’.”

“It’s her all right. So, where’s Falana?”

Nengwe watched intently. Yes, that was Shaha surely. Her mottled coat stood out clearly in the evening light, and there, yes, there were her ear marks. She inched forward, flat to the ground. Then, almost shielded from view by the... whatever they were, was another lioness. Not Falana. Heavier set, clumsier, almost angular at the hindquarters; no, definitely not Falana. The buffalo had moved round and now stood between the bluff and the lionesses that seemed intent on the bigger antelope. “Never take your eye off a buffalo Nengwe” his mother reminded him. Shaha would know that. She’d never forget that surely? Yet there she was, letting the buffalo blindside her.

Almost silently at this distance, the scene burst into life. From the distance a slight lioness rose from light cover, then another, faster still. Dust rose from the ground as the buffalo panicked. Another couple rose in the far distance. The first pair turned as the great antelope leapt away, turning toward the buffalo. "Nengwe!" A few faint bellows and grunts floated up. The buffalo had now seen them and one turned back to face the lionesses. "Nengwe!" Everything moved at once, dust everywhere, noise and confusion. "NENGWE! This ain't good!"

"Don't interrupt! What the heck is it Mtundu?" Nengwalamwe turned his head angrily. There, some way down slope, heading along the bluff top toward them were three dogs. The lead was very dark, almost black, with lighter grey to the top of his head and ears. His, no her legs, were almost white. She stood tall and proud. To her side but some way behind walked Elizabeth, her ears round and upright. Her coat smooth, its colours bright in the evening light. To the rear another dog, rather like Eddie, trailed looking agitated, scanning left and right.

"Mtundu, what happened to that half a day?"

"I dunno. What are we going to do? Run away?"

"No chance. We could stand and take them down, there are only two and Lizzie."

"Stand and fight? D'ya reckon?"

"No, not here. We've got to take all of them. These need to tell the other's we're here."

"Tell the others? Are you nuts?"

The dogs approached steadily. They showed little sign of having even seen the lion and baboon. The lead dog called, "Here, you there! Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Come on; let's give them something to tell the others."

"What d'ya have in mind?"

Nengwalamwe dropped his forequarters to the ground.

"Get on."

"What? You are nuts Nengwe?"

"Get on, and hold on tight."

"Whatta y'mean, 'get on'"

"Stop yabbering and climb up on my back."

Mtundu looked uncertain. He reached over and grabbed a handful of mane. The lion closed his eyes and hunched down as far as he could. Mtundu hesitated for a moment, and then looking at the still closing dogs, swung his back leg up and over the lion's back as best he could and pulled himself on.

"Hold on real tight now."

"I am."

Nengwe rose sharply. Mtundu slipped to the right, clinging on with his arms and squeezing with his legs.

"Tighter Mutt, tighter!" Nengwe struck up with his forelegs and turned on his hind, wheeling round tightly. The baboon clung. The lion took a pace, then a half pace to change his lead and surged, gathering pace with every lengthening stride; gathering his strength.

"We gonna turn and charge these dogs?"

“No, Mtundu,” Nengwe gasped, already taking in deep breaths, “We’re going to the waterhole.”

Mtundu just managed to croak out, “Waterhole?” as the ground rushed beneath them. He barely dared to look up; the edge of the bluff was rushing up to meet them. Then with a surge which crashed over Mtundu like lightening the lion punched up with his forelegs, moments later kicking the ground away with his hind. Mtundu hunched tight over the lion’s shoulders. “Ohhh Shi...”

Few animals ever experience the adrenaline fuelled power of a male lion at close quarters. For most it’s thankfully something that happens far away and to others. Many of those that do felt it don’t live to tell the tale. Even they do not feel what it’s like to be the lion. Here though was one who did. Perhaps indeed the only one who ever had and might ever do. Mtundu was one with the lion, feeling his strength and power through his hands and the thumping beat of his heart through his feet. He was enveloped in his scent, wrapped by the warmth of his blood and flesh, tousled by the rushing air. He felt the strength, beauty, grace and life force of the lion were all his to share.

If all that wasn’t enough the ground was rushing up to meet them fast. Nengwalamwe stretched out his forelegs to greet it. The unaccustomed weight was carrying him over more than he had expected: it was going to be a rough landing. His legs buckled as they hit, he was barely able to stay upright. His hindpaws crunched and slid. Somehow, by not fighting his forward motion, he managed to keep his balance. Had he fallen and rolled over, or worse had his head been taken under he would have crushed Mtundu, instead he flowed forward, breaking into an all-out run, carrying them both in a gently curving headlong run away from the bluff.

They crashed through the buffalo that spread in panic all around them at the sight of the monkey head lion beast. One fell; others jumped and tumbled over the fallen. Then the herd all took to headlong flight. Beyond, neither saw nor heard any sign of the hunting lionesses, they had all but vanished into the dust. A little later the lion slowed to walk, breathing heavily. He stopped, hanging his head to breathe more easily. The baboon slipped off his back.

“Nengwe, if you’re gonna do sometin’ like that again, ask me first!”

“Why,” the lion rasped, “So you... can say no?”

“No, so as I can keep my eyes open and enjoy the ride.”

Mtundu was going to be able to dine out on the experience for a long, long time.

“So where are they?”

“We dunno Elizabeth. We ain’t seen hide or hair of ‘em for days. They’ve just up an’ gorn.”

George stared at Elizabeth. He dropped his head and curled his tail down tightly. He had given up any hopes of her favours. Now he knew he was just another of the dogs. Behind him, down slope, lay a near grey bitch, her ears still up, a slight smile on her muzzle. Her tail lay easy on the sandy ground above Saffi’s Bluff.

“And where the heck’s Edward? Has he just gone and vanished too?”

“But Elizabeth, you know ‘e can look after ‘imself. He always turns up, one way or another. The river, it’s that fast flowing we can’t get across it. We’re watching the only crossing point day and night. There’s no other way they can get back. We’d have seen ‘em.”

The waxing moon flickered through heavy broken cloud. It shone down picking out Elizabeth’s tattered ear hanging down over her face.

“Don’t bring me your flamin’ problems. Give me soddin’ solutions!”

“Yes Miss.”

“That flamin’ monkey could do it, so so can you. It’s only bleedin’ water.”

George looked incredulously at Elizabeth. “You want me to swim the river?”

“No, I want the whole bloody lot of you to. Just get on with it! What the heck are we doing way out here eh? Traipsing around all flamin’ day, and for what? There’s bugger all round here. Have you seen any tracks? Smelt a lion’s scent? Seen any stray monkeys? No, ‘cause I haven’t either.” She paused, and then went on slowly and deliberately, “That’s because THEY AIN’T HERE! Geddit?” George nodded passively. “They’re still out there over the river. Eddie too for all I soddin’ know. I want them found. Now!” Elizabeth bored her eyes into George who shrank back. “Come on Jane, let’s get out of ‘ere: I’m getting bleedin’ cold.” She turned and stormed off. The light bitch got up and slipped behind her. George let them go, and then turned and walked toward the river in the most obvious, direct way he could, ignoring all cover and following the pools of moonlight.

From below, Shaha watched the dogs on top of the bluff. She couldn’t catch any of what they said, they seemed unusually quiet, or perhaps what little breeze there was carried their sounds away. She afforded herself a wry smile when they split up and started off back the way they had come. Once she was sure they had gone, she paused a few moments to remember her grandmother who gave her life here, and gave her name to the bluffs that overlooked where she fell while saving others. Shaha doubted anywhere would ever be named after her. Lifting her head and taking a deep breath to compose herself, she slipped away into the night, smiling again and broader still when, a little later she came across the unmistakable track of a heavy lion, almost certainly a male, running fast, and heading toward Pride Rock.

By dawn she had returned to Silent Rocks and wondered if she ought to take the time to visit the great rock. It was not far, but it was most of a lifetime away. She gave in to her memories and stayed at Silent Rocks until Falana roused her in the late afternoon. By then, she knew that her previous night’s efforts had not been for nothing and she was able to turn her whole attention to hunting with her daughter.

As dawn approached Nengwe began to feel more at ease. He and Mtundu had made good time; the great rock now loomed ahead, dark, monolithic, massive, but still home.

“Well Mtundu, here we are. Home at last. I guess you’ll be wanting to get away.”

“Err, not just yet Nengwe. I, err, well, ya know.” Mtundu sat back and began inspecting the back of his fingers. “I can kinda stay here for a while.”

“Mtundu, that’s not very convenient.”

“Ohh, ya wanna go see Falana?”

“Well, there is that too.” Nengwe tipped his head and almost smiled. “But I was thinking more of getting something to eat.”

“Yeah, fine by me.”

“I can’t hunt with a monkey on my back.”

“No, ‘course not.” Mtundu leaned forward, conspiratorially close to Nengwe’s ear. “What ya gonna catch?”

The lion looked left and right, then whispered, “baboon if he doesn’t let me get on with it.”

“Ahh, righty. I get ya. You just go ahead and do your thing. I’ll just stay right here and look after myself. Yep, that’s what’ll do.”

Nengwe softly licked the side of Mtundu’s face. “What’s up?”

“Yeah, well, I’m kinda alone here without you. Its lookin’ mighty lonesome from where I am. Can I stay with you?”

“This is something a lion’s got to do for himself. Then I can knock up the lionesses on a full stomach.”

Mtundu’s eyes opened wide. “Err Nengwe. I really don’t think that’s the sort of thing you oughta be saying around Falana,” but Nengwalamwe wasn’t listening. He was looking around for somewhere for Mtundu to shelter. He looked back at the baboon sitting bold as day on the ground. OK, somewhere to hide, that’s what he needed. He walked around, sniffing at bushes and the ground for any scent that might signal danger for a baboon. There was plenty, even, he noted with some relief, Falana’s. None was strong, all was old.

Some way ahead stood the remains of a tree, its canopy all but gone. The wood was dry and brittle but the few remaining branches were low and might well support a baboon’s weight. From there Mtundu might easily watch Nengwe hunting if he so chose. Better yet, he would be able to see anything coming, and be able to call Nengwe. He called back, “Mtundu, how about up there?”

“Are you serious? Ya wan’ me ta shack up in that tree while you go hunt?”

“Yes, that’s about it. Well, what do you say? I’ll let you groom my mane later.”

Mtundu started walking toward the lion, who turned sideways on and lay down.

“How long ya gonna be?”

“As long as it takes: stalk a few, chase a few, get lucky maybe, till mid-morning or so. You’ll be all right up there.”

Mtundu stopped and sat down. “Like ya was all right up on the bank of the river huh?”

“What? Well...”

“Nengwe, you don’t get the prey thing do ya? I go sit up there and sure, while it’s dark I’m sittin’ pretty. Come sun up and I’m a monkey on a stick. Ya might as well hunt me ye’self, it’ll save ya time.”

Nengwalamwe dropped his head, his mouth hanging open, his eyes tilted up to the baboon. “Yeah, we’ve got better things to do, haven’t we? Let’s get home.”

“It ain’t so far. Who knows, Falana might have caught something.”

“She won’t want to share it, unless its worms.”

Nengwe got up, stretched, yawned with a twist of his head. Mtundu lead off warily, looking all round with sharp turns of his head.

It was well after dawn when they reached the rock. Nengwe climbed slowly, for the first time admiring the beauty of his home: the early light on the rock face, the haze of damp ground greening after the rains, the grazers floating on the horizon, the acacia trees bursting with fresh foliage. Everything fresh, everything green and gold, everything growing and alive, everything, as he stepped on to the promontory, other than that grey, barren, stinking pile of rocks.

18. *Silent Rocks*

As with so many journeys, once over, and returned to home, sleep is often the first need to be fulfilled. The great rock offered many places to lie, sleep and wait the day out amongst its caves, overhangs, and the tree canopied platforms of the southern ridge. The best of all these was the one place where Nengwe could not go, the blocked promontory cave.

What looks good to a lion is not necessary so for a baboon, each looks for something different. Nengwe worried about being able to see all round should he wake, or worse, be woken and need to escape. Mtundu wanted somewhere high and inaccessible where he could feel secure and hidden. Each though could be the eyes of the other, Nengwe's tuned to distant movement between earth and sky; Mtundu's on subtle patterns of light, shade and colour above and below.

After little debate, and a few resigned huffs from Nengwe, they choose the larger cave that opened to both sides of the great rock. There, in a large, deeply shaded alcove they could see to the western boulder strewn plain that lead down to the river, and off to the south, the dog's distant den. If they were to come, it might well be from there. The other entrance narrowed and sloped down from the east. With luck, if anything came from there, and they woke in time as it approached they might be able to take it down as it descended the narrow path into the cave.

The lion found it hard to sleep. He was worried that the dogs were coming for him. On the odd moments when darkness spread her wings about him and he dropped into soothing sleep they crowded into his fragmented, fevered dreaming.

A little after noon Nengwe got up and stretched. Mtundu, feeling the stifling air on his back, woke too, trying to work out when it was.

"Why's it not dark already?"

"It's after noon, a little I think. I really ought to go warn the lionesses," the lion looked to the sky beyond the narrow entrance.

"Nengwe, ya just got back and all you can think about is lionesses? Ye gotta rest."

"No, we can't. We're burning daylight."

"Nengwe, ya leave me alone in that daylight and I'm dead meat. Right now, the only way thing keeping me alive is you."

"Look, come sundown and I've got to go. I might be too late, they'll be out hunting most like and I'll not find them till morning."

"Yeah. I guess I can do what I have to in the dark."

"What do you have to do?"

"Told ya. I gotta see some people."

"What people?" yawned Nengwe almost closing his eyes.

"Big, important ones. Cain't say more 'less it doan' come off." The lion flopped to the ground, folding his forelegs under him. Mtundu stepped over to him and gently slipped an arm over his mane. As the lion slipped off, his head loose on his shoulders, the baboon softly stroked his mane and shoulders. "There ya go. You ain't no good to any of us if ya doan' rest."

Soon Mtundu was also asleep, his head resting on the lion's foreleg.

Soon after sunset, bats streaming out to feed from high above on the great rock, Nengwalamwe struck out onto the eastern plain and headed off for Silent rocks. There he hoped to find Shaha at least. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to find Falana, and was quite convinced she didn't care to find him. Her desire appeared plain: to have nothing whatsoever to do with him. While it pained him to think of it, and of what might have been, he respected her wishes, so clearly shown, and was determined to let her be. He knew not why it was so with her, but now it seemed to be a waste and no little intrusion into her life to find out.

When he arrived at the crags he first saw and heard nothing. Then he felt a movement high up to his offside. He looked up in to the soft moonlight: nothing. He dropped his head, and was about to turn away to leave when he heard a familiar small voice.

"Welcome back Nengwalamwe." It was Shaha. "We thought you would return."

"We?" he asked without lifting his head.

"Falana and I. You know it can't be easy being Falana. Every lion, every male that she's been involved with has paid dearly for knowing her. All her cubs are dead."

"Mtundu told me."

"I think she feels that as everyone she knows suffers she must never get to know anyone."

Nengwe looked round to face Shaha lying high on one of the boulder tops. "Doesn't she know we suffer too from not being a part of her life?"

Shaha sighed softly. "I don't know; maybe she thinks there'd be more pain with her than without her. Perhaps she's just trying to spare you... us, that pain."

"You're her mother, surely you know her better than maybe and perhaps?" Nengwe padded forwards to the base of the rock. It rose sheer from the earth. There appeared to be no way up.

"No one ever knows Falana. Maybe they think they did, but then perhaps she let them think it, but they never really know her. Not even me... maybe especially me. She has a lot to bear. She's the last of the Pridelands pride, the very last. I can't have cubs; I don't come into season anymore. She knows that if the Pridelands is to have any future, it rests with her. That means she must have cubs. That means she must have cubs soon." She paused, looking intently at Nengwe. "That means she must have your cubs, Nengwalamwe."

Nengwe pricked his ears and shook his head. "No, I don't want cubs with Falana." He dropped his head sadly, "No, that's not what I mean. I want Falana, all of her. Every time I see her I long to be with her, but she doesn't want to know, she doesn't see. I see her; I see the way she flows by. She like the river, when she's calm she runs deep and full, in the shallows she swirls and plays, yet she runs headlong down the gorge, carrying everything in her path, unstoppable, fierce and powerful. Then over the falls she goes, enveloping all who venture close. I see the curve of her back as it seduces me; taking my eyes wherever she is. Just a glance is enough... and yet all I can do is admire from afar; as soon as I get close she turns away. She doesn't want anything to do with me, and all I can

do is let her get on with her life.” He breathed deeply in resignation. “I don’t want her just so as I can have cubs. I want her for her. I want her to want me; to be with me because she wants to, not because of her duty, or your expectation, or because she owes me anything or because she thinks I saved her from anything. All I can offer is me, just as I am. All I have for her may be pain and suffering but at least it would be side by side; together. I’m going to stand up to those dogs come what may. I don’t know if I’ll survive, but I have to do it. Not for Falana, or for you either, but for everyone. It’s what I came here for, I know that now. Can you understand that?”

“Yes Nengwalamwe, I do. I think Falana does to, for what it’s worth. But you can’t do it alone, you need friends; allies.”

“I have no friends. Well, I’ve got Mtundu, but he’s not going to be much use in a tight spot. Oh and there’s Yali, but somehow I don’t think she’ll be around when the time comes. A cub and a monkey, that’s all.”

“You’ve got more friends than you know, and I feel there’s more to your friends than you realise. I’ll do all that I can, and don’t underestimate cubs. I was a cub once you know.”

“Funny, I can’t imagine you as a cub.” He sighed.

“You don’t need to Nengwe.”

“And Falana?”

“Falana does what Falana does. Have you tried to alter the course of a river? Just remember, the river that runs through these lands is small, almost nothing. Further downstream it joins with other rivers, becomes part of them and together they flow on and on, united and mighty. You’d be wise to do a bit of meandering yourself Nengwalamwe.”

“What do you mean? Meandering?”

“Take your time. Give Falana time to... be Falana. She knows what she’s doing. You can’t hurry love, and you certainly can’t hurry Falana.”

“Shaha, time is one thing I don’t have any more. Elizabeth and the dogs are coming for me. If you and Falana are in their way they won’t care. They’ll simply take you down and keep right on going.”

“I’m not leaving, Nengwalamwe. I was born here. I played as a cub here. I grew to an adult here. I bore Falana here; and others too. This is my home, I can never leave.”

“Well, at least take care. Please look out. Trouble’s on its way.”

“I never go looking for trouble.”

“I can believe that Shaha, but it finds us all just the same. I’ve got to go. I need to talk to Falana. Do you know where she is?”

“I’m sorry, I really can’t help you.”

“Well, thanks for telling me all this stuff. Though I don’t know how it’ll help. I’ve got bigger things to worry about just now.” He nodded to Shaha. She got up and slipped down behind the rock. She soon emerged beside Nengwe who, leaning forward, rubbed his neck against hers. “Let all your hunts end well Shaha.” He held himself there, for the first time feeling her pulse in her neck and the warmth of her flesh. Then he pulled back and began to turn to leave.

“And tell that baboon of yours I want to talk to him. Don’t worry: he’ll be alright, I’ll look after him, and no, I won’t eat him.”

Nengwe walked off, back toward his great rock. Shaha watched him go. Once out of earshot she said quietly, "Falana? You can come out now."

Falana slid out of the shadows.

"How did you know mother?"

"You know I am everywhere, I see everything," Shaha said still looking away to the lion's rock. "That and you reek of sweaty Impala. How much of that did you hear?"

"Enough. 'I can never leave' my backside! We were down in the Nyangali for two rains!"

"He's going to find you."

"No, he won't. I'll go to him when I'm good and ready."

"You've been ready for days."

"That, mother, is why he's not going to find me. I can't believe he's going to get himself killed for me."

"He won't get himself killed if we're there to help. And he's right; Elizabeth will want to take us this time. She won't want to make that mistake again. Anyway, I thought you liked him."

"Nengwe? What if I do? He'll just get himself killed like... like..."

"No, he won't. He'll stand on that rock and everyone will see him: King of the Pridelands, and you can be at his side. You and a scruffy baboon..."

Nengwe walked over to Falana's knoll, half expecting to find her lying alone on the bare patch of earth which she cleared through lying on it night after night. His suspicions were wrong; he called softly, almost furtively, hoping that no dogs were nearby: she was not there. He settled down and waited. Around him the night carried on: hyenas noisily brought down an impala; a gemsbok was born; a wild dog bitch wandered alone, confused and torn. Life went on.

Nengwe dozed in the final hour before dawn. He lay on his near side for most but from time to time turned onto his back and underside. At each twist his legs assumed a position even more uncomfortable than the last. At length he lay still, more or less squarely on his back, his offside hind leg partially raised so as to allow the warm, moist air to bathe his fully exposed underside from neck to tail. He enjoyed the feeling of openness and coolness on his spotlessly white, short underfur.

The hard stones embedded in the ground beneath began to push and grumble at his back. He realised that Falana might not come before he would have to return the great rock. The spot where Nengwalamwe laid, atop a knoll some five lengths by two, had once been covered by soft earth and thin grass. That had been before Falana took to lying there alone, watching the evening fall.

Nengwalamwe had come to the now bareheaded knoll in the hope that Falana would return. It occurred to Nengwalamwe that despite his once clearly voiced disregard for lionesses, he actually needed them far more than they needed him. These were moments when he felt incomplete, as if he had stopped growing too soon and had been stuck forever without his mane.

His dreamless sleep was interrupted by Falana licking his cheek. She had finally decided to come to him. He murmured softly, “Falana, I need to tell you...”

“Shuushh!” came a young lioness’s voice almost in his ear.

Nengwe started, opening his claws as his heartbeat climbed rapidly. He opened his eyes and peered into the stillness of the night, but all he could see was a fuzzy greyness. The muzzle drew back, resolving into: “Yali!”

“Shuusssssshhhh.... keep it down, we don’t want the whole savannah to know.”

“Yali!” he shouted in a whisper that carried no more than a length. “What the - what are you doing here?” Nengwe stared hard at the cub. “Go home. You’re a bit young to be out at this time of night.”

“I told you once before: you’ll find I’m a lot older than you think Nengwe. So tell me, do you love Falana?”

“If I tell you will you go home?” Nengwe asked pointedly. “I thought you said you didn’t know Falana?”

“Oh, I know all sorts of things. You’ll never know what I know you know.”

“OK, OK. Yes, I... I... I don’t know. Now will you go? Falana could be along any moment.”

“Yeah, yeah. Will she have your cubs?”

“Cubs? You’re far too young a cub yourself to ask about that sort of thing. If I ever find your parents I’ll tell them a thing or two about what you get up to.”

“Will she?” Yali insisted with soft eyes.

Nengwe sighed softly. “No, I don’t think so. She’s not interested in all that. I don’t know what she is interested in. There’s so much about her I don’t know.”

“Oh, she’s not so hard to understand.”

“Really? And what would you know about it?”

“Silent Rocks.”

Nengwe peered at Yali in confusion.

“Silent Rocks are a whole load of boulders right?”

“Yes, of course they are.”

“No, Nengwe, they are all one big rock. Most of its underground see. We only see the bits that break the surface. Falana’s like that.”

“I know she can be hard, but she’s not made of stone.”

“No, no, that’d be silly. No, when you’re on the rocks, you can only be on one at a time, and you have to go down to the ground and then up again to get on another. Well, you would if you were me. You’re bigger an’ all, you can maybe jump from one to the next, at least for a bit.”

“And that is Falana? How exactly?”

“There’s different Falanas, just like there are boulders. She keeps each of her rocks apart; it’s difficult to go from one to another, unless she wants you to. No one of them is Falana, all of them are Falana. Unless you can get to all the rocks, and go from one to the next easily, you’ll never know her.”

It seemed like the meaningless babbling of a cub, yet it made some sense. Even Shaha said she didn’t really know Falana. What if she had been hurt so much that she put the bits of her life onto each of these rocks so that they couldn’t and wouldn’t know about the rest? If anything did happen to her, she could limit the damage to just that rock. She would go from one to the next, but

each wouldn't know about all the others, only some, and maybe not even knew that others existed. It could be her lonely way of protecting herself.

Then again, what could Yali really know about Falana? What indeed could she know about? Not much about Shaha and Falana for sure. Ah, but then Shaha did warn not to underestimate cubs.

Then another thought struck him. If she knew so much about Falana, could she know about the other lionesses he and Mtundu had seen from the bluff? Whilst it was not unlikely for there to be two prides on these lands; it was more than big enough to support three or four; it was very odd that they had never met. But then Shaha had been there below the bluff with them, hadn't she? He wondered why he had never smelt, seen or even heard Yali's parents nor her siblings and cousins. She was still a cub and though she was seemingly capable of looking after herself, far beyond her age, she could hardly be living alone. So, where and who were her parents? Why did neither Falana nor Shaha know of them? Or was it that they didn't want to tell Nengwe of them?

He turned his head, slowly opening one eye to where Yali had been standing. She was still there, standing intensely as if she had all the energy in the world. "Haven't you got a home to go to? Come on, where are your parents?"

"My parents? You want to know where my parents are?" She giggled and turned as if to leave. Before she moved off she turned her head back to Nengwe and smiled, pulling her upper lip up slightly to let her teeth, still new, as witnessed by a gap low down to one side, shine in the thin pre-dawn light. She then turned and ran forward a few paces but, hearing no sounds from Nengwe, stopped at the bottom of the slope of the knoll and turned her head back once more, this time she did not smile quite so broadly.

"Come on! What are you lying there for? Come on, let's go!" Now she ran off without waiting further. Nengwe rose stiffly and watched the cub run, knowing that he would have no trouble catching her. He could not stay around all day however, and he wished he had a little more time to stretch. The earth of the knoll was hard and not entirely comfortable. He called after the running cub in an attempt to gain a little time. Not for a moment did he doubt what he was about to do. He was going after her and that was all there was to it. He was going to meet her parents, what harm could there be in that? Yet somehow his instincts had been set aside; for an adult lion to meet a pride male, particularly after running after his young daughter, was likely to have only one outcome: Nengwalamwe would have to fight. Yet all this did not even enter his thoughts.

"But Yali? Where are we going?" Then in a lower voice, so as not to be heard, "as if I even cared." Nengwalamwe however did care. He really did care about this young lioness who wandered so casually in and out of his life. He tried to reassure himself, saying that it didn't really matter: "Why am I chasing after some cub anyway? It's Falana I should be chasing, if only she'd lie still and let me catch her."

"To meet my parents of course," came the clear unwavering reply. Nengwalamwe casually noted that her voice carried no hint that she was running, no tremor of exertion, yet running she was and Nengwe felt as though he might as well get on with it and run after her, perhaps the rush of the grass along his flanks would do him some good. In her current mood Falana was

perhaps best avoided. Nengwalamwe did not like the idea of being scratched or worse by a moody and confused lioness.

He moved off and quickly drew his weight forwards, accelerating powerfully. Yet just where was Yali running to? As he had predicted he was closing on the cub with every stride, every pawfall: every press of his pads on the ground. Yet no matter how he tried, she somehow managed to keep ten or more lengths ahead. The going was easy and familiar enough, nothing but the gentlest of downhill slopes. The well grazed paw-high fine grass was interspersed by occasional tussocks of tougher and thicker grass that might have brushed his fur heavily had he not avoided it with supple mid-stride twists of his back and subtle sideways flicks of his tail. The soil felt warm and slightly yielding under paw.

The dawn overtook them both, bursting over the rock ahead, bathing it in dazzling gold. It enveloped Yali, Nengwe lost her as she approached the rock. He slowed for a few paces before stopping to stand, drawing his forepaws together. Yali had entered the deep shadows at the base of the rock where the dawn had not yet penetrated. He waited for any sign of the cub.

‘Where’d she go? What a time for games!’ He waited again then dropped his head and raised it again calling in a restrained voice, “Yali?” No answer came through the rising air of evening. ‘Where did she go? Cubs can’t just disappear.’ Any of the caves, overhangs and ledges could hide a cub of Yali’s age. It was a perfect playground for cubs, it was the perfect place for a family of lions yet, apart for Nengwe it was empty.

There was still no sound or scent of the cub. ‘Just why don’t Shaha and Falana live here?’ He looked about, but realised he would be much better able to search from above, on the rock. He looked up to the long promontory of the rock. His instincts began gnaw at him, ‘if her parents are here then I would know it. Yali’s just playing cub games: “See me, Hunt me” I reckon. And where’s Mtundu?’

Nengwe set off again, leaping over every boulder to the rock platform. No lion would dare to show himself around here, Nengwalamwe’s scent marks bore silent witness to that. He slowed as he reached the tip of the promontory and looked all about him, even, as unnatural as it felt, below to each side. He padded tentatively forward to reach the tip. Once more he looked back to the north of the outcrop, shrouded in trees, past the ledge and the empty, draughty cave that lay beyond the branches of the ancient, blackened acacia, past the saddle between the tower and on to the northern mass beyond that lead to the boulders of the western fields. He looked to the rock pile that covered what he presumed to be the greatest of the rock’s secrets. Neither a cub nor any living creature larger than a lizard met his gaze: Mtundu had indeed not returned. In frustration he filled his chest with the full warmth of the savannah and called out as loudly as he could over the plains below:

“Yali! Where are you?” His voice filled the rock and overflowed like the opening of the rains. He was about to roar again when, from far off to the east, came a returning call of a lioness. It was not full, complex and resonant like Falana’s. It was strong yet broken and rough: Shaha’s. He roared back with his eyes closed and head raised majestically. After, he paused again. Again he heard Shaha’s response, caught and magnified by the rock face that towered behind

him. He smiled wryly. 'Well Yali, I'm not that sure I wanted to meet your father anyway.'

He backed up gingerly, opening his eyes to look down to his forepaws. A couple of lengths back from the edge he turned carefully, swinging his great forepaws round, placing them precisely. If the dogs didn't know already, they could have no doubt at all: Nengwalamwe was back.

Nengwe woke to sounds of soft approach. Someone was close. The breezes of earlier had abated and now an unmistakable scent drifted on the still air. He felt no need to rise, or even to look back to see who or what it was, the scent told it all. He felt a paw land at his near flank. It held for a moment and Nengwe was sure he could just feel breath on his shoulders. This time he was sure. Falana laid down beside him, pressing herself to him, laying her tail over his.

"You know, love's like that."

"Love's like what, Nengwalamwe?"

"Like all that out there. It's beautiful and has everything that keeps us alive."

She looked at Nengwe then raised her off forepaw, stretched it in front of her and brought it down, claws exposed, with a thud, lifting the dust into the air.

"No, Nengwalamwe, love's like my paw. It's strong, it tears and rips, and it can kill you if you're on the wrong side of it. It raises the dust around us and clouds our way."

Nengwe turned to Falana and stared at her. Was that what she really thought? Maybe Shaha was right.

She smiled at his discomfort then raised her paw and held it hovering above his head, her claws still glaringly exposed. He looked up uneasily, his unease began to turn to fear and he pulled his ear down. She smiled at him and said: "And yet, it brings..." she carefully lowered her paw so that it rested gently on his mane just behind his flattened ear. She drew her paw slowly and delicately down his mane and onto his neck sending shivers down his back. "... joy and pleasure in that pain. It gives us the will to live, and die, for others."

Nengwalamwe closed his eyes and could not help but enjoy the feelings of shimmering pleasure that welled up within him. Falana laughed and drew back her paw. "That's enough Nengwe. I wouldn't want you to think I was leading you on." She withdrew her paw, tucking it neatly under her. "What's all the noise about?"

"Elizabeth and the dogs. The dogs are coming for me. Not today most likely, nor tomorrow, but soon. You mustn't be here when they do."

"I can look after myself. I don't need any warnings from you."

"I'm serious. Can't you drop this 'Miss Independent' thing for just one day? A storm's coming, and I just don't want you to get caught up in it. Is that such a bad thing?"

"No Nengwe. I just don't need rescuing, that's all." Nengwe got up and paced about. "Nengwe, what happened to you?"

"What? Oh this? It's nothing."

“That’s not nothing.” Falana watched him anxiously. His ripped mane could not hide the still raging-raw torn skin beneath. “What happened?”

“I got into trouble. I went in a bit too deep. I wasn’t looking.”

“Too deep? Water?” She pushed her head forwards with an open mouth. “You mean you... you got attacked by a crocodile?”

“I messed up, but I’m still here.”

“You survived a crocodile attack? That’s not nothing Nengwe. That’s a pretty big something. How did you do manage it?”

“I was lucky. It wasn’t deep enough, it couldn’t take me down. It had to give up. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Does it hurt?”

“A little; sometimes. It’ll heal in time. My mane will be a bit ragged maybe, but hey, at least I’m still here.”

Falana got up and walked over to him. She put up her forepaw, Nengwe shied back.

“Let me look. Can I do anything for you?”

“Look Falana, I know you don’t see me that way, but you can’t just turn up here whenever you like and cosy up beside me. You know what it does to me. It’s not fair. You can do what you like, but I’ve just got to lie there and feel nothing!” He flicked round, tail high, for another pass across the promontory.

“I just thought you might be lonely and wanted some company. I want to help.”

“Company? Company? You know I want more than that. I’m running out of time. You know the only way all this will end.” He looked out to the eastern ridge, crunching up his eyes against the early morning sun. “Where the heck were you? I waited on your knoll all night for you.”

“I was out.”

“Out? Is that it? You were ‘out’?”

He shook his head, then ran to the rock pile and sniffed at it.

“By the stars Nengwe, what are you doing?”

He began tearing away at it with his paws. “I’m clearing this rubble, what’s it look like? At least it doesn’t try to bite me back, and it doesn’t go ‘out.’” Some of the rocks slipped, tumbling on to the promontory, grazing his foreleg.

“Oh yes? Looks to me like it can bite well enough.”

Nengwalamwe thrust a forepaw into the hole which had opened up. He tugged at the rock frantically. There was a little movement; some rocks settled above, then nothing. Nengwe roared at the rock pile. It resolutely stayed put. He painfully twisted his paw out and then turned round to face Falana. She had gone.

19. *Dogs and the Midday Sun*

Nengwalamwe's roar at dawn from the great rock in frustration for a vanishing cub carried out to many animals. It meant so much more to others than it did to him. For most it was a sound that they had heard of but never heard. It was a legendary sound; a sound of tales. For some it was a sound of distant memory, rolling over them like thunder before the rains. It stirred hearts and worried mothers. For a few it meant something more, something that pulled deeply at them. If anything the replies were more painful, for they meant that not only was there a lion on the great rock, there was also the beginnings of a pride of lion.

To the west, not far from the enraged river rushing down to the falls, lay two abandoned aardvark burrows on the side of a broad, shallow knoll. Were it elsewhere the free draining and sandy burrows might have given an attractive home to warthog or crested porcupine. Here though, the occupants had greatly enlarged the burrows and bared the soil all around over many seasons. Nengwalamwe's roar woke several of them. One, lying out in the open near the top of the knoll, pricked his ears and turned his head to the great rock. He blinked slowly, lay back his ears and set about nibbling at an itch on his lower foreleg.

"So you couldn' find 'im? What the 'ell's that George? A lovesick dik-dik?"

George looked up from his leg. "I can't find wot ain't there."

"No, cause e's 'ere, in'e!" George tucked his tail between his hindlegs and drew back his ears. "So wot are ye go'in do about it?"

"What can we do Liz?"

The other dog stared hard at George, who pulled his head back hard to his shoulders.

"Doan' call me that in front of..." She looked around furtively. "...'Er!" She rose, shook herself alert and went on, "My mother'll be turning in her grave if she heard that."

"Eh? She's still alive!"

"Not for long." Elizabeth tipped her head lightly. "It's time to arrange... a presentation."

"Eh? What the 'eck's that Lizzie?"

"Don't yer call me that when anyone's aroun'. Get it?"

"Yes... Ma'am."

"Miss Elizabeth'll do."

"What's a 'presentation' when it's at home?"

"Give over." Elizabeth took a couple of paces toward the puzzled George. "You know: A Presentation."

"Eh?"

"Where all the animals gather round that stokin' great rock to greet a new monarch of the Pridelands. Remember?"

"Oh yeah, one of 'em. Sounds cool."

"Cool'? Wha'd y'been up ta? Knockin' about with them flamin' baboons all day again? Talk propa for gawd's sake! Go an' talk to 'Arry, he'll learn ya."

George yelped.

“Get Utawala. I need ta ‘ave a natter with ‘im.”

“Is there anything else, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yeah. When you’re done, go find Fentayli.”

“Fentayli?” George darted his eyes about and flattened his ears back.

“Yeah, you ‘erd. No go git Utawala.”

“I ain’t yer gopher Liz.”

Elizabeth rounded on George and bore down on him; her teeth bared and eyes piercing. “For the last time it’s Miss Elizabeth! Get the ‘eck out of it before I wipe that smile off your face! Move it. Now!”

Utawala sat uneasily in the shade of an acacia tree, greened with fresh buds. He raised his hand to his forehead, shaking his head slowly. “No, no. I’ll be damned if I’ll let any son of mine go with your daughter!”

“An’ wha’ so bad about that? We ain’t good enough for the likes of you, is it?”

“Madam, look at her! She’s... she’s... she’s totally inappropriate for my son.”

“Who you callin’ ‘inappropriate’? Are you callin’ us fat? Is this a fat thing? Cause if it is you ain’t the Utawala I know.”

“No, it’s not that. You’re not... err... you’re well proportioned. I would almost... err... well I might be inclined myself if... well...”

“Come on out with it now. We ain’t got all day, ‘ave we Kikkora?”

On her mother’s side stood an ample baboon. She idly picked through the hair on her forearm. She said nothing.

“I’ll have words for you too when we get home girlie. You just see as I don’t.”

“He’s missing. We don’t know where he is. Even if we did, the dogs’ll never allow it. Not now.”

“Now what’s that damn fool son of yours been doing now? He git in trouble again?”

A bird flew up, flapping noisily from the branches above.

“Oh yeah Utawala. Go on, an’ tell her. You just tell ‘er if he’s in trouble.”

“Miss Elizabeth. We were just sorting out some... err... family business.”

“Family eh? You got such a big one too. Must’a ‘ave loads o’that to deal with.” She turned to the loud female. “Are you still ‘ere?”

“U’huh. An’ I ain’t goin’ until Utawala keep his promise. No ma’am.”

“What promise?”

“His boy is promised to my girl. Now he says he cain’t find him and he’s trying to say it ain’t happennin’ no more.”

Elizabeth looked round the female. It took some time.

“Her? Is she female?”

“Why ‘course she is. Finest female a baboon’s ever gonna get. Gives a whole lot of lovin’”

“Really? Yer don’ say. Consider it done. Now leg it.”

“Now we’a goin’ ma’am. Nice doin’ business wi’ya. Not like *some* I could mention.”

Utawala looked relieved for a moment as the mother and daughter walked off. Then his expression turned, first to resignation, then to alert fear.

“And to what do I owe this pleasure Ma’am?”

“I like you Utawala. Just the right degree of arse-lickin’. I like that. I really do.”

Utawala stood up, closed his mouth and smiled stiffly.

“However, on this occasion, the pleasure is all mine. It really is.”

“Ma’am?”

Elizabeth turned her head to look on after the females.

“Which son were they talkin’ about?”

“My only son now ma’am: Mtundu.”

“Oh ‘im. I wouldn’t bother arranging any celebrations just yet then. You wouldn’t ‘appen to ‘ave seen ‘im recently, would ya? I mean, just on the off chance?”

Utawala looked puzzled. “I thought he was doing things for you?”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Well, as I say, if you do run in to ‘im. Tell ‘im we want words. Friendly like.”

Utawala looked to the two dogs sitting tongue loose behind her. One was George, looking as if he’d fall over as always. The other, a grey, he didn’t recognise. He raised his eyebrows momentarily. “Yes Ma’am.”

“Now I want you to arrange a presentation.”

“A presentation Ma’am?”

“Yeah, a presentation. Has everyone round ‘ere got cloth ears or what?”

“It’s been a long time. It won’t be easy.”

“You’d better get on with it then. How long will it take?”

“Well, there the grazers: it takes ages just finding their herd leaders. Then all the predators have got to agree not to eat them, and then....”

Elizabeth swished her tail. “How long Utawala?”

“Maybe ten... no eleven days at least.”

“Ya got eight.”

“Yes ma’am. Very well, though... there may be a few missing.”

“I don’ care. Just get ‘em there. Dawn in eight days time.”

“There? Where?”

“The bleedin’ rock. Where else?”

“You mean Nengwalamwe’s great rock?”

The glare Utawala caught cut him to his bones.

“E don’t exist. I never wanna hear ‘is name again. ‘Ave you got that?”

“Yes Ma’am... A-as you wish.”

Elizabeth stared at Utawala. The baboon, greying over most of his coat, tipped his head and looked steadily back. The bitch curled her lip and breathed out a light growl then turned and walked off. Utawala watched them go until they were just a haze on the horizon. Then, with a look to the heavy clouds above and a sigh, he set off to find what was left of his family.

“Nengwe! Nengwe! Will ya just stop and listen for one damn minute?”

It was late afternoon. The air lay heavy, the ground still steaming after a brief downpour. Nengwalamwe's flanks had dried, but the damp cooled his spine as he carried his own cloud about him. Already the ground at his paws was lightening: drying, warming and shimmering.

"I'm tired. I'm wet. She's not there again. I'm going back. Are you coming or are you going to sit there all day?"

"I'm coming. I'm coming damn it." Mtundu scurried after the lion, ignoring the splashes from the thinning red-muddied puddles. The downpour had flooded the eastern plain below the ridge so the pair so they were north of the great rock, approaching the eastern end of the lugga, but it was so different. Everything was different: greener, old familiar tracks covered over, landmarks confused, trees re-leafed and flowers everywhere: red, white and yellow clusters and blankets over once dry barren ground. Then there was the lugga, or what used to be the lugga: flat, sandy and dust-dry, now mud and ooze and from the north, still black with rain, a rushing rumble; a wall of water thundering down the valley taking all in its embrace.

Nengwalamwe felt safe on the slopes above. They had lost the trail and were slowed as they picked their way over the greened valley side. Mtundu, breathlessly caught up with the lion.

"Hey Fuzzbutt! We're going the wrong way."

The lion stopped abruptly and turned back. "What?"

"I told ya, we're goin' the wrong way."

"You didn't have to come."

"Sure I did."

The lion sat, nodding his head with a half-smile.

"OK, so what is it now? What have I missed?" Before the baboon could answer the lion's expression fell. "What the heck is that?"

Mtundu followed Nengwe's gaze, out over the valley to the still dry far side of the lugga. Something light coloured moved then darted back up the bank.

"Some warthog, a lost gazelle, how the heck do I know?"

"Or a dog?"

"Jeez, a dog... yeah, it could'a been a dog."

"Which? Come on Mtundu, which one was it? Which one?"

"Dunno, cain't say for sure. Looked a bit like it could'a been Jane... sure wasn't George or Charles, could'a been Liz I guess. Heck I don't know Nengwe. I only caught a flash o' them. It could have been a warthog. Look when ya'll waiting to be taken down by wild dogs everyone looks like a dog."

"Has everyone ever looked like a lion to you?"

"More like a lioness but yeah, it happens."

"Was it a dog? Was it? What about the others? Were they there, over the lugga? In the trees? Up the slope? Behind the rock? In the grass?"

"The weak have only themselves to blame," father said.

'Take this one; yes. Then the next, and the next, and they'd keep coming. One by one, torn apart. Dead, dying. Running away.'

"Only the weak fight back. The strong fight on."

'Alone; only I can do it. It's my task, my place, mine, all and only mine. Killing; for what? Only to do it all again the next day, and the next. So much death. Help - can't do it alone: too many.'

“No one who asks for help deserves it.”

Nengwalamwe shivered in the chill of the mountain void. His father was coming to get him; to kill him. Roaring and running after. Cold, bitter, empty. Black, empty, dead, dying.

“Don’t think: do. When you do, don’t stop. Never look back.”

‘Look back. Nothing to see: nothing there. Nothing ahead. Nothing. Void and so cold and close. Everything around so close. Closer and colder. Soon it will take everything. Falling. Shiver-cold.’

“Nengwe!”

‘Nothing to do but lie still and die.’

Mtundu stood over Nengwalamwe’s shaking body. The lion’s legs outstretched, trembling and twitching. His tail tightly curled and trashing the ground. Claws out, ripping the earth. His head adrift in a gale at mane-sea lurching with open unseeing, frightened eyes.

“Nengwe, what the heck’s happening? Talk to me!”

“Mt... Mt... hel...”

‘No father, I’m not weak. I’m not going to die here. I deserve to live.’

“Help! Me.”

“Hey, Uncle Nengwe, you don’t look so good.”

Nengwalamwe was on the eastern ridge. It was dark, getting on toward dawn, already the first blue-red hints of light horizon. His mane rippled in a fresh breeze. He smiled to Yali.

“Oh yeah? You think so huh?”

Ahead, every animal he’d ever seen, and many he’d eaten, great and small, predator and prey, all the birds of the air and even a crocodile streamed toward the great rock. Some were already there, gathering peacefully.

“What are they doing?”

“It’s a presentation?”

“A what?”

“A presentation. Everyone gathers to welcome a new king. Look, there’s the zebra. Don’t they look funny? And there’s the elephants. My dad says they always want to be in front. I guess they don’t see too well.”

Nengwe sat back. Yali lay at his side pressing to him for warmth in the unexpected dawn chill. They watched together as the elephants strode through the throng to take up pride of place below the promontory. As they took their place an unnatural hush came over the savannah. For a few heartbeats all was still. The eastern plains lay as silent as the growing arc of the sun. Above, on the rock, the cave lay open and from it to the very tip of the promontory walked Elizabeth. She stood, flanked by a baboon and a leopardess, her mottled coat damp stained with splattered blood. Up went a cry, taken up by all, flooding over the plain: “The King is dead, long live the Queen! The Queen shall reign forever and ever!”

“Yali, which king is dead?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t like this anymore. Nengwe, please, can we go now?”

“Yes, I don’t like it either.”

He rose. Yali turned, he turned with her. There in front, black against the sun, ears glowing blood red against the light were the dogs, more than ever

before. All of them: Eddie and Mary, George and Elizabeth, Charles and Jane and the others. Not one dead. They fanned out, blocking their way. He turned again. There were more. Yali shrunk tightly to him.

“Please Nengwe, make them go away. I don’t like them.” He looked down to her; she looked up, wide-eyed, afraid: alone. “Please, make them go away.”

The dogs closed in, covering them both in darkness. Nengwalamwe fell still.

“Nengwe!” Mtundu gripped the lion’s mane and shook it. The lion’s head flopped loosely to the ground, his mouth open, his paws lying still. Mtundu felt the lion’s side, then under his chest. He was warm, he was breathing.

The sheet-black sky eased its grip on the northern hills. In moments the lugga heaved and seethed, filling with mud, then spray then fast flowing flood and bushes and trees. The water rose almost to where the lion lay, but left him dry and cool. The baboon, not knowing what else he could do, kept him close and warm, the lion’s breathing steady and deep but slow and unchanging.

The moon was well up, and the raging waters gone by the time the lion stirred. Confused and not understanding where the day had gone, he could not seem to understand where he should be, or why the ground roundabout was so soft and yielding. He asked where all the animals were, and then almost panicked when he couldn’t find someone, or something; Mtundu couldn’t decide which. It was all the baboon could do to persuade the lion to go back, slowly and with much turning and returning back, to the great rock. When close, the lion grew even more confused and in the deep moonlight shouted out about not waiting for dawn. No amount of persuasion could make climb the rock, so Mtundu took him under the shelter of the promontory. There the lion slept again and Mtundu finally felt able to slip away to seek help.

Mid-morning and the lion had still not woken. Shaha and Mtundu had stayed with him for most of the night. Now Falana took her mother’s place. She gently licked his muzzle, and then turned her ministrations to his forelegs and paws, working her tongue in between his toes, over his claws, then his forelegs and in time over all of him to his tail tuft. Then she too fell asleep. When Shaha returned, the pair lay still side by side.

“Come away Mtundu. It was a good thing you came to me when you did. They’ll be all right, they’re just sleeping now. Here, let me show you something I think you’ll be interested in.”

She led off to the boulder path to the promontory. Mtundu lingered by the lions for a moment, then silently turned and walked off after Shaha.

“I was born here. There in that cave.”

Mtundu looked. He remembered Nengwalamwe’s fascination bordering on obsession with the rocks that blocked the entrance. “What happened?”

“Once you could walk all round the rock to the top. My father took us up there, my brother, sister and I. We watched the dawn. Looked all around. You could see everything.”

The baboon thought about the path that headed over the saddle of the great rock. Beyond was a narrow ledge that curled around and up. There he had thrown stones down at the newcomer lion. He felt ashamed.

“Before I was born there were two long years with almost no rains. The cracks in the rock, they’re everywhere, they dried out. Then, when the rains

finally came, about when I was born, the rock began to move, the cracks grew. Slowly they grew. In time, the ledge above the cave cracked away. It was nothing at first, for a few years anyway. A few small stones here and there. Then someone got hurt. Not dead, but hurt. We took notice then.”

Mtundu looked at the face of the rock, now in slant-shade that picked out the fresh reddened stone above the cave. The rock that had covered the face lay in smashed fragments front of the cave. He saw the ledge, now hanging bare, continuing round the pinnacle.

“It was just another thing that happened. So much happened then, so much.” Shaha seemed lost for a moment. She looked around. “So many gone.” She sat, tucking her tail about her. Mtundu caught a movement in her flank and deftly picked something from the curve of her back. Looking back to the rock, he ate it between finger and thumb. “None here though. There are no bodies buried under that rubble. It came down foul wet night, my father was gone, and his too. We were trying to hunt: pointless. The cave sometimes floods in the rains. We came back but there was nothing here for us anymore. There were more of us then.” She sat. Mtundu looked. They were silent.

Later they picked their way back down the boulder path. Shaha explained that that too was once clear and even and that which had blocked the cave had spilled out there too. As she reached open ground Shaha stopped, her breath short. Mtundu ran forward. She called after him.

“No Mtundu, leave them be. You’re not going to see this again for a long time.”

“What? Why? It’s just them two asleep together... still.”

“We’re not like you. We need to spend two thirds of our life asleep: dozing, half-awake, whatever; most of it through the day. Nengwe can’t go on day after day awake and frightened: listening to every sound, alive to any danger all the time. Walking here there and everywhere all the time. Expecting every moment to be his last. We’re not made like that. You and he can’t live the same life. He can’t live with you, but never for one moment think he can live without you.”

“Yeah, but what about her?”

Shaha nodded, the skin over her shoulders tightened.

“Mtundu, we lions and lionesses live in different worlds. Lionesses live for the pride: for their sisters, mothers, aunts, and their cubs. We stay in one place. That’s our life: the pride. Lions live in a territory. They are worried about borders and incursions, about other lions. They can move about, take prides, and father cubs. The pride is not the territory; a pride is about relationships: about others. A territory is about space, fighting and mating: it’s about self. They are separate worlds that only sometimes come together, just as they are for Falana and Nengwe now. It won’t last long.”

“How long?”

“A few days perhaps. She can take his mind off the dogs.”

“And then?”

“Like you, they can’t live with each other and they can’t live without.”

“So, what’d we do?”

“Make them time. Give them space. Let them alone.”

“Yeah, but what about the dogs?”

“Ah the dogs... I don’t know Mtundu. I simply don’t know.”

“That’s just it see. I was doing something that’d get the dogs off his back. Give him time. For a while at least, but then, he just... he...”

“Yes, I know. He’ll be all right.”

“You weren’t there! He just went all... I just don’t know. I’m scared of it happening again. I was damn scared when it happened. I didn’t know what to do.”

“But you did do something, something good, and here we are. I think he needs to rest. He can’t keep on and on like he has been, he’s just not strong enough.”

“But he’s a lion! He’s not strong enough? Who the heck is?”

“I don’t know, a hippo maybe?”

“Hippopota-my-ass! An elephant, now that’s strength!”

“Do you actually know any?”

“Yeah. That’s where I was tryin’ to get Nengwe at. Maybes still can.”

“Try. You have the time.”

“Will he be OK?”

“Yes, but maybe he’ll not be up for a while yet. Be gentle with him when he does. He’ll not be in a good mood. Now come away.”

Mtundu looked at his friend. He knew he was in good hands, even if they were draped over his forelegs. He remembered the warmth and strength that Falana must have been feeling through her near-white fine underfur. He turned, keeping his eyes on the lion until the last moment, and then stepped back to Shaha. She led him away toward Silent Rocks.

A leopardess approached the burrows. Twenty lengths out, she paused and looked around. She was alone, as usual. A dog, hearing her pawfall through the ground, poked her head out of the nearest burrow.

“You there: Fentayli!”

“Oh great Miss Elizabeth. It’s such a pleasure to speak with you as always.”

“Stop the arse-licking; you’re not a dog.”

“Err, yes... Ma’am.”

“Seeing as ‘ow well’ard you are and always up for it, you know that old grudge of yours?”

“What grudge would that be Miss Elizabeth?”

“The really old grudge.”

“Ah, *that* grudge.”

“Yeah that. I want you to settle it: finally. You understand?”

“Most certainly, it will be a pleasure.”

“Get it done right. No mess, no witnesses, but not yet mind. Bide your time. It’s got to be done at night, before the presentation.”

“Very well. I shall use the time to... enjoy it.”

“Whatever. Oh and after you’re done there’s another job.”

“Something else? What might that be?”

“I don’ care ‘ow. I really don’t give a flying fig what you do. Just kill that baboon. Is that clear enough for you?”

“Oh yes, very clear: something for me, then something for you. Very clear indeed... but not simple. It’ll take time.”

“You’ve got until the full moon. Then do it, do them both. No cock ups. I want him gone: snuffed, demised, rubbed out, dead.”

The leopardess nodded obsequiously. She clearly enjoyed her work. She even, in a strange way, enjoyed Elizabeth; she was as near a creature of kin as she had ever known.

Falana woke often. Nengwe remained still and calm. She made sure he was comfortable before settling back. She could not imagine what he had been through: where he had been or what he had seen; that would have led him to this. To her, Elizabeth and the dogs had mostly been an irritation; an annoying tick in her underfur. She had grown up under their shadow. For the most part they had left her alone. Except that when they hadn’t they had intruded deeply into her most personal lives. They had killed the most important parts of her land she was now determined not to let them kill this one.

Towards late afternoon she woke again and after stretching, stepped way to walk off the stiffness in her legs and back. When she came back, Nengwe, still in deep shade, looked blearily back at her.

“Are you feeling all right Nengwalamwe?”

“I... think so. What are you doing here?”

“I’m... looking after you.” She reached down and pressed her cheek against his.

“Where is here?”

“Here? Well, we’re under the overhang of your rock.”

“Oooh, I thought I was by the lugga.”

“That was yesterday Nengwalamwe. Yesterday.”

“Was it? How did I get here? Where’s Mtundu?”

“It’s OK. He brought you here. He’s with mother.”

Nengwe thought about Shaha growing fat on baboon meat, but resisted the urge to say it. He struggled to rise.

“No, don’t get up. There’s no need.”

“Yes, Falana, there is.” He swayed a little on out-stretched angled, painfully stiff, forelegs.

“No Nengwalamwe!” She rushed to his side, he brushed her aside.

“Please let me do this.” He cracked his forepaw joints. They stung. He gasped and breathed in sharply, holding in. His head swam lightly, then clearing he breathed again, closing his eyes. She could do nothing to help him, and dare not do anything to stop him. For long seconds he did nothing but breathe. Then with effort drawn from deep within he lifted his hindquarters and drew himself up to stand. She moved back to his side. He wavered but did this time welcomed her support. She leant her head to his softly. “Now, let me go.”

“Why Nengwalamwe?”

“There are some things a lion needs to do by himself. Especially if he’s been asleep all day.”

“Oh...” She drew away from him. He appeared steadier. He tried to walk forwards: a single pace. His forepaw twisted under him. He drew it back up in pain. She pushed close to him again. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Maybe not, but I’ll live. Now let’s try that again.” This time he was able to land his forepaw soundly, then another. He drew slowly and haltingly away. She followed a few lengths behind. He stopped and without turning said, “There really isn’t any need Falana. I’ll be fine. Please let me go. I’ll be back soon.”

“All right, but call if you need me.”

With a simple, “I will”, he walked off.

He returned with much of his fluidity of movement regained. Falana noticed a dullness of his eye, but other than that she felt he looked much like he always did. He suggested they go up the rock. She wondered if he was up to the climb through the boulders. He though felt no such reservation, and while he was certainly more careful and slower than normal, they both arrived on the promontory bright and alert. There together they watched the evening creep over the savannah, and as the remaining clouds began to turn orange saw two elephants, a large male and another, probably a female. Between slipped a lioness and...

“Mtundu? No, it can’t be... and is that...”

“Mother!? What are they up to Nengwe?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“They aren’t coming here, are they?”

“It looks like it Falana. I hope we don’t have to go and meet them.”

“Of course, you must still be feeling a bit err... off.”

“Well, maybe a little.”

Nengwe was relieved when the lead elephant, calling himself Kudlavu, took one look at the boulder slope and gave up the idea of climbing to the promontory. From the edge Nengwe could see and hear them clearly, and safely enough. Elephants were something of a mystery to Nengwalamwe, and he had no intention of getting to know them any better.

20. *Opening the Cave*

“So, you’re the one who’s been roaring up there.”

Nengwalamwe lay at the edge of the promontory, casually dangling his forelegs over the edge. “Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Me? I’m Nengwe, just Nengwe.”

Falana, a little behind and not visible from below, leant over and pressed her flank to his.

The elephant blinked and flapped the outer edge of an ear. “Well then, Nengwe, I am Kudlavu. I speak for all the elephants in these parts. I won’t stand out here all day: too hot. I’ll keep it short. What is it that you want from us?”

“I don’t want anything from you Kudlavu, nor from your people.”

Kudlavu flapped again. “Then why are we here?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask you.”

Kudlavu looked down at Mtundu, swinging his trunk towards the baboon. Mtundu shrugged.

“Then why are you here?”

“Me? I... I live here. Some don’t like that it seems.”

“Indeed, and do you know where here is, lion?”

“I’m beginning to... I think.”

“Well, some time ago this rock was the home of many of your kind. Some called them kings.”

Nengwe looked back to Falana. She had nothing for him. He flexed his off forepaw, circling it. “I’m not a king. I’m just a lion.”

“We’ll see about that. And those that don’t like you being here, would they be hunting dogs?”

“Yes. Yes they are and they are going to kill me if they can.”

“Well, yes... I mean no, but no king, or queen, has ever ruled here without the elephants’ support... until now. There are many that want to see the end of the dogs’ time. Their queen is old and may not be with us long. Her daughter...err...”

An awkward silence fell over the rock.

Nengwe broke it: “Elizabeth?”

“...Aye, that’s the one. Is not generally regarded as a wholly worthy successor, and you, well you seem to have what is needed to challenge.”

Nengwe closed his eyes for a moment. “I appreciate your support Kudlavu but it’s not that easy. I have to take down maybe ten wild dogs at once most likely. I mustn’t leave any alive to kill Falana or Shaha. I’m not strong enough.”

“Nengwe, we... we elephants can’t be part of your... petty war.”

Nengwalamwe dropped his head on to his forelegs.

“...but I think we might just have something to share with you. We hear there’s to be a... erm.... a presentation. Yes, that’s it.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s where all the animals come here to see their new king Nengwe,” interjected Falana brightly.

“That’s... that’s what I saw with Yali!” Falana looked at him blankly. “But it wasn’t me they are going to see as their king, it’s...”

“Nengwe, what are you talking about?”

“Falana, I saw it. It was dawn. I was out there on the ridge.” He looked out to the east. Falana was puzzled. “All the animals were coming here. Kudlavu, you were here too: right there, where you are now. And Elizabeth stood up here all bloodied and... she’d killed someone: the old king.”

Kudlavu stamped, Nengwe even felt it on the rock. “What was that lion?”

“I saw it. Here. She killed the last king, but I didn’t see it did I? It hasn’t happened.”

The elephant looked about. The grassland below the promontory was empty and quiet.

“It has happened before.”

Shaha spoke slowly, “I think you, Nengwalamwe, saw what you feared might happen, but it won’t be like that. That’s what the dogs want you to think. They want you frightened. They want you to fear them.”

“But...”

Kudlavu shook his head, trunk swaying. “No young Nengwe. They may want to kill you, but we elephants won’t let it happen. It takes a good while to organise a presentation; if anyone can even remember how to. The word only went out a day or two ago. I doubt they intend to present you, but they won’t try anything till it’s all ready, until then you’re safe.”

“Oh great, what am I going to do till then?”

“I hear you need rest. So take it easy. Do whatever it is that lions do. I’m sure your lioness there will be able to find something for you to do.”

Nengwe turned to Falana. She lay expressionless. Turning back to the elephant, “And you? What will you do?”

“As I say, we can have no part in all this... but we can make sure those dogs of yours don’t have it all their own way. We can keep them busy. They won’t be able to harass you and... errr...?”

“Falana,” prompted Shaha.

“Ah yes, of course, Falana; lovely name. Now then, we must be going. Trees don’t eat themselves you know, and it’ll take forever to get round that lugga now the flood’s softened it up.”

Kudlavu lifted his trunk in respect and then moved off, circling away with his companion. Shaha and Mtundu looked to each other and nodded silently.

“Aren’t you two coming up here?”

“Nah Nengwe, I reckon you’ve got your paws full as it is.”

“Eh?”

“We’d just be kinda in the way.”

“Yes, Nengwalamwe. You just relax and get your strength back; you’re going to need it. Let Kudlavu and the elephants do their bit. You just do yours. I’ll look after Mtundu. Did you know he can pick fleas from your back?”

“Err, yes Shaha. You’ll look after him won’t you? I want him back in one piece.”

Falana lay her forepaw on the lion’s back. “He’ll be fine with mother Nengwe. Now then, what say you I rustle us up something to eat?”

“Falana? I’ll come with you,” he said, starting to rise.

“No Nengwe.” She pressed down with her paw. “You had better stay here and rest. You heard Shaha.”

Falana shifted and opened her eyes slowly, yawning as she pushed her forequarters upright. She glanced around. Her afternoon had been frustrated and fruitless and had swung her mood dramatically. Sleep now tugged at her eyelids, a soothing voice that was sorely tempting. She resisted its call and stood up, scanning the grass around herself curiously. Something had intruded upon her senses. She decided that whatever it was, it had better be faster than she, but then everything had been faster that afternoon. Her attempts at hunting had been unrewarded. She would have preferred not to return to Nengwe empty-pawed.

“Probably his monkey again,” she muttered as she paced about, ears twitching. The grass gave gently beneath her paw pads as she circled, sniffing, but the whispering wind brought no indication that she was right. Stealthy as he could be, Mtundu’s odour was unmistakable, even from a distance, but it didn’t hang on the hot, humid breeze.

A distant scraping of rock on rock; her ears perked sharply.

“It can’t be, he’s with mother,” she growled, claws unsheathing. She rose, paused for a momentary stretch, and then broke into a slow run, emerging onto a low, open area from beneath the shadowy boughs of the tree under which she had rested, recovering from her last empty strike. The grass was shorter here; it barely tickled her forelegs up to the elbow. Her ears flickered and her body answered unconsciously, turning toward Nengwalamwe’s barren spire of rock.

The lioness slowed to a walk, then to a slow pacing as she neared the looming shadow of the out-thrust promontory. Laying her ears flat and growling nervously to herself, she passed under it quickly where she had lain with the lion, jerking her head as the sound of rock on rock came again. She heard the clatter clearly now. She stepped silently to the small pile of rubble and straggling weeds that marked the foot of the path that led up.

Falana paused again, tail flicking agitatedly, and then began to pick her way up the path. Her frustration had by now faded and been replaced by foreboding. She still didn’t much like this stony monolith, with its grey colour and forbidding stone that seemed to watch her. She preferred the open plains, with the waving grass and its soft, whispering voice, not this cold and silent thing. What sort of creature would make its home here? No sane lion surely, but what did that make Nengwe?

She crested the head of the path. The ground ahead opened up onto the promontory. Nengwalamwe crouched a short distance away, the bulk of his tensed body between her and a pile of rubble which lay at the base of the rock which scaled away into the heights above. As she approached him from his off hindquarter she saw his tail flicking back and forth steadily, as a lioness’s might do when preparing to launch a strike. Circling round, pad by silent pad, to one side, she caught a glimpse of the expression on his face, and it was almost enough to make her laugh, then she remembered he should have been resting.

The lion's mane hung limply to either side of his cheeks. While not entirely unattractive, did give him a rough, unkempt appearance quite unlike his accustomed look. His eyes were almost shut, slitted into gleaming spears of reflected light that glared downward along the length of his outstretched foreleg to where his paw should have been: vanished into a dark wedge in the rocks where the rubble met the face. He shoved forward again, his foreleg coursing into the crack up to his elbow, but lodging there. Muscles rippled under the fur of his shoulder as his paw flexed about out of sight, seeking some unknown purchase and finding none.

"Hey! Stop that! You'll break your paw doing that. You're supposed to be resting!"

Startled, Nengwe jerked backwards, yelping as his paw caught. "Falana!" A wave rippled up his back. "You're back!"

"Yes." Falana cocked her head at him, sniffing. "Come on. Get it out before you hurt yourself. Again."

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled, leaning backward, and then grunted suddenly, "now you've messed me right up. I'm stuck!"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, blame it on me."

"I was doing just fine until you came up here and started interfering!" Growling low in his throat, Nengwalamwe gave a sudden yank, snarling as his paw caught again. His claws extended and contracted as he began jerking back and forth furiously, his mane swirling about and flying into his eyes. "Damn it, come out!"

Falana's breath was suddenly in his ear, hot and booming. "Stop! Now!"

Nengwalamwe froze in place, staring at her from the corners of his eyes. His breath came in contracted gasps; eyes widened slightly from anger, fear and not a little pain. "What?"

She glared at him for a moment before bending down to inspect his foreleg carefully. "Push it in a little further."

"Huh?"

"Just a little. Go on... do it!"

"What for?"

Falana bared her teeth. "Nengwe, will you please just do what I tell you this once?"

"Fine, OK, whatever." Curling his lip, the lion sank his foreleg back in several inches.

"Turn it." The lioness sighed exasperatedly. "No, the other way." She peered downward again as he complied, then nodded. "Now, pull it back, gently."

He grunted, and pulled his foreleg back, hissing a little through clenched teeth as his paw emerged from the crack, the fur covered in dust and scraped in several places. Limping back away from the rock pile, he sat down, turned away from Falana. "Thanks," he mumbled, starting to groom himself.

Falana nodded, glancing at him. "You're welcome. Are you hurt?"

"Huh? Oh, no, of course not." He settled his weight on the scraped paw with a quickly hidden wince and began licking his other forepaw studiously. "I'm just a little dusty."

"You really do want to get in there, don't you?"

Nengwe shrugged, flexing his claws to clean between his toes. His head dipped slightly, as if nodding, and then began to repeat the motion as he washed down the fur on his foreleg.

The lioness sighed, "You'll never do it like that."

Nengwe paused momentarily, lifting his head from his fur in mild surprise. "I can wash you know."

"No, not that; that. The whole lot'll fall down on you for sure." She stepped past him to a smaller pile of rubble that his earlier struggles must have dislodged. She selected one, picking it up in her mouth and carrying it over toward the edge of the promontory. She eyed the ground below for a moment before dropping the stone over the edge.

"What are you doing? That's no use, you'll be shifting that small stuff for ever and still do no good."

She glanced around and eyed him critically. "So help me, why don't you?" Her tail flicked lazily. "You can't shift that big stuff, but you can move these small bits." Lifting her head, she perked an eyebrow and held his gaze in her own. "Nengwe if a problem defeats your first efforts; don't moan about what you can't do. Focus on what you can do."

"But Falana, it'll take forever!" He straightened irritably.

"Ok, have you got anything better to do then? It'll only take half of forever with the two of us."

The lion sighed, and joined her, nosing over the rocks carefully before selecting one that fit comfortably between his teeth. It was noticeably larger than the one Falana had picked up, but if she made a note of this, she gave no sign. Before long the two were carrying stones and dropping them over the side regularly. It proved to be monotonous, and a strain on the jaws. Every stone carried also held the threat of a chipped tooth. Yet it gave both some degree of satisfaction, and for Falana the benefit of distracting Nengwe.

By the time evening swept the light from the sky, Falana finally appeared willing to call a halt to their day's efforts. At her insistence the pair made their way slowly to the waterhole and soothed their chafed lips; content for a while to sit by the water's edge and drink as their thirst demanded as the savannah song swelled into night's chorus around them.

She sat perplexed when Nengwe suggested that they both run into the water, now much swollen from the rains. It really was a waterhole now, not just a muddy wallow. He insisted, saying she'd like it; it would cool her and ease her pads. She declined, pointing out that Nengwe was in no fit state to go drowning himself. In time they returned to the rock, spending the rest of the night curled up separately but together on the dusty floor of the promontory before the rock's silent face.

With dawn, Nengwe was up, nosing Falana awake. His enthusiasm was tempered by sore muscles particularly in his hind legs which had spent most of the afternoon and evening tightly hunched down on the rock floor. The clarity of the morning light cloaked his aches and breathed fresh life into both of them. The huge mound of rock was much less imposing than it had been the previous afternoon, and the two fell to with a will, the stiffness of their muscles slowly easing as they began to tackle the problem of handling the larger boulders.

It was Nengwe who hit upon the idea of clasping the larger rocks between his forepaws and slowly shuffling them out of the way with an odd gait that sent Falana into giggles.

“Nengwe, what are you doing with that rock? Does it excite you that much?”

The lion paused, panting hard, and shot her a glare. Adjusting his grip, he pushed the rock another few inches, clasping it before him in an almost embarrassingly close embrace. “And it’s not doing a thing for me except wearing me out. As far as I can see, there’s not much difference between it and a lioness at the moment.”

Falana chuckled again, helpless to stop herself. “That’s because you’re trying too hard. If only one of you is doing all the work, of course it’s no fun.”

Nengwalamwe shoved the boulder another foot and stopped, gasping. “Well, it’s certainly not going to get up and walk over the edge itself. What’d you expect?”

Falana shook her head. “Well no, not like that.” She slipped over and reared back. She fell on the rock, gripping the rock with her own forepaws. “Now, don’t just shove at it. If we move together, it’ll go easier.” Raising her ears, she tipped her head at the lion. “Come here.”

He edged forward but something held him back.

“Don’t go all shy on me. Help me!” Still he held back. “Come on Nengwe, get behind me and help.”

Nengwe took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he lifted his forequarters from the still cold rock, bringing them down on Falana’s warm back.

“Now, give me your forepaws.”

His heart racing, the lion set his paws on the lioness beneath him. She slipped hers further up the rock so that both their paws bore directly on the rock.

“Ready?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“OK...? set... go!” Grunting, the two sent the stone rolling toward the edge. Its own inertia carried it on. They released their grip and watched it dip out of sight as their forequarters fell back to the ground. A low thump sounded moments later, heard through the air and felt through their pads. Both lion and lioness laid their ears back.

“I hope no one was under that,” he breathed.

Falana snorted. “If I’m lucky, Mtundu was.”

“What?” He trotted to the edge quickly, peering down in anxiety.

“Relax,” she said, laughing softly. “Sit down and catch your breath, and then we’ll have at it again. Just don’t go biting my neck....”

The two lay down for a moment, enjoying the ever present breeze that coursed across the promontory, something largely stifled by the dense grasses below. Falana had to admit this rock might have had a few positive points about it. She couldn’t quite see what the rock pile held for Nengwe, but if it took his mind off those dogs it had to be a good thing. Nevertheless, she could not deny a slight curiosity as to what might be behind the rocks... did Nengwe know something about it that she didn’t?

“Oh, nonsense,” she muttered.

”What?”

Falana winced. "Err... nothing. My jaws are just sore. Those rocks are sharp, in case you hadn't noticed."

He offered her a cockeyed grin. "I've been noticing for a while now. I was just waiting for you to complain before I did."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means the sooner we can clear all this away, the sooner we can really rest C'mon." He stood up, grunting as muscles he'd forgotten he had made themselves known.

Falana groaned audibly. "Don't you ever rest? Mother would kill me if she knew. We've been at it since yesterday! What's so important about clearing away a few rocks? Come on, Nengwe."

"We'll find out what's important about it when we clear away the rocks, won't we? We've got this far haven't we?" He turned to the few remaining pieces before them. "Say, there's only a few left. But that big one right there is really what's in the way, I think. Do you think if we move that, the others will roll out of the way?"

"They'll roll right over us, more than likely." She mulled it over for a moment. "I suppose it's worth a try, but after this one, I'm through for the day, whether it's cleared or not. This isn't natural for lions, you know. I'm exhausted. You know what happens then."

"Since when are you worried about following the rules?"

"Since we started moving rocks like some idiot monkey." She shook her head. "I'm just glad there are no other lions to see us doing this. We'd be laughed out." He was barely listening to her, his attention focused on the rock before them. "Oh, damn it. If it means that much to you Nengwe, let's get it over with."

Circling round to one side, she watched as he pushed his forequarters off the ground and clasped the rock in a firm grip. Nengwe's eyes narrowed, his teeth gleaming in a clenched grimace as he strained. "I don't think I can move it."

"Well, wait half a moment and let me get it from this side." She studied her own end of the boulder, the biggest they'd moved so far, and then placed her forepaws surely upon its surface, her toes splaying outward as she flexed the muscles in her paws. "Okay, now... just like a wildebeest. We'll grip it and use our weight to twist to the side and out, just like if we were trying to drag it down. Except we have to pull up first. Understand?"

"No, but I'll take your word for it." He adjusted his grip and then looked up to her expectantly.

Falana stared at him for a moment, realising he was surrendering the initiative to her, trusting her word without making a smart comment. "You don't want to do it another way?"

"My way didn't work, did it?" he shrugged. "Your idea sounds good enough to me."

She nodded and then paused, looking back to him carefully. "Make sure you pull when I tell you. If you don't, this bloody thing is liable to flatten me."

Their eyes met. "I won't hurt you, Falana. I promise."

She nodded, looked back at the rock, firming her grip and taking a deep breath. "This is going to go quick when it goes. When I say run, you run, right?"

Nengwalamwe's eyes flitted momentarily from side to side. "Where to?"

“Nengwe! Away! Run away! Where’d you think I meant?”

“Away... right...”

Falana uttered an exasperated growl. “Come on, pull!”

They pulled. The rock shifted a little. Nothing happened.

“This isn’t happening,” Nengwe gasped. “It’s never going to go.”

“Don’t you give up on me now, lion! Come on, put your back into it! Pull!”

Nengwe looked into Falana’s eyes. They were concentrated on the rock. For her, the rock was all that mattered. Falana and the rock, which would give first? He pulled. The rock began to lose the struggle. It moved, a little. Falana put even more effort, Nengwe saw in her a determination that he’d not seen in any lioness. He liked what he saw; he gave his power to her struggle. There was movement above, a shifting, a settling. Then the rock moved a little more; loose stones tumbled down behind the pile. One landed on Falana’s back. She took no heed of it and pulled on. Her effort now was fading; Nengwe’s redoubled.

More stones falling. The rock shifted more easily, but still no more than half its length. Then, far above, there began a low rumble. Falana looked up, but only for a moment. ”RUN!” The rumble grew; the clattering stones became a crashing. The air clouded with dust. Nengwe turned to run; took two hurried paces then was smashed over by something clawing, biting into his near hindquarter. He tumbled on to his offside and forward, carried on by his own momentum like a zebra struck by his mother. Rocks crashed over him, clawing at him, but none landed a killing blow. One tore at his ear, now filled with a shattering roar far louder than any he could have made. Then it faded leaving silence. Through the dust he made out the shadows of rocks shake and then fell still. He coughed and shook. It just made the cloud denser. Through it a familiar shape slipped effortlessly, closing on him.

The voice came thinly, distantly. “What part of ‘run’ don’t you understand?” She sniffed at him, moving back to his hindquarters. “That’s nasty! Are you all right Nengwe?”

“I think so.”

She bent down and licked at his haunch. Blood ran clean from a paw wide wound, congealing dark amidst the dust and stone shards in his pelt. “From now on...” she licked again. “...you rest. You got that?”

The dust began to settle out in the mid-morning air. They could see specks glinting, dancing in the sharp light. Nengwe lay still. Falana stopped mid-lick and looked up. Where before there had been a wall of rock and rubble, there was now a dark hole in the great rock’s face with only a rough mound of rock before it.

“What is it Falana?”

“Nothing Nengwe. You stay here.” She slipped forward and then looked back to make sure the lion was heeding her words. He was. She went back to looking. A way of sorts was there, rough, uncomfortable, unstable most likely, but a way. The cave was open.

As she mounted the mound she suddenly felt differently about the rock. It was inviting her to join it, to be part of it. She thought for a moment then slipped tentatively into the darkness. Her eyes soon adjusted and in the gloom she saw... nothing, no wonders, no horrors, no bones of trapped animals, just a flat floored cave, narrow here at the entrance but wider to the rear, big enough to

shelter a pride of over ten lion. As the gloom lessened she became aware of a platform to the rear. She looked up and around; there being nothing to concern her, she crept forward, sniffing. There was mustiness, probably from the far right corner where a puddle of water remained from the rains. Then something else; something very familiar. She thought she felt the heat of breath on her side, "Mother?"

Nengwe turned his ears back, and turned his head over his shoulder. "She's not come back has she?"

"No, Nengwe." She looked around. The smell faded and a warm feeling flooded over her. "No Nengwalamwe. She's not here, she won't come here. We're all alone." She padded over to the platform, rounded it to the rear and then stepped on to it. It was flat and, for the time of year, refreshingly cool. She moved forward, facing the entrance and laid down. She laid her head on her paws and closed her eyes. She felt at home at last.

"Are you all right in there?"

She stiffened her shoulders and lifted her head, opening her eyes suddenly. "Yes, of course I am. How about you?"

The lion stood against the light on the mound of rubble peering into the cave.

"I'll live. Just another wound or two to add to my collection."

"Come in. Come here and rest. Go on. Those rocks aren't going anywhere just yet. We can clear a path later."

"It is hot out here."

"Cool in here, but first you must make a wish."

"What?"

"Go on, make a wish, then you can come in."

Nengwe closed his eyes for a few seconds then walked in. He paused as he hit the darkness, hunching down his shoulders. Then, as the light began to penetrate the cave he moved on. He went to Falana's side.

"May I?"

"Feel free; it's your cave after all."

21. *Hunting*

Nengwe woke late into the afternoon. Falana lay still, her legs outstretched to her free side. She had clearly not slept clear through. He rose, stretched, went to the entrance and blinking, stepped into the sun. He shook some of the debris from his coat and sat, lifting a hind leg to scratch at his shoulder. It hurt, stinging and sharp; he dropped it back and tried instead to fold his head back to nibble at the itch: he couldn't and gave up.

Around him, the rocks lay tumbled into a loose ridge. Some had crashed out onto the flat; some even had rolled off and crashed down to the ground. Some of the rock, less weathered, had a redder hue, far brighter than the grey of the exposed rubble. Nengwe saw little of it: to him, and all lions, it was all one. He set to, pushing, pulling and kicking the loose rocks one by one from the promontory. For each he reserved a little hate, he was glad to see each crash and smash on the ground. After a while he grew hot and headed back to the cave mouth to cool down.

With the flat clear he turned his attention to the mound. It was low, three or four rocks deep, but broad. He started at the top, pushing the rubble down into the open, creating a saddle in the ridge. The rough rocks cut into his pads and skin on his lower legs. At one point he stumbled and lurched onto the bare edges, cutting into his under fur. Nothing now, short of major injury, could stop him. Yet he sensed that this, while all consuming, was not all there was to his life. He was missing something. The cave still called, even though he could now enter it at will. What was it? What secret could lay within waiting for him to discover it?

Falana woke to the cacophony of grunts, growls, clatters, scrapes and crashes. She rose sleepily and headed for the light. There she met Nengwe, more bloodied than ever: ear, haunch, belly and paws

“What’s going on?”

“I’m clearing this rock away. Feel free to join me.”

“Nengwe, stop. Please just stop for a moment.”

The lion kicked the rock at his paws. It didn't move. He turned to her, looked at her. Something stirred in him.

“I can't stop; I've got to clear this. It's not part of my life, it's someone else's. It has to go.”

“What's the matter Nengwe? Isn't this what you wanted: to open the cave?”

“Yes, but it's not open yet. This stuff is still blocking it.”

Falana looked at the mound. Nengwe had clearly been busy; a distinct gap had almost opened up. She knew that she wouldn't be able to shake this obsession from him. It had to play itself out.

“OK. So, what do you want me to do?”

By the time sunset slipped away on the horizon behind them, the two lions had cleared a respectable path at the cave mouth. To both sides still lay rubble, stones and rocks Nengwe would keep picking at for months on and off, while secretly Mtundu would put rocks back, sometimes with Falana's help, but the

cave lay open and was accessible. The pair sat back on the promontory and surveyed their work.

“Now Nengwe, is that better? Are we done yet?”

“Yes. Yes we are, but... I’m tired and hungry.”

“Hungry? You want to go and get something to eat?”

“Well, yes, I’d like that. If you’ll let me that is.”

Falana considered the prospect: hunting with Nengwe, just the two of them. “Look, if we’re going to hunt, stay close. You must watch me all the time. Can you manage that?”

“Yes Falana, I think I can.”

“Good, because if you do you’ll be able to work out what I’m doing, and what I’m thinking of doing. Remember, just watch me. You’ll know what to do when the time comes. Just make sure that when the charge is on, you don’t go rushing in. Take your time, and always keep with me, and support me whatever happens. Can you do that?”

Nengwe quietly nodded. Yes, he could try to do that for Falana.

He led them out to the north-west, into the high grasslands beyond the lugga. The distant whistling thorns over the valley quiet in the silver-clear light of the half-moon. Along the valley floor grazed twenty or more gemsbok, Falana’s specialty; their striking black band and head marks making them almost float across the grass. They stretched away toward the river.

“Now Nengwe, don’t bother going in from behind. Those horns aren’t much good for defence, but they’re as sharp as your claws. They’re long enough to scratch their rumps with them so chasing them is a sure way to get yourself killed. If they really get going, let them. We can’t outrun them.”

“Great, so how do we catch them?”

“Stalk them and charge from the side, or ahead, before they can run.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, they won’t spook when they spot you. They know they can get away, so keep out of sight.”

“You’re full of good news.”

Falana shrugged off Nengwe’s jibe. “We’ll go for a young straggler. Are you feeling strong?”

“Enough. Why?”

“I want to take it back to the rock.”

Nengwe’s eyes popped at the thought, yet they were not so far from the great rock as to make it all that difficult. At least it would make the selection of the target simple: one he could drag back.

He took her at her word and watched Falana. Her tail floated from side to side leisurely. Her shoulders rolled easily as she started to walk off. Her pawfall was measured, precise and elegant, even if those paws were somewhat muddied. In the moonlight her ear marks showed clearly that she was alert yet relaxed. This was something she had obviously done before, and often. Her talk of horns, he thought, may well have been purely for his benefit. He looked to the herd, dismissing the idea: they were more than real enough. Before she had gone ten lengths he set off after her, catching her up.

“I think we ought to get off this ridge, we can be seen against the moon.”

“Yes, you’re right Nengwe.” She stopped, and looked down to her right. “Let’s get down there. You go on and put some distance between us.”

For a while, with the shade of the ridge covering them, they made good progress. There was little wind to give them away, but with the stillness came greater risk of being heard.

Nengwe paused and listened for Falana’s pawfall behind him. He heard nothing other than his own breathing. He leant forward on his hindpaws; a twig cracked. He froze, looking to the still peaceful herd. They remained so. He lifted his nearhind leg and drew it forward, all the time staring intently over the valley. A silver streak caught his eye; the rains had filled the bottom of the valley with water: a stream. They would have to cross it.

“Yes Nengwe,” said a subdued voice from behind him. “How do you think my paws got muddy?” The lion just stared at the gemsbok. “I suppose you want to help me with cleaning them. Get this right and I might even let you.” Nengwe continued to stare. “Pity we can’t be on the other side working down. We’ll just have to work our way down here, over the stream and up to the long grass around those boulders. See?” Nengwe turned his ears round toward the boulders.

“Yes, I see.”

“Come on, you’re doing all right so far.”

Falana led on to get ahead of the herd: down into the valley floor and over the stream, which she crossed without any regard to its pitch-mudded bed. Nengwe picked his way across, then realising that he needed to keep up and keep down, he slipped across lightly, soon joining Falana in the boulders.

“Wait here. They are coming this way.” She retreated, slipping out of sight. She re-emerged to Nengwe’s nearside, closer to the still seemingly untroubled gemsbok.

Nengwe whiled away the next half an hour or more watching Falana and the herd, steadily but painfully slowly approaching. She appeared calm; content to lie in wait. Content for the herd to come to her, and come to her it did. As it approached the boulders the leaders grew tense and anxious; looking about, listening and scenting. Nengwe watched Falana breathe in steady, unchanging rhythm. The leaders moved on, feeling secure enough to graze within eight lengths of Falana lying in the grass ahead. They kept further from the rocks. In time they moved away, the bulk of the herd slipping by. Still she waited.

Crouched among the boulders, looking like just another of them against the moon, Nengwe waited and watched. His eye turned to the tail of the herd. It thinned, and almost as Falana had predicted there at rear were what he thought must be a mother and pre-adolescent. Both were horned, the youngster though lacked the black belly band of the others. That, he thought, must be their target, but how to take it?

He remembered Falana, lying patiently in the grass. Her ears now scanned slowly. Her shoulders rippled tensely. Her hindquarters shimmered. She was ready, but for what?

The mother looked up from grazing. She had strayed too far from the herd. She moved forward. For a moment the youngster held back. That moment shone clear in the moonlight. It was all Nengwalamwe needed. The time had come, and he knew what to do. He broke from cover and charged toward the mother. She panicked and ran toward the herd, only then realising her mistake. The

youngster heard her go, and decided to run the only way that made any sense: down slope in a curving arc behind the charging lion. Before it had picked up any speed Falana broke right in front of it and lunged up at the hanging skin of its neck. She swiped at its flank, knocking the wind out and breaking some of its ribs. Gasping for breath and falling, the lioness bit down hard on its neck and carried it down to the ground. She held on tight. She wasn't going to let go.

Nengwe stood and watched as the herd dashed off in to the night, then turned to return to Falana.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, still gripping the gemsbok's neck.

"Falana, I think it's dead. You can let go."

She bit deeper, shaking her head. The gemsbok's lifeless eyes stared back at her. Her strike had broken its neck; it had been dead before it hit the ground.

They took their fill from the carcass where it fell. It was Falana that dragged it most of the way back to the rock, Nengwe took over for the final haul up the boulder path. He had to drag it backwards up the steep slope, Falana encouraging him from the promontory. When he stumbled backwards over some of the fallen rubble the pair set about clearing yet more of the entrance to the cave. The moon had set before Nengwe dragged the carcass into the cave. Falana was already inside, resting quietly on the platform.

As he approached, padding gently and with renewed vigour, he looked on Falana, lying at her ease on her side exposing her pure cream under fur which seemed to glow with warmth and strength. He stopped for a moment unsure as to whether she had heard him, unsure whether he would be welcome at her side.

He smiled gently and felt a surge of guilt at the thoughts that he was unable and unwilling to suppress. Falana was not just a lioness; she was his mother, friend and daughter all in the one golden furred body. He knew his thoughts were totally inappropriate for those so he pushed them mentally to one side and with a shake of his mane walked up to within a length of her outstretched forepaws. She did not move as he drew close but just lay watching the stars through the cave entrance. Nengwalamwe let his hindquarters drop to his offside, his hind paws sliding across the earthy bareness. For a moment he said nothing but just watched Falana's eyes as they gazed unmoving out into the night. He was just about to drop himself to the cave floor when Falana spoke, softly and assuredly, but with a strong sense of 'Not now Nengwe!'

"It's been a long night, and I'm still hunting." She didn't look towards the young but not unattractive male sitting within striking distance. For a second Nengwalamwe was at a loss and just sat shaking his head distractedly.

"Still hunting? But all I wanted was to lie and enjoy the night with you. Is that too much to ask?" Falana smiled gently and played on:

"Yes." She kept her eyes fixed on the distant horizon

"Well if that's the way you feel I'll go. I just wanted to be with you for just little while. You know, that company you mentioned."

"Yes..." said Falana in a distant voice.

“Are you going to lie there and just say yes all the time?” asked Nengwalamwe in slight irritation. Falana chuckled, beginning to purr under her breath.

”Yes”

“Come on, I know you never much liked me, but how is playing games going to help?” Nengwe dropped his head and looked away towards the distant line of green, blue and black that seemed to so captivate Falana. Falana turned towards him wondering how long it would take him to realise that she was different and rather more female than she had been for some time. She raised her hindquarters a little in the pretence of getting more comfortable. He turned back to look at her when his ears caught the light sounds of her movement.

“Yes,” she said slowly with a voice that talked to Nengwe like he had never been spoken to before. Suddenly he felt like a greater lion than he had ever been, suddenly his feelings for Falana bursting up from within, feelings that he knew were wrong and that might well get him clawed and humiliated. He felt like he had felt once before: helpless at a lionesses paws. She had come to him, and helped him open the very cave they now lay in. They had hunted together, the kill laid just few lengths away. He couldn’t hold his gaze on Falana’s loinclothingly beautiful emerald eyes and tore himself away with a self-disgusted grunt.

“How can you tease me like that? Hey, what is it with you? What is all this about? It’s not even as if you’re in season or anything.”

Falana unhesitatingly and strongly felled him with a short and penetrating word that struck Nengwalamwe firmly, “Yes.”

Nengwalamwe had come a long way since entering the Pridelands. He had entered the land and yet that was nothing, he was still a loner, a wandering vagabond without a pride. Later he had longed to enter the cave and become a part of the rock yet it was cold, hard and dark and yet it was nothing to compare with what he yearned for now but knew she would never allow him to have.

“Good for you. I hope you find some nice lion and have his cubs. I know you don’t want to mate with me.” Nengwalamwe turned back to watch Falana.

She had already risen up, forequarters first. She stretched out her forelegs, pushing her head and shoulders upwards, her back sloping down in a gentle curve that ought not to belong to such deadly an animal. She turned her head away from Nengwe as she pushed her shoulders towards him. The touch of her strong shoulder against his whiskers sent shivers down to his tail. He sat spellbound as she drew herself up and forwards running her back and thighs past his nose. He could not fail not notice her scent as she slowed to hair by hair pace as the base of her tail crept tantalisingly beneath the soft fur of his muzzle. She continued forwards, moving away from him in one long movement. She flicked the end of her tail lightly over his nose, toying with his most complex instinct. She walked forwards a pace and stopped, turning her head and looking him in the eye. She watched his incredulous expression for a moment before saying with a mischievous cub-like smile: “Yes?”

Nengwalamwe leapt forwards but Falana anticipated his move and, already standing, moved off with strong pushes from her supple legs. She laughed as she ran out of the cave.

Nengwalamwe growled and ran headlong after her. In a few lengths she slowed a little and he felt the flash of her tail tip past his head, then, in the next pace he was by her hindquarters, even here in the open air of the promontory her scent was irresistibly strong.

He stumbled on one of the smaller stones left from their earlier exertions. It pricked his pads of his forepaw. He lurched on to Falana's work heated thigh. She responded by tensing. Nengwalamwe tumbled to a stop at her side, falling over onto her ungracefully. Thinking he might have hurt her he scrabbled to his paws, his right forepaw pressing hard onto her shoulder. He relieved the pressure on her yielding but tense fur. He felt her heart pounding. Now freed, his forepaw slid down her leg and stopped on the ground by her side. He pushed down on it again and lifted his great weight from her back.

Instead of rising up and pulling herself from underneath his belly she pressed herself down further to the ground, flattening her hindquarters so that she lay square on the ground. She panted strongly. Nengwe felt the warmth of her flesh on his and asked gently:

"Do you really want this with me?"

For a moment she said nothing, their hearts pounding as one. Then she extended her hindlegs powerfully, forcing her hindquarters back, beneath his body. "Yes Nengwe, it's what I wished for."

He curved his back down, the skin on his sides rippling as he felt her offering herself to him. She pushed back again... his instincts took over.

He cried out in a roar as he held his teeth open over Falana's neck. Underneath he felt her hold onto him. Falana closed her eyes as his power closed all around her. She knew the moment couldn't last and let out all her flesh ripping tensions of years with her mother in one long ear piercing roar as she felt an intense heat of inner strength flood over her. She saw and heard nothing as a loud silence and an intense red blackness overtook her.

When she next saw light she could no longer feel Nengwe's belly rubbing her back, she felt disorientated and lost. She whipped herself up from the ground and lurched over to find him. She rolled onto her back desperately hoping to catch a touch of the one who had just given her such a wonderful gift. Her right hind paw caught a nose. As she pulled her leg away, she felt the overheated panting breath of a lion who then licked the blood from his nose; his breath coming back in sharp lung-filling gasps.

"Are you all right Falana? I'm sorry I didn't mean for that to happen, I just..."

"Shuusssh, it's just how I wanted it to happen," she said looking at him with her hair-hung chin pressed to the underside of her neck. "Didn't you want it too?"

"I've wanted it forever. I wished for it too. It's what I was born for: for you."

Later, in the cave with some of the gemsbok to sustain them, Nengwe's thoughts turned to lighter things.

"I do wish you wouldn't do that claw thing Falana. Why do you keep on trying to claw me?"

"Nengwe", said Falana laughing as she rolled on her back in front of him, "Do you think a lioness is going to reveal all her secrets at once?" He didn't

understand, but smiled at Falana just the same. “But as you ask I’ll tell you: It’s to keep you on your pads. We lionesses can’t have you lions dropping off on us can we?”

“I really don’t know what you mean.” Nengwe took a playful swipe at her forelegs as they swing by again. He suddenly grew serious. “Falana, promise me you’ll save yourself and... if...” He couldn’t get the words out. He sighed deeply.

“Don’t Nengwe. Forget about all that: leave it out there on the plains. We’re here now, that’s all that matters. We can hunt tomorrow.”

Later the following morning, unknown and unfelt by either, their gifts, so freely given and passionately received and enjoyed as one, became so powerful as to draw forth not one but two souls from the void. Their gifts had become the most precious of all: of life itself. Yet the void does not give out its souls easily. As it gives, so it’s cold, dark fingers reach out and take back. This day the void was in no hurry, unlike the lions. The void could wait, and so it left the two together, their time was not over. Their sun was not set, even though in the cave new days were dawning.

22. *High Moon*

Shaha lay dozing quietly on the ridge above Silent Rocks in the humid heat of the midmorning. She had had a busy few days with Mtundu. Now at last alone, she was trying to sleep. She couldn't settle: rolling over and back repeatedly. She tried every position of her legs and paws but none helped to ease her discomfort in the searing shade of the breezeless morning.

She looked up. She noticed Falana moving amid the shadows of a clump of trees. She was heading for the river. Some way behind her, the grass moved again. She was being followed. Shaha felt warm at the thought that it was most likely Nengwalamwe. She savoured this time, borrowed as it was, for now Falana would surely spend more and more time with him.

At length Shaha found a passably comfortable position for her forelegs. She closed her eyes to sleep, ignoring the flies that swirled around her head.

"Shaha?"

She woke instantly and looked up.

"What do you want Mtundu? I've been trying to sleep for hours." She struggled to focus beyond the baboon.

"It's late Shaha. You have been asleep for hours. No tryin' about it."

She passed a forepaw over her forehead.

"I must be getting old. A baboon wakes me and I don't even want to kill him."

"Yeah? An' now I know where Falana gets her grump."

Shaha forced open her eyelids, blinked and raised her head from her foreleg. "You know..."

"Yeah, if baboons tasted better and you were ten years younger you might do sumtin' about me."

"...Something like that, yes. While you've been gone sorting your family, I've found something for you, and by the way how is your father?"

"For me? You got sumtin' for me?"

Shaha turned her head slowly. Mtundu followed her gaze. A first he had no idea what it was he was supposed to be looking at.

"What?"

"That."

"Eh? Cummon Shaha, stop funnin' me."

"There at the foot of that rock."

Mtundu scurried over. He looked about and then turned back to Shaha, shrugging; raising both his hands above his shoulders.

"Beside you."

He began to raise his upper lip, but before he had exposed anymore than the tips of his teeth he saw a gnarled branch, bark-stripped and smoothed with age lying on the ground.

"What? That old branch?"

"Yes Mtundu. That "old branch". Pick it up."

"How? More like, why?"

"You'll see."

“OK, OK, seein’ it’s you.” He looked at it. It was half as long again as he was tall. Far from straight, it kinked near its thicker end. Mtundu sat over it and put his open hand over it where it bowed away from the ground. He felt something flow through him, a rushing force. He jumped back, pulling his hand away, startled. He looked to Shaha as he composed himself.

“What the heck was that?”

“It won’t bite, but I might if you don’t try again.”

He breathed quickly.

“What is it?”

“It’s just a stick Mtundu. That’s all. All you felt were memories.”

“Yeah, memories they might have been, but they sure as heck weren’t mine.”

“No, that they were not Mtundu. It’s yet to see yours.”

“Are any yours?”

“Oh yes, it knows all my secrets. Go on now, pick it up again. This time remember it’s yours, so hold it as if you mean it. You control it, it’s yours to use as you need.”

Mtundu side-shuffled to the stick: it still lay as before. He looked at Shaha, raising his eyebrows. She nodded, tipping her nose toward him, urging him forward.

“As I need, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Shaha flicked her off forepaw at him... twice.

Mtundu thought. His hand hovered over the bow of the stick. Birds flew up from a tree in the distance, his mind flashed to the dogs. Where were they? What were they doing? He leant away from the sound. His hand touched the smooth wood.

“George, we gotta learn this ‘ere lion a lesson ‘e won’t never forget. I reckon it’s time we went huntin’.”

“Wot, just us? I ain’t that hungry.”

“No, the whole bleedin’ lot of us. Get ‘em up.” Elizabeth walked off back toward the burrows, tossing, “We’re away as soon as we’re all at the twin tree,” over her shoulder.

George stayed low to the ground until Elizabeth was well ahead, then he got up, and lifting his head high, set off. He knew well enough what Elizabeth had meant by all of them and would have little enough trouble finding a hunting party. All though heeded him and only one, the lightly built dull-grey bitch Jane, asked him what was going on.

“We’re ‘untin’, what’s it look like?”

“What’s our prey?”

“Lion for all I know. ‘Eck, I dunno. Go ask Miss Elizabeth.”

The pack that assembled that afternoon under the split-trunked acacia was not that which Elizabeth would have chosen. She would lead, as always, with Jane as second hunt. Behind them as the dogs set off was George, possibly the most experienced and steady of the pack. He led the five main working dogs; they worked as two pairs and a roving lone third. At the rear came ‘Arry, the last of the eight but as important as any: his job was as cover. The dogs had used this method of hunting since way before Elizabeth’s grand sire’s time. It was well practised and required few calls to make it work. At its simplest, the method

would bring down most prey within a few minutes, but they had the stamina to keep it up for an hour before they closed in. There was no need for stealth, indeed the technique relied on the dogs being seen.

They moved off to the north, along the riverside. Cresting a rise, Elizabeth called them to a halt. Ahead a herd of some nine or ten elephants; females and calves; headed in leisurely single file toward the river ford. One of the calves ran off, turning back toward the lion's rock. His mother stomped out after him, soon catching the youngster. She made him grasp her tail with his trunk and led him back to their place in the file. The other females gathered round, some looking out in concerned vigilance.

The dogs waited. The elephants looked to be moving on. Then they stopped and turned back. George crept up to Elizabeth and twittered into her ear, "I don't fancy messin' with them trunk swingers again. Are you sure this is such a good idea?"

Elizabeth made no reply. Her jaw hung open, she panted lightly, staring at the herd slowly assembling back into file. She pulled her tongue in noisily, shook her head and turned, walking silently back through the hunting party.

She led them southeast, away from the river; past Saffi's Bluffs; where they waited while a long trail of zebra crossed ahead of them; and on to the low hills beyond. There the soil deepened and supported thicker clumps of trees and denser scrub. Here they regrouped, looking to the grasslands beyond. George slipped up to Elizabeth, twittering hopefully in greeting. She ignored him at first, looking intently out from the rise.

"Impala. We'll take a female. That one'll do: there."

"Yeah, Elizabeth, no trubs. I can taste it already."

"Forget it. You ain't eating it."

"What? You pullin' my leg?"

"No." She raised her voice so that all could hear. "No, it ain't nosh. We're goin' to give it to that..." She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. "...that bloody lion."

The huddled, crowded dogs muttered. 'Arry spoke up. "Give it to the 'effing cat?"

"Yeah. You got a problem with that? Get going: wide to the right."

'Arry set off, keeping to cover wherever he could. It would take a little time for him to get in position behind the mark.

"George and Jane'll take it to 'is rock. We'll all mark it first."

"Mark it? Wha'd'you mean 'mark it' Elizabeth?"

"Mark it. Piss on it George. You're first." She looked sternly at the others each in turn. "We want 'im to know exactly who put it there. Is that clear?"

George held his ears back, screeched up his eyes, and spoke for the rest: "Crystal Elizabeth."

"Now then look to. Lead's goin'" She rose to fours and leant forward, "Lead's gone." Jane got up and walked after her, then the remaining five. They walked steadily down slope, rounding the taller scrub, winding through the trees and out in to the open. Any prey seeing the column knew what they were doing. They knew they were safe as long as the file remained; it was when they split that the danger grew.

The impala grew wary, feeding a little more quickly out of the way, shepherding their young ahead of them. They could not tell on who the dogs would fall, it may not even have been for them. Still they looked on the dogs, approaching steadily, quietly, deliberately. A small group ran, leaping in a confused mass. The dogs ignored them and walked on in plain sight.

With a few simple monotone calls the pack suddenly split. The lead pair carried on while behind them first a male, then two more turned away to one side. Within a few strides two more peeled off to the other side. A group of gemsbok ran up from dense scrub to the east; the dogs lost some of their customary cohesion. The hooing calls came more quickly. The pack worked quickly to get back into formation.

Three impala, all young females, red-backed and un-horned, saw the lead dogs striding toward them, closing steadily. Closing too slowly they thought. Any impala could outrun a dog, they all knew that. They turned and ran nonchalantly, leaping occasionally more for the fun of it than to throw the dogs off. Yet still the dogs came, faster now, calling all the time.

One of the impala females turned away to the side. She reared up as she saw George and two others. She collected herself and then leapt over them, they didn't follow. Instead they closed in on her companions, tightening the noose.

A mid-afternoon's bit of fun at the dogs' expense turned to raw fear. The impala ran for their lives, turning to each side to escape, only to run into more dogs, and still the plain hunters kept on coming, steadily kept on running them down. Within minutes the impala were totally separated from the herd. They were on their own and the dogs were closing. Coming together, squeezing the prey, driving them away from any hope.

The impala began to tire. They were now running for their lives, and they had long since run out of places to run to. Yet still the dogs came, pressing on, hemming in, running down.

The end came simply enough. The five closed the noose, two from one side, and three from the other. One appeared out of the grass right under the impala, one of whom leapt over him to safety. The other died there in the heat of the afternoon. Her calls for help ignored; her end unseen. Her fate had been decided long before and far away in deep cover. Yet the dogs didn't eat her. One by one, females and males starting with George marked her deep red back, light counter-shaded belly and slight, long-nosed head. Just as Elizabeth had said.

Mtundu sat stunned. The stick still lay to his side.

"Mtundu, what was that?"

He looked at Shaha blankly, "What was what?"

"That - there, on the kopje across the valley."

Mtundu looked round. The rocks were bare. A shimmering haze rose from them, nothing more.

"There's nuttin' there Shaha. It's just the heat."

She wasn't listening, she was staring. "I'm sure there was something."

"Ya know this 'presentation' thing: where you presented?"

“Me?” Shaha’s weary eyes brightened. “No Mtundu, I wasn’t. My brother was, as a cub, my father too of course.”

“Not you? Why?”

“I wasn’t going to be king was I? I’m a female, they don’t present lionesses.”

“Maybe they should.... So ya had a brother? What happened? Was he king?”

“He grew up. He left; he wanted to find his own pride.”

She looked north, to the distant mountains. “Out there. He never saw what happened here.” They looked together.

“Nengwe came from there. Do ya think..?”

“Who knows Mtundu? Not I. There’s not much of him in Nengwalamwe that much I do know. Look, I’m tired. I think Falana might want to go hunting later. I need to get some sleep. How about you get off to see how Nengwalamwe’s doing?” She laid her head on her forepaws. Mtundu nodded. She smiled back, “Best leave the stick; it’ll be here when you need it.”

“What, this old stick?” He grasped it, and lifted it awkwardly. It felt light; the wood dry and age-smoothed. He dropped it, and tried again, this time catching hold near one end. Its weight twisted his wrist painfully. He let go. He finally grabbed with both hands, lifting it above his head.

“Yes that ‘old stick’. It’s yours now.”

“Yeah sure it’s mine, but I dunno wh’use it’ll be.”

“You’ll think of something. Look I need to talk to Nengwalamwe, but not now. Tomorrow mid-morning will do, until then I’d better look after it for you.”

“Yeah, OK. Mid-morning, sure.” He put it down carefully beside the rock, where it had lain earlier.

Shaha watched Mtundu as he scampered off. The afternoon sun caught him casting a long shadow reminiscent to Shaha of days long ago, days when she still used to laugh.

She settled down to sleep again. Before she fell under she saw the summit of the distant rock move again. This time she saw that it had a delicately spotted coat. “Ah Fentayli,” Shaha said recognising the leopardess. “What are you up to?” She watched as the leopardess slipped down off the rocks and into the grasses after Mtundu. “Fentayli, I hope for their sakes that your cubs are old enough to fend for themselves... not that Falana’s were; and young enough not to know who you really are.”

When Shaha had passed, Fentayli leapt nimbly from the low bough of a baobab, landed among a tussock of grass and sniffed. The night was still, with only zephyrs of wind stirring the grass before her. Sniffing again, she stepped forward cautiously, eyes searching, and then pushed her way among the grasses, padding a few yards and then pausing to sniff and listen once more. Now and again the wind sighed among the grasses, the stalks waving and rippling in patches. Each time she paused, fearful, until it died down. She cast aside her fear and got to work.

She kept to cover, but was careful to never let the lioness get very far ahead. She was alone, she often stopped to rest, her gait was uneven, almost a limp, probably a result of the injuries to her near shoulder. Fentayli noted with ironic pleasure that they most likely were given to her by her own daughter, who as she was told, and she shuddered at the thought, was mating with that damned lion.

It was close enough to when Elizabeth had said it should be done. The moon has full, which favoured daytime hunting leopards. This was the time, but it wasn't the place. She needed more cover, somewhere where the lioness would be disadvantaged, somewhere she would have surprise. She needed trees.

There was no way she was going to be able to lead the lioness. Indeed she had to stay hidden. All she could do was to follow and take whatever opportunity presented.

It was several hours later when, tired and about to give up, Fentayli saw Shaha entering a loose grove of acacias. By day it would appear mainly open, but at night, it was cover enough, and familiar cover at that. She trotted on, entering the grove from the side. She was pleasantly surprised to see the lioness resting in the pools of moonlight at the centre of the grove. Fentayli sat for a moment and listened. Through the night's cocktail of insects, calls and cries she could not hear any pad fall. The lioness licked distractedly at her wounds for a while before getting up and walking off slowly.

The leopardess walked confidently out into the open. Stopped and turned to the receding lioness. The lioness froze mid-pace then turned. She carried fairly fresh and evidently painful wounds to her shoulder and flank. She twitched as she put her weight on her off forepaw, rolling to her nearside. The leopardess drew down her eyelids and stared hard at the lioness. She was old, injured and alone. A glimmer of a smile crept over the leopardess' face.

Shaha heard pawfall behind her. She halted mid-step, holding her hind paw in the air before rolling it gently down to the ground. She turned carefully to her offside, drawing herself square to the leopardess, no more than five lengths away. Shaha didn't wonder what the leopardess wanted. She already knew, and was expecting the encounter. Indeed she had planned for it to happen.

She had scented Fentayli soon after setting out at sunset. She took a leisurely wandering route around the southern lands, pausing more often than was necessary to check for scent marks she knew were not there. Keeping in the open, she moved off when sure she was still being followed.

Always unhurried, always with a little more unevenness in her stride than normal; she had drawn Fentayli along after picking her up below her baobab lay-up. Shaha had even thrown in a few clearly audible mumbles about not being able to find Falana now that she was with Nengwalamwe. There was nothing that called more to Fentayli than what she considered to be weakness. For Shaha it had been a surprisingly enjoyable few hours. Now, though, the night got serious.

“And where do you think you're going?”

The leopardess stepped back, fear rippling her shoulders and raising her whiskers in a snarl. “I'm heading home, if you don't mind.”

“Oh, but what if I do mind?” Shaha pulled herself up to stand square and sound. “You’re way out of your territory... and a bit far to be hunting, and at this time of night. Don’t even try explaining.”

A shiver of fear shook through the leopardess as she realised she might have underestimated Shaha. “I’m only doing my duty. The Queen has a right to know what is going on in her lands.”

“You’re right, but the Queen is not that mangy flea-ridden cur you’re reporting to.” Shaha advanced slowly, her eyes fired. “And you enjoy it.”

The leopardess backed a pace and then stood her ground. “I do what I have to,” she said with a certain dignity.

Shaha did not deign to reply, merely moving forward slowly, tail flick-flicking. “You’re alone, as always.” She crouched down, unmoving. “You don’t do friendship do you Fentayli?”

“What?”

“You know: teamwork, cooperation, working together, family. You don’t get it do you?”

“What’s there to get? I am stronger than you. I win.”

“And Elizabeth? Is she stronger than you?”

Shaha edged forward, sliding her belly over the ground. Even the leopardess knew she was stalking. She also saw the lioness was snatching looks to each side, probably in some vain hope that someone would rescue her. There was no chance, there was no one else. She was alone, and her failure to maintain eye contact was weakness. Weakness that Fentayli knew she could exploit. She stared hard. Her fear subsided. She had the lioness now, she was hers at last. Ever since the lioness had injured one of her cubs she had waited for this moment: this one shining moment in the moonlight.

Shaha inched forward along the ground. She actually seemed to foolishly believe she was in cover and that she could hide under it! Fentayli stood tall, looking down in all ways at the pathetic lioness.

The moon shone down on them in piercing shafts from the canopy. Fentayli was waiting for the lioness’ head to move in to one, a couple of lengths ahead. She gathered herself for the spring: a jumping pounce to land hard on the lioness’ back, claws out and digging in deep. If she was lucky she would break her in one, her belly was hard to the ground, her legs under her. The lioness, the crazed fool, wouldn’t have time to pull her legs out. Fentayli stared, and smiled.

Shaha’s yellow eyes caught the light, casting it to Fentayli. The lioness looked aside as she entered the pool of moonlight. With sudden explosive fury, the leopardess sprang forward; closing her jaws upon Shaha’s near shoulder then ripping back violently, re-opening recently healed wounds. The lioness cried out and snapped out, but the leopardess, lighter and lithe, had already darted away. Her jaws glistened with dark blood in the moonlight. “Not so smug now are we? Careful or you’ll lose more than just fur.”

Shaha’s eyes widened in fury, and she darted forward with frightening speed, a paw whipping out to smash the leopardess’ cheek, sending her reeling.

“What was that for? Falana’s cubs?”

“No, Mtundu’s brother.” Gasping, the lioness moved in again. The leopardess flicked over onto her back, paws flailing wildly. She rent the flesh on

Shaha's chest, tattering the fur and tearing an agonised growl from the lioness. Twisting lithely up, using her smaller frame to advantage, Fentayli attempted to seize Shaha's throat, teeth closing barely fur length from her neck. The lioness staggered back desperately, blood running freely from her wounds.

"Who's in trouble now, hmm? I've not quite figured out yet why those other two keep you around, you old flea-bag." The leopardess stood up, eyes glinting as Shaha stumbled backwards, fighting her wounded shoulder. "You're too slow, too stiff, too weak and too old. You should have stuck to lying in the sun and let others do the fighting."

The muscles in the leopardess' hindquarters tensed as she prepared to spring. Fentayli was so totally focussed on Shaha, so locked eye upon eye, so engrossed in her own success, that she had failed to notice Falana who had stalked to a few short lengths of her near hindquarter.

The leopardess leant forward to pounce but instantly felt herself falling backwards. Little pain, just numbness. When she tried to hold herself up she just kept on falling, twisting, collapsing on to the ground.

As she stared up in confusion and disbelief, Shaha fell on the nape of her neck and bit, spine crushingly hard. "Please! I-I-I was just doing what I was told! I have cubs to feed," the leopardess gurgled, scrabbling at the ground with her forepaws, eyes dulling as they stared up at the uncaring moon.

Shaha hung on until the leopardess' body slumped down. Falana, breathing hard, withdrew her foreclaws from deep in the ridge of the leopardess' spotted back and slipped to the ground. Fentayli's end was swift: a mercy she had afforded few of her victims.

"That's the end of it then."

Shaha drew back, holding her near forepaw off the ground awkwardly. "No Falana, it's just the beginning. I said I'd meet Nengwalamwe at Silent Rocks mid-morning."

"So?"

"So something's going on I know it." Shaha's shoulder bled freely.

"Yes, Elizabeth doesn't even pee without a plan. Mother - are you hurt badly?"

Shaha tried to put some weight on her forepaw. Pain surged through her shoulder. She lifted her paw. "I need to rest. Not here, she's still looking at me."

The dead leopardess looked almost as though she would wake, get up, stretch and walk off in search of a kill, but this time she was the kill. With Falana's help Shaha limped away to the edge of the trees. Falana returned with a tuft of fur from a lion's mane. She dropped it alongside the sleek, delicately smooth-haired leopardess' twisted neck. "Goodbye Fentayli, may the stars shine on all your hunts."

A new sound cut through the din of the night - a hyena's cackle. "Yeah, so the old dear's got what's comin' to her. 'Bout time too."

Falana rounded on the hyena snarling, "Give me one reason not to kill you: just one."

"Save it missy. I ain't here to kill you, or your mother. Hi there Shaha!"

Shaha growled from the trees. "Yeah, I love you too!" The hyena strode up to Falana boldly, circling her and the kill. "Me, I'm just the messenger. Lizzie

thinks we're all in this together, us being canids and all. Trouble is, we ain't, but you know how it is: who's gonna' tell her?"

"Going to tell her what?"

"Why, what happened here of course. I gotta tell her something."

"Tell her her assassin is dead."

"No, no, no. You don't get it do you? I gotta tell her what she wants to hear an' that's exactly what I think I'm gonna do. After that I'm getting way outa here. I ain't hanging around. I've had enough of this business. The pay's lousy an' the boss stinks."

The hyena turned away without another word and stepped off into the night. Falana, her eyes burning, stood silently over the body.

"Let her go," said Shaha limping out from the trees. "It'll be all right."

"How can you know?"

"That's the first time a hyena's ever called me Shaha."

The great rock sat silently adrift amidst a blossoming sea. The rains heralded new growth and new life but the rock just was. It always had been. It had seen so much come and go, so many rains, and many that did not come, desiccating the ridges and plains around close to desert. The colours around were rich, vibrant and full of life. Against them, the grey of the rock was more forbidding than ever. Mtundu shivered as he climbed the path to its still heart.

"Mtundu, Mtundu! You're back! Wow, it feels like forever. How are you? Shaha not eaten you yet?"

"Err, nah. I'm still all here. Every bit." Mtundu looked around. Everything appeared changed, and the scents were overwhelming even to Mtundu's nose. Nengwe rushed over to him, dropping down, licking him. "Yeah, Nengwe, see? I'm jus' fine."

"Great! What have you been up to eh? Hunting? No, that's not you is it... I know, walking under the moonlight discussing stuff."

"Yeah Nengwe, something like that." He put his arms around the lion's neck. "And what about you? What'd you been up to eh?"

"Oh nothing."

"Nuttin'? Yeah right, and where's Falana?"

"Oh she went off a while back. She swears she saw something out there. Wouldn't say what. Just ran off. You know how she is."

"What did you do to her? How is she? Jus' what kind'a nuttin' you been doin'?" It wasn't just the rock, it was Nengwe that carried the scents: rancid meat... not sure what; musty water, damp earth... ah yes, that... and... Falana. He smelt of Falana. "Cummon Nengwe, what have you been up to for all this time? Been out much have ya?"

"Not much, just pottering around. Here, there, relaxing, you know."

"Yeah, I've got a pretty good idea. I reckon you've got just a hundred and ten more nights of freedom. Then you'd better get used to being called 'Dad' lots of times... very early in the morning."

"A hundred and ten, you've counted?"

"Nah, Shaha told me."

“She’s counted? Wow, she really doesn’t get out much these days does she?”

“Jeez no, Nengwe. She didn’t count. She’s got better things to do. An old friend told her once, that’s all. That’s my kinda nuttin’ you’ve been doin’!”

“Ahhh.”

“Yeah, and that ain’t all. When did you do all this?” Mtundu spread out his arms surveying the lions’ paw-work.

“Falana and I did it... together.” Nengwe nodded, his eyes alight with a brighter glint than ever Mtundu had seen. “We still got a bit of work to do, but the cave is... come and look!” The lion jumped up, whipping himself from the baboon’s arms. He rushed over to the cave mouth. “Come on Mtundu. Come and see for yourself what Falana did with me.”

Mtundu wrinkled his brow. “I don’t think I got the strength for that Nengwe.”

“Come on. It’s really... cool. Honest.”

Mtundu got up and walked across the promontory. The lion bounced inside the cave. Mtundu walked slowly through the gap in the rubble. ‘Aah,’ he thought, ‘Gemsbok...’

The lion stood proudly on the platform deep inside. Mtundu approached and stopped before him, looking around. It was certainly something. Actually it really was pretty cool, in all senses. Yup, Nengwalamwe had had a good time.

“Hey, now you’re here we can go and find Falana.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Well, maybe she wants to be alone or something, but after a few days here I’m a little stiff.”

“A little? Hind legs?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Just a haunch eh? Mtundu, I need to run it off.”

“Yeah right. Go on then, off you go.”

“Oh no Mtundu, you’re coming with me.” The lion crouched on the platform. Mtundu smiled, laughed and walked forward shaking his head.

“Just don’ jump off Nengwe. I wanna stay alive!”

23. *Lettest Thou Thy Servant*

Mtundu leant forward against the wind, low against Nengwe's ear. "So, wher'a we goin'?"

"Anywhere, south maybe."

"Ahh, maybes north Nengwe."

The lion began to stretch his stride, eating up the eastern plain.

"Why?"

"Ya don't wanna run into the dogs do ya?"

"No, do you know where they are?"

"Yeah, down south," Mtundu clung hard to Nengwe's back. "They're huntin'"

"You've seen them?"

"No... I just know."

Nengwe slowed to a walk. For days he had barely thought of the dogs. He had had barely thought of anything other than Falana. Why did the dogs have to be part of his life? The alternative was, if anything, even more disturbing. What do lions do? Life would go on without lions and without hunting dogs too.

Predators were arguably only a step above parasites, living off other species, but couldn't afford to predate too many for fear of choking off their own food supply.

Nothing noble about that, yet other species seemingly wanted to look to lions for guidance and wisdom. Nengwe felt he had precious little of either. He was just a big cat with a neck-full of manky fur and actually he wasn't unhappy with that. If he could help then that was fine too. "North? OK, north it is."

Later, in higher spirits than for as long as either could remember, the pair wandered back to the rock side by side. As Mtundu climbed the path he noticed a smear of blood on one of the boulders. Stopping, he stretched out a finger to touch it. It was still fresh.

"Nengwe, come an' take a look at this."

The lion stepped to his side, seeing the strain of fear in the baboon's stance. "What is it?"

"I hope it's nuttin'. Is that Falana's?"

The lion sniffed at it. He couldn't tell for certain, but it didn't seem to be at all familiar. "I don't think so..." Mtundu turned to him slowly. "But I can't be sure. You don't think... surely..." Realising, the lion pushed past Mtundu and leapt on up the slope. Mtundu ran after him, catching him up on the promontory as the lion stood beside an intact carcass. The previously pervading scents of lion and lioness were now overlaid heavily with the acrid stench of dog: African hunting dog. It even masked that of the impala.

Nengwalamwe turned away in disgust. He felt unclean. He rushed into the cave to wash, to rid himself of the dogs' taint, for it was clearly more than one that had nauseatingly violated his home.

As Mtundu went in after him, the rock trembled to the lion's anguished roar. Within, Nengwalamwe stood over one of the foul beasts, his forepaws pinning it down. It spoke up to him with little fear.

"Yer not stupid lion."

“Nengwalamwe,” he growled angrily, “my name is Nengwalamwe!”

“Yeah, whatever. Nengwa-firkin’-lamwe. I see yer’a sharper tool than some. Look they... we ‘re gonna take you and present you to all the animals, showing just how crap you are to ‘em. Telling them how you’re just going to nom’em. How’as yer don’t give a monkey’s about ‘em.”

The lion seethed. If he weren’t standing over it, he would probably have swiped the smile from its face with unsheathed claws; the rest of its face with it.

“Just how are you expecting to capture a lion?”

“Don’t flatter yourself li... err, Nengwalamwe. You’ll go down easily enough. We can put nine or ten well’ard dogs on you anytime we want. That’s what that impala is about: telling you that we can get to you whenever and wherever we like. You’re not safe anywhere. You had better watch your back and stay watching it ‘cause we’re coming at ya.”

“Why are you telling me all this? I can kill you anytime I want.”

“So as you and what’s ‘er name... Falana, can get away.”

Nengwalamwe, trying desperately to contain his anger, backed off from the dog. “Run away? Is that it?” He closed his eyes and breathed in great gulps of air. “This is some attempt to get me to... to run away again?”

The dog got up. It made no attempt to get away. Its coat shone silver in the half-reflected light of the nearly setting moon.

“Nah Nengwalamwe. I’m trying to warn yer. I have to do what I’m told. Like for all my life I’ve never got to choose nuffin’, ‘cept now. I’m choosin’ to warn yer.”

Mtundu slipped over to the lion, sitting in his shadow. “Warn him?”

The dog leant forward, panting on the baboon. “Yeah, warn him.” Sitting back and looking up, she went on, “Well, what about it?”

“I...” He looked down to Mtundu. “We are not going anywhere.”

“No lion. Come on, if you can’t do it for yourself then do it for Falana... and your cubs.”

Mtundu held his arm up in front of the lion. He had no hope of holding him back. “Why should we believe you?”

“Do you think I would come here, right into your den, risking my life to wind you up? Give me a break.”

Nengwalamwe, his anger subsiding, considered the dog’s words for a moment. “We’re not going and you can’t take me down, not with Falana and Shaha at my side.”

“Yeah right. So where *are* Falana and Shaha? Where are they? For all you know they could be dead already.”

“How?”

“Naah lion, that would be tellin’.”

“Tell me.”

“Or what? Anyway its one of your kind.”

“Lion? Lioness?”

“Naah, wouldn’t ya like to know!” Nengwe growled, baring his teeth. “Spotted. Big, spends all day in trees.”

“Leopard? Hardly “my kind”. When’s all this supposed to happen? When are you going to kill Falana and capture me?”

“Dunno. Elizabeth don’t tell us nothing ‘til it ‘appens. Soon I reckon. Few days maybe.”

Nengwalamwe paced slowly round the dog. “So you want me to run away. Is that it?”

“I don’t care about you. You’re just a fluff necked crap burier. I do care about your cubs. It ain’t right, killing them too.”

“Killing them? I thought you said you were going to capture me.”

“Yeah, capture you, put you on trial in front of all the animals and then kill yer, and Falana too if she hangs around. The flea-bag’s as good as dead already. I don’t want all this killing. Miss Elizabeth ain’t gonna’ back down. You say you won’t either, so how’s it all gonna end eh? You can change this. You, lion, can do something good. You can end this bloody mess. Miss Elizabeth says it’s all your fault for coming here. We were ‘ere first. It stands to reason you’ve gotta be the one to back down. You owe it to your cubs. So, what do you say?”

Later, the moon, high and full, silver-rippled the grasses of the western boulder field yet it could not touch Nengwalamwe’s blackened heart. For once his companion was silent too. They strode resolutely together toward the river, veering off to the south as they saw its dancing sparkle. Much of its fury from the rains was spent; it flowed full but peaceful. Its greatest danger came once again from the crocodiles that frequented its shallows.

They approached the burrows. Nengwalamwe made for the split tree, when he arrived he looked to the bare earth. There was no movement and little sound. The dogs, unlike the lion, it appeared, really did sleep tonight. He dropped the load from his mouth. It fell to the ground before him.

He roared. He listened and waited. Confused yelping yawns. To make sure he had the sleeping burrow occupiers’ full attention he roared again. Shouting after, “I got your message. Here’s my reply!” He dipped his head down, took up his burden once again in his jaws, and lifted it, swinging it high over his shoulder. Then, twisting his head, neck and forequarters violently, he flung the silvered body of his visitor toward the nearest burrow. It landed heavily, sliding limply on, twisting and rolling along the bare ground.

He crouched, and taking the baboon to his back, struck out north along the river. They did not return to the rock, instead, once well away from the burrows the pair crossed the valley where Nengwe and Falana had hunted together. There were no gemsbok, and neither the lion nor the baboon was hungry.

Pressing onward they came to the lugga. They tracked up its bank past where Nengwe had fallen. Once they had crossed the still soft silt cautiously, they stopped to check for signs of the dogs. The night hung heavy and still as if everything around knew something was happening. Insects still flew and fluttered, and with them came the bats from the great rock and elsewhere. There were few large animals moving about. The few the pair saw were still, almost as if hiding. None ran from them, all stayed well away and were only seen fleetingly in the distance.

There was still an hour or more before dawn. Surely the dogs would soon venture out. The first place they would go would be the rock. After that... where? Falana’s knoll?

“Don’t worry Nengwe, she’ll be with her mother.” Mtundu’s words of comfort had little effect. They had to stay out of trouble until they met up with

Shaha and Falana mid-morning. That's all they had to do, but with the moon already set the night grew darkest and the slight chill penetrated both fur and hair and the damp of the grass seeped up through toughened pads.

A hyena walked head high into the burrows. She had expected the dogs to be asleep, and to have to wake Elizabeth: a delicate and somewhat hazardous task at the best of times. Instead the burrows were chaotically alive. Elizabeth stood outside; her ears flopped down, shouting agitatedly at George.

"I don't give a shit what time of flamin' night it is. He can't just walk in 'ere and insult me like this. I ain't gonna let 'im get away wi'it!"

The hyena paused. Perhaps this was not the best time for her news. Then again, perhaps it was. She walked straight up to Elizabeth.

"Excuse me, Miss Elizabeth?"

"What the hell do you think ya doin' 'ere at this time of night? Doesn't anyone around 'ere ever soddin' sleep? This 'ad better be bloody good."

The hyena waited. Standing straight she looked down on the dog's head. It would be so easy to...

"What the hell are you waitin' for? Get on with it!"

...well perhaps not. "Miss Elizabeth. The silent one says that "Fleabag" is dead and "Ice Maiden" is running off to the south. She's on the trail of "Longnose". It is done just as you commanded."

"What are you going on about? Why are you even 'ere?"

"Shaha is dead, Falana is running away and she's going after the baboon."

"Are you taking the piss? What is this?"

"It's as you said: kill Shaha."

"Yeah I said it but not now: in two nights flamin' time! Now you're telling me she's gone and done it?"

"Err... yes."

The dog sat back. For once she had little to say. Her friend lay dead, killed by the lion, joining Mary and Eddie. If he killed or injured any more she wouldn't have the strength to take him. She could muster eight; that was all. It was enough, just, and now the lion was finally on his own she could take him down. There was no time to waste. No more planning. No more chances for that stinking cat to cause more trouble. He had to die, that day. She was disappointed that she not get to drag it out as she wanted, but that was perhaps a price worth paying as long as he wasn't going to live to see another sunset. So where, his rock? No, he'd be expecting that. He'd hole up there. He knew every crack, every boulder, earth clod and pebble of it. No, it had to be where he wasn't expecting it, somewhere where he could be ambushed; somewhere he'd be sure to go.

They would stay out of his way till the moment was right; there was no point in risking another chance encounter. Then she would avenge Jane's death. Oh yes, the lion would pay, he would pay dearly. He would pay when it was light: when he was tired and they were fresh. She could do it, she had before. Maybe she could get her vengeance after all.

Not all the dogs shared her confidence. None wanted to share the fate of the one whose crumpled body gave compelling evidence to the fact that she had dared to do something about it.

A little after dawn Nengwe and Mtundu passed not far from where the lion had first set pad upon the lands. Nengwe had come once or twice since to this place. He paused and looked north to the forest and mountains beyond, quiet and sleeping now, wondering about what he had left behind. He remembered his father, but now not with fear: with bitter disgust. His memories of his mother were fonder; richer and warmer now than ever before, especially now that he was most likely to become a father himself. Then there was Talashi...

“Nengwe?” Mtundu’s voice was distant. “What are you doin’ back there?”

“Oh nothing. I was just...”

“How long d’ya reckon?”

“Eh? Oh, a while or so.”

“What do you think she wants?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know whether they are alive or dead. I just don’t know.” The lion shook his head, his mane rolling and snaking.

“Nengwe? Shaha, what d’ya think she wants?”

“I don’t know. I hope I’m doing the right thing. We are doing this right aren’t we?” He peered into the distance. There by a tree on a ridge, silhouetted against the early sun stood a young lioness. “Do you see her Mtundu?”

“Who?”

“I guess not... she’s not really there is she?”

“What, Yali? Yeah I see her, over by that tree.” She stood holding her head up high; looking to the great rock. “If ya wanna know if ya doin’ it right, just take a look. That’s what ya doin’ it for.”

“You do see her! See I told you. I wasn’t making her up, she’s not a dream. She’s really there.”

“Yeah Fuzzbutt, she’s really there. But hey, she’s goin’!”

Yali lowered her head and paced forward. She seemed hurt; her stride was unsteady and broken.

“We can’t reach her Mtundu, let her go.”

Moments later she disappeared behind the crown of the ridge, making off south. In time, the pair followed in her pawfall. From where she had stood, they could see along the length of the eastern ridge. The tracks along much of its length were partly obscured by fresh grass. They passed the pitted valley where Nengwe had blundered upon his first kill for Falana. A little later Falana’s knoll, empty once more, came and went. When the bedrock erupted out of the ridge, rising ragged on their offside, they slowed, moving forward cautiously as they approached the crags of Silent Rocks.

The morning was much like any other. Clouds, patchy and unladen, floated by. Birds chattered, rising in flustered flaps as they passed. Zebra pricked up their ears and turned to the lion before dropping back to graze, unconcerned. In the distance to the south a small group of elephant noisily picked off the fresh flush of young leaves from acacias. From far to the east the

call of a leopard, tight and seemingly strangled to the lion's ear, floated lazily on the air.

"Well," the lion said, trying to sound confident as he came to the outer scattered boulders of Silent Rocks, "here we are." He stood for a moment. There was nothing unusual about the day or the rocks. Together the lion and baboon turned toward the crag, slipping among the rocks. Shaha usually lay sunning herself deep in the formation where the narrow paths between the rocks opened out some tens of lengths. To reach her they had to wind their way through tightening alleys and gullies much as Yali had said about Falana: threading their way through the lioness's mind. It was still a strange concept to Nengwe, but one he was beginning to come to terms with and it calmed him to think on it.

"Nengwe, did I tell ya about this stick Shaha gave me?"

"What stick Mtundu? What about it?"

"Yeah its... well its sorta... I don't know, but its uber cool. I mean its sub zero."

"A stick?"

"Sure. She left it round the corner for me. You know, where she lays around."

"Lays around'? Lionesses like Shaha don't 'lay around' Mtundu, they...." Nengwalamwe stopped dead. His breathing shortened instantly. His ears shot forward. His shoulders tensed and he raised the hair along his spine. He puffed out his mane. His tail began swishing from side to side.

Ahead, on the opposite side of the now much opened space, stood a group of dogs. Their heads down, ears forward, eyes fixed ahead. Mouths slightly open ready to take in lots of air. Three or more in front, more in a narrow arc behind, maybe eight or nine in all. Leading them as they came forward slowly was Elizabeth. To the rear Nengwe could just see a small dark dog, one he did not remember.

Sensing how vulnerable they were from the rear due to the narrow rockbound passage through which they had entered the space, Mtundu jabbed the lion's side with his elbow. The lion looked around. They were surrounded on most sides by high rocks. The only entrances were that through which they had come and another which the dogs covered. Over on the nearside an old wooden stick lay discarded, was that old thing what Mtundu had been going on about? No, enough of that. Back to the business at paw: they had walked right into an ambush, and there was no sign of Shaha or Falana. He turned his head, only to see yet another dog, a burly male, licking his lips as he came up the path behind them.

Mtundu nudged the lion's flank.

Elizabeth stopped and spoke. "About bloody time too. You just don't get it do you lion?"

He tried to look defiant, standing tall. "Get what dog?"

"Yer not wanted 'ere. Why didn't you just leg it when we gave you the chance?"

Mtundu nudged him again.

"Not wanted by who?"

"I don' want you 'ere."

“You don’t want me here?” He noticed the baboon was no longer at his side. He spotted him sidling quietly toward the stick. He hurriedly went on, “Yes, I get that but Falana wants me here, so does Shaha.”

“Falana and Shaha?” Elizabeth’s eyes lit up. “Shaha’s copped it, and Falana’s gone. Oh yeah, sure you look all regal with that... hair an’ everything but face it: no one wants a king that flamin’ eats ‘em. You’re on your lonesome lion!”

The baboon nudged him again. He was back.

“Ah... what about Mtundu?”

“What about ‘im? He ain’t been any help to you for ages.”

“What are you talking about? He’s my friend. You’re lying.”

She edged forward, laying her head over slightly on to her offside, looking at the lion in a curious sideways manner. “Lying? About that waste of space? I’ll tell you about Mtundu. He’s a spy, an’ I don’t mean for you.”

“A spy?” He felt he needed to add a growl for extra effect. “Working for you? Telling you what?”

“Oo, only everywhere you go. Everyone you see. Everything you hear. Everything you say. Heck, we even know where you...”

He snapped a growl at her, “I know about that.”

“Yeah, so do we. I bet you don’t know the half of it. We know about Yali.”

“You keep her out of it! How is it you know?”

“How? The baboon of course. One of those little cheeky buggers no one takes no notice of. So where is she now lion? Where is your little imaginary friend?”

“She’s not imaginary... she’s....”

“Oh come on lion. A lion cub no one’s ever heard of. No one but you ever sees ‘er. Only you ever talk to her. You work it out.”

“But she is real. She lives here.”

“Oh yeah, a lioness called Yali lived ‘ere all right. Right ‘ere, I remember, but she’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yeah, snuffed it right an’ proper. And what about your traitor friend? He’s turned you in again.”

“Hey bitch, I’ve not turned him in. Ya gotta believe me Nengwe.”

Nengwalamwe snatched a quiet aside to the baboon, “don’t worry Mtundu. She’s bluffing.” Raising his head along with his voice, “So Elizabeth, what is this all about?”

“Oh, were here to nick yer: to take you in. We’re going to show the animals all the bad stuff you get up to: eating them and all that, and show ‘em just how little you lions do for them.”

“Take me in?”

“Yeah, I’m glad you like that cave: it’s yer prison. After a day or two in there with us, you’ll wish you’d never been born. After that, we’ll take you out to the northern borders. Break your legs, pull open your belly and leave you out in the sun to die. A few dinners out with the vultures and you’ll be just another pile o’ bones. Either that or we’ll kill you ‘ere.”

“You mean you want me to die?”

“Oh yes, you’ll die: painfully slowly. Crying, pleading with me to finish it. But you know what? I think I’ll stand there and resist that temptation. I’m gonna really enjoy watching you die.”

Nengwe whispered, “Mtundu, I want you to know it’s been good running with you.”

“Eh? ‘Been’, Whatta ya talkin’ about?”

“I can take three, maybe four, and if you were ever serious about wanting to take down a dog; now may be your only chance. This is it Mtundu: we’re going to die.”

“Not...” Mtundu started fidgeting awkwardly. “...if I can do anythin’...” He pulled the stick to him, lifing it in both hands. “...‘bout it.”

“Drop that blasted thing. You’re likely to take someone’s eye out with it.”

Mtundu smiled back. “Wicked. I’m well likin’ that! But Nengwe, stall ‘em. We need more time.”

“Time?” Elizabeth pressed forward. Nengwe raised his shoulders and poked Mtundu’s head with his nose. “We haven’t got any time.”

“Just do it man. Make some. Buy us time damn it.”

Time, how am I going to make more time... Elizabeth called her dogs to order, never taking her eyes off the lion, now less than ten lengths ahead. “Watch your starts everyone. George, thirds; second: just remember to lead first this time.”

Time...

“third and four-five near-, six-seven off-side. ‘Arry ... You’re covering again still, right?”

A string of dog’s hoos clattered off the rock walls from behind the lion and baboon. Ahead the dogs formed up, yelping anxiously behind Elizabeth. Nengwe looked frantically to each side as if he had spotted something. “Wait!”

Five of the dogs slipped out of line behind Elizabeth and turned away to the rear.

“Miss... Elizabeth. Ma’am.”

“What the heck is it now...” She spoke coldly. “...Furball?”

“Can’t we work this out? Isn’t there some way we can settle this maturely... like grown animals?”

“You, a grown animal? Yeah right! Anyway if this other way of yours doesn’t involve you dying then no, we can’t.”

“What? Surely we can end this without yet more bloodshed.”

“The only blood that will be shed is yours lion! Just give it up, you can’t run away this time.”

“I’m not going to run, and you’ll not take me alive.”

“Dead will do. Takes some of the fun out of it maybe, but dead’ll do.”

Suddenly a voice came from behind the lead dogs. A wavering, tired voice. “Elizabeth, now let me talk with him. It’s what we came here for.” The dogs behind quieted and parted.

“Lion, let me introduce you to my mother, Victoria.” Elizabeth pulled to one side, letting her elderly mother come forward. She had once been black, but now was largely silver with age. Her ears and lower legs were clean and bright white. She had clearly never been tall; age had done little to change that.

The lion gazed upon her incredulously. "Queen Victoria? I thought *she* was the imaginary one!"

"No Nengwalamwe," the dark bitch imparted. "Let me assure you we are quite real."

"Ma'am, surely you can see there is no need for all this."

"Ah young Nengwalamwe, it's good to actually meet you after all this time. We've heard so much about you."

"All of it good I hope."

She stopped close to her daughter, who lay at her paws. "Unfortunately no. We've heard all about your comings and goings. We are much amused by your runnings away."

"I'm not running away this time. I'm staying right here. You'll have to take me by force."

"That is indeed most unfortunate. However if it has to be then so be it."

"No Ma'am, it doesn't have to be this way. There is a better way. You, of all... people, must see that this is madness. You, the queen, can stop it. All you have to do is say the word and it stops."

She seemed to consider his words for a moment. Could it be that after all that had happened the madness was about to stop?

"And what then Nengwalamwe? Would you be king? Where would we be then, and my family? What then?" Nengwe made no reply. "No, no it cannot happen. There are traditions to uphold, protocols to follow, agreements and alliances to honour. We can't just let you stay here and raise a family. Unfortunately there's nothing more we can do for you at this time."

Time...

"But your daughter! She's doing all this in your name! She terrorises all the animals. She kills, tortures and she enjoys it!"

The queen once more stood to take in the full force of Nengwalamwe's words.

"Our daughter... ah yes, she does some errr, unsavoury things. That's true." Her eyes darkened and she dropped her head down as if on the hunt. "...But let us tell you this Nengwalamwe: If we were her age we'd do everything she's done and, as your uncultured baboon friend there would say 'and then some'." Seeing nothing from the lion, she eased her head up, turning her ears back. "Now then, if you'll excuse us. It's been a pleasure to talk to you at last. We can't be everywhere. Indeed these last few months we've found it hard to be anywhere for much of the time."

Victoria withdrew stiffly to the rear and evidently in considerable pain. Before she was gone, Elizabeth got up and after a quick scan to see where all her dogs were, she got back to her deadly business. "Right everyone, look to. Lead's going." She started moving forwards slowly, advancing toward the lion once more. "She's... gone!"

Elizabeth's plan had been to take Nengwalamwe alive. She, and her other dogs, knew they could take down a fully grown male lion. They had done it before, but they had had more dogs and had used very different tactics. The dogs were used to tiring out prey that ran from them and then, when they faltered, smothering them while dragging their legs from under them. Taking large prey

relied upon getting a critical mass of dog on to the prey in the shortest time possible.

Prey always ran when they saw the lead dogs coming. So often in their panic they forgot about the dogs to each side. They usually stumbled, exhausted, on to the cover who was often the first to strike. Prey didn't stand its ground, and it never reared up and fell upon the lead dogs as Nengwe was about to do.

Elizabeth moved forward, the second lead at her side, both expecting George to stay behind them in support and to add weight after the strike. Instead he had already slipped off to one side and up on to one of the boulders, knowing that getting on top of the lion was the only way to bring him down. They were not going to tire him out. He was not going to run. Unlike Elizabeth, George had a grudging respect for the lion, he was no ordinary prey, and he wasn't going to play by the rules. They were going to have to take him where he stood. It all depended on where the other dogs were. If they were close, the lion was dead.

"Watch my back Mutt."

Mtundu turned away from the dogs and pressed himself hard to the lion's hindquarters. He felt the lion breathe; taking in what might be his last breaths. He used them to snarl and growl, nothing loud, no great roar, no shows of power, only a sudden and explosive use of it: he reared up and sprang down onto the two lead dogs, his claws fully exposed. The dogs saw him rise and shrank back, one jumping out of the way, the other rolling over on to the ground so that the lion crashed down between them. The dog on her back leapt up at his foreleg, managing to get her teeth high into his shoulder. She bit deep, scrabbling her hindquarters out of the way of the lion's teeth. The other dog moved back, fatally failing to support her.

Above, George sprang from the top of the boulder on to the lion's back. He bravely managed to get his claws and teeth into the thin flesh over the lion's spine, but couldn't gain any hold as the lion writhed under him. Had the other dogs joined the fight at that point they might have succeeded in their plan. Instead the lion caught on to the bitch's flank with his teeth and pulled violently up, tearing her through his muscles. It was beyond pain, it was all life and death in one terrible moment. Swinging the bitch, and shreds of his own flesh, over his head, the bitch's hind legs knocked George hard, sending him flying off the lion.

Mtundu saw the cover leaping at him. He tugged at the end of the stick; it flew up from the ground behind him, hit something with a shuddering crack and sung on over his head, landing inelegantly on the ground before him. The cover stopped, keeping his distance. In the confines of the rock he had no way to close on the baboon and yet keep out of the way of that wooden thing, which had just smashed George's neck.

Still one dog held back. She cowered as the lion threw her companion, still barely alive, at her paws. She could see 'Arry at bay behind and George, or what remained of him on the ground to the side. Where were the side pairs? Why hadn't they attacked? The lion bled profusely from his shoulder and less so from a number of places on his back. The baboon, terrified to be sure, stood undefeated. Where were the others?

Then she saw them, two on a rock to the far side. Their mouths were bloodied; one had a wound to her throat.

Neither lion nor baboon saw them coming. It was a dangerous move, taking advantage of the lion's uninjured flank. The dogs came almost from behind. One thought himself lucky for a moment to knock the baboon over on to his side. The cover boldly took the opportunity presented and came in to the lion's now exposed hindquarter. The three dogs pressed home their strike, forcing the lion to roll on to his side. They ripped at his flank and underfur, but all they had done was to free his rib-crashing hind legs. He cried out in pain, but even now the cowering bitch held firm.

Mtundu, all the breath knocked from him, struggled to his feet, and grabbing the stick, lifted it and smashed into the melee of dog and lion. With claw, tooth and stick the lion somehow managed to rip himself up, and turning round, roared at the three dogs before sweeping into them with his forepaws. He set about them, ripping with his teeth at anything that looked even faintly canid, covering them with his and their own blood mingled in pain and death. When it was done he stood on a dog as it breathed for the last time. He looked over to where the bitch had watched. She was gone. Nengwe collapsed to the ground, knowing that two dogs were still to come. He closed his eyes.

A big voice boomed, "What do you want us to do with this one?"

Nengwe's ear twitched.

Mtundu tried to get up, but sat still, defeated by pain in his ribs. "What are ya doing here Kudlavu?"

"We were just passing."

"Just passing eh? Pull the other one." Mtundu doubled up, gasping for breath.

"We told you we'd cover your back. We can't come in there to you, so what's it to be?"

Nengwalamwe turned his ear round, and then pulled the rest of his head after it. "Hmm," he gasped, "if I were your size I'd do whatever I want, and then some. She's yours; do with her as you will. I have to look after my friend."

The bundle in Kudlavu's trunk shouted, "You'll 'effin' pay for this lion!" The elephant tightened his trunk around the squirming dog. "Mufthrrt..." The dog fell silent.

The two elephants walked backwards until they could turn. Once out of view Nengwe and Mtundu heard a dog's yelp, a bone-snapping crunch and then a dull thud. No one ever saw Elizabeth again.

24. *All You Have to do is Roar*

Deep among Silent Rocks, using routes only she and her mother knew, Falana ran and jumped back to where she had left her mother. Shaha lay amid a pool of blood, much or all of it her own. Falana rushed to her, licking and sniffing at her. Old wounds seeped and new ones ran.

Shaha looked up, and struggled to her paws. "Go help Mtundu. Nengwe can't do it, he's injured too. You have to do it." She stood stiffly and painfully, her shoulder dripping blood. "I'll be alright. I slowed them down didn't I?"

"But mother!"

"We did it, didn't we? I will see another king on Priderock."

"Yes, mother. We did it, the dogs are gone. "

"Go to Nengwe now. He needs you."

"I need you mother. I need you."

"Go on. I'll be all right. I've made... other arrangements."

"Mother, what are you saying?"

"You know. My time here is nearly over. Please Falana, please don't come looking for me. I won't be here."

Falana left, looking back pleadingly at her mother. Shaha shooed her away with loving, but fast fading eyes.

As Falana slipped away, Shaha collapsed, breathing heavily.

Falana rushed back to Nengwe and Mtundu. Nengwe was up, teetering on unsteady legs. Mtundu still lay on the ground. Falana walked over to him and, standing over him, leant down and scuffed him between her teeth. She carried the baboon back to the cave following Nengwe whose progress was agonisingly slow, pausing to catch his breath over and over. The lion dragged himself to the cave and flopped down exhausted, afraid and in pain. Falana set Mtundu gently down beside him. Once the pair had settled to exhausted sleep she got up and went out, back to Silent Rocks.

Falana returned soon after the cloudless dawn. Nengwe was awake but still in the cave in much the same place she had left him. She inspected his wounds. The bleeding had long since stopped. She set about cleaning the worst of the dried blood from him.

"Are you OK Nengwe?"

"No, but I'll survive."

"Look at you! You've been through it, haven't you? Where does it hurt?"

"Where doesn't it, Falana?" The lion looked around anxiously. "Where's Mtundu? I thought he was here. Wasn't he? And your mother?"

"She's gone Nengwe."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"I think she's gone away."

"Why? I don't understand."

“She told me to look after you. She said she’d be alright, but I think she... she just wanted to.... She’s gone Nengwe. Can I lie with you? I don’t want to be alone today.”

“Of course.”

She lay down beside him.

“There’s one more thing. Unfortunately I have to tell you Mtundu...”

“What? Him too? Why did it cost so much blood to end this? If only I had stood up to them sooner. He’d be alive today, and your mother too.”

“Stop beating yourself up about it. Anyway, if you had let me finish I’d have told you he’s going to be all right. He’s outside playing with some stick.”

“He is? He is!” Nengwe tried to stand up, but his near forequarter couldn’t hold him.

“Whoa, steady tiger! Stay still, you’re in no shape to go running about just yet.”

“Shaha’s gone... I’m going to miss her. She taught me everything.”

“Nengwe, she said when we came back here that she had something she had to do: one last thing. I didn’t understand what she meant. When I last saw her, there at Silent Rocks, she said, “it’s done”. I thought she meant the fight, but now I think it was whatever she came here to do. Maybe though, she’s out there still.”

“Maybe Falana she just wanted to let go.”

“Why did she have to go and throw it all away? Why? Why now?”

“I guess she...” Nengwe closed his eyes. “She did it for us, for you. This land is your land, not mine. I’m just the lion from over the mountains: all mane and roar and can’t hunt to save his life.”

“Don’t worry Nengwe, I can hunt for two.” She pressed her flank to him.

Soon they were asleep, both knowing that for the first time their future looked brighter than the past, and that no one, baboon excepted and even expected, would disturb them.

Two days later Mtundu came to the cave at dawn. He stood in the light at the entrance, supporting himself on his stick.

“Wake up, wake up, it’s another great day Fuzzbutt!”

“Mtundu! What are you doing here?”

“Yeah, I guess I am here ain’t I?”

“It’s been a strange few nights for all of us.”

“Strange, yeah. Have you ever tried danglin’ from Falana?”

“No, I can’t say that I have.” Mtundu winced and bent over, breathing painfully. “Does that hurt? Say, where is Falana? Have you seen her?”

Mtundu whispered through grit teeth. “Yeah, it hurts a lot of the time. Less now I can get the weight off some. See I found another use for this thing. Oh and she’s outside, somewhere.” He appeared somewhat worried.

“Mtundu, just get in here and take all that weight off.”

“No Nengwe. Look, they’re here.”

“Who?”

“Those ‘few’ friends I told you about who want to see their new king.”

“New king? Who’s that? No, they were meant to be here to see me die, but I guess they don’t know that. Well if they really want to see me they’ll have to come in.”

Mtundu was cagey, “Ah, it ain’t that easy. There’s a few more than a few.”

“Come on, are you saying this cave isn’t big enough? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Errrrr, well...”

“It’s not? OK... so they can stand outside on the rock.”

Mtundu tried to show bigger by opening his arms wide. The pain struck him and he abandoned the attempt.

“No? So where will they fit? How many are there?”

“A lot. A real lot. They’re outside.”

“A lot? How many are ‘a lot’?”

“A lol’a lot.”

“Real more than a few?”

“Oh ya, more than a few, many more than a lot. A lot more than a lot I’d say. Come on, get that fur off your paws and come on. It’s a great morning and it’s all yours.”

Nengwe shook his head, thinking it’s all too much for any lion in the morning, and anyway what was Falana up to? He got up, stretched as best he could and haltingly followed Mtundu’s uneven footfall out of the cave and into the glare of dawn. Soon they were out on to the promontory.

Falana slipped north out of Silent Rocks just after midnight. She barely saw the animals of all species moving with one unknown purpose. She had spent much of the time walking against the flow. All acknowledged her, none but a very few talked to her. She found some dried blood, leading away to the north and followed the spatters but the trail soon ran cold.

She turned back to the rock; it was now little before dawn, the air still and minutely damp. She saw more blood, fresher this time, smeared over the ground, and a drip trail leading away. Whose was it? Could it be her mother’s? If it were, which way had she passed, to or from Silent Rocks? How old was it? All she knew was that the trail led toward the great rock and all the animals gathering round it. The trail faded and vanished but the lioness carried on into the throng which parted all around to let her pass as the dawn approached. There were animals of every kind everywhere Falana looked, but she saw few of them: she was focussed only on finding her mother.

Approaching the foot of the boulder path she saw the elephants, all of them. She recognized Kudlavu, who knelt before her. The others clustered closely, all kneeling.

“Falana, they’re waiting for you. You’d best not keep your Nengwalamwe waiting.” She looked back blankly before walking on. Kudlavu called after her, “And don’t forget your mother told you she will see another king on this great rock. She’ll keep her word, but remember: don’t go looking for her.”

'She'll keep her word: keep, not kept. She will see another king: will see.'

Falana smiled and after a few moments' quiet reflection climbed to the promontory.

"Ok, Mtundu, so where are they all? I can't see anyone..."

Mtundu stopped Nengwe mid sentence by holding the stick up vertically in front of him and shaking it, the shadows dancing on the rock in the silence of dawn. He lowered it to horizontal and pointed to the overhanging tip of the promontory. Nengwe looked towards the eastern plain. Mtundu shook the stick again, "You want me to go over there? OK, OK."

The lion stepped forwards, Mtundu motioned him on. Nengwe smiled and looked back to see Falana climbing on to the promontory. She returned his smile. Nengwe beckoned her forwards. She shook her head. Mtundu bowed before her, a shallow bow made all the more significant by the pain she knew he must be feeling.

"Come on, don't just stand there. Join me! Please Falana; I'm not doing this alone."

Mtundu almost doubled up with pain. He took a few deep breaths, the pain subsided somewhat. He drew himself back up, supporting himself on the stick.

"Me Nengwe? They don't want to see me, they want you. You're the king."

"What? I'm not the one who was born here. You belong here. I'm just an overner."

"Eh?"

"From over the mountains. You, Falana, you belong here. This is your moment more than it's mine. We'll just go to the tip, look out and come straight back. That's all."

Falana nodded a little dubiously, "Well, if you're sure..." She walked forward to Nengwe's side; he tracked her with his eyes all the way. He nuzzled her. She pressed her flank to his. They walked forward together.

As they reached the tip Nengwe forgot about the turning and for a moment lost his sense of balance. He felt the world begin to sway as if he might fall as all around were the animals. He felt a steadying arm around his neck and a warm body pressed to his side.

"Just remember who you are."

Mtundu came forward to the very tip of the rock and fussed about in front of them. "Er, I don't know how this goes. I gotta smear this stuff on ya... and, err... well, it's meant to be for cubs she said."

"What are you blabbering about Mtundu?"

"I still can't stand so close to ya mouth Falana. It's not natural, ya know?"

Falana stretched her head forward and flashed her swiping tongue along Mtundu's outstretched arm. "There, does that make you feel any better?"

"Not in front of this lot. Please, I have rep ya know." He crept forward and reached up to Nengwe's nose; the lion dropped his head. Mtundu smeared the juicy concoction on his forehead as Falana watched on proudly. Mtundu then

turned and nodded to her. She blinked in surprise, but Mtundu held his gaze, she too dropped her head.

“All you two have to do is roar and they’ll all go away, but make it good. They are expecting a king and queen not a pair of cubs.”

“Just one roar?”

“Yeah Nengwe... one is enough, from both of ya mind.”

Mtundu stepped away leaving them alone at the tip of the rock. Nengwe looked around, marvelling at the throng below. He looked to Falana by his side, smiled at her broadly, a twinkle in his eye matched in her’s. “Together?”

“Oh yes Nengwe. Together.”

“Look everyone! We’re here, and don’t you forget it!” The pair roared strongly and louder and more together than ever before.

As Nengwe walked unsteadily back down the rock he felt light headed and distant as though all of the events of the morning had happened to someone else and that he had just been an onlooker: one of the crowds caught up in the euphoria of the moment. Yet in all of the excitement he felt a void, Shaha had not lived to see a lion king presented once again. He stopped and, amid the tumult rising up from below, closed his eyes to see Shaha once again. There she stood, serious as ever, on the rock before him. She had never to his knowledge stood on the rock, yet there she stood over the point where the rocks had once covered the entrance to the cave. Two others came from the shadows behind to stand beside her: Melakwe and Talashi; all three lost, gone from his life forever. He smiled gently, remembering, then they were gone and the rock was empty once more. He knew that they would never leave him; he could recall a vision of them whenever he needed to remind himself of who he really was - Nengwe, plain old Nengwe. His smile slipped as they left him.

“Are you all right Nengwe?”

“Yes. I was just remembering.” He swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment more but only darkness covered him.

“Are you sure? Look, I’ll go back now, if you’re OK. Mtundu’s looking pretty shaky. I’ll go and see how he’s doing.”

“Of course I am. It’s all so incredible, all this, the animals down there.” Nengwe stood as Falana walked off into the cave. Then he turned and ran to the tip again and looked down. The animals were beginning to disperse, but some saw him and up came a wave of sound. He surveyed the scene for a while, then turned to head back to the cave. He was momentarily blinded by the full glare of the sun on the rock of the cave mouth. Something caught his eye. Below, on the boulders leading to the promontory was another vision, a young lioness that he had thought he might never see again. Her presence filled him with a warm feeling of pride. He thought that she must have seen the short ceremony; the origins of which Nengwe could not even begin to comprehend. Then he realised that at last she could meet Falana who was just a few lengths away in the cave.

“Yali! What are you doing here?” he called joyfully. “It’s great you could come!”

“Nengwe? Who are you talking to?” asked Falana from within.

“Yali, she’s just over there,” he said pointing his nose towards boulders.

“No she’s not. She’s... Look, just come back in here. I think all this is going to your head. Come down before you fall down.”

Nengwe stared at Yali who just smiled back at him.

“Go on Nengwe, go to Falana. I saw you back there. You don’t need me anymore. And hey...”

“Yes Yali?”

“Falana is what all this is about. Right rocks Nengwe, just the wrong river. You said it yourself.”

“Nengwe? Come on!” called Falana. “You can’t be talking to her. My mother’s gone, don’t you remember?”

Nengwe glanced at Falana, pleading with her with his eyes. She replied with an agitated flick of her tail and an unsubtle twitch of her left ear as she stared back at him. He was uncertain as to what to do. He turned away from Falana and back to Yali, dropping his head to show his mane flowing over his shoulders. She called gently to him.

“I’ll be just fine. I’m a big cub now. I can’t stay, I’ve got to go.” Then she turned and bounded away down the boulders. Nengwe smiled, lifting his head and drawing forward to go to Falana. A few seconds later he was back by her side.

“What was that all about? Who were you talking to Nengwe?”

“Oh, just that cub Yali, you know the one who found me and brought me here to you.”

“Yali? Oh, I thought you said a cub.”

“Yeah, of course she’s a cub. Surely you’ve met her. She knows you.”

“Met her? A cub called Yali? You got to be kidding me? There are no lion cubs here... yet, but I know a Yali.”

“You do?”

“You do too: my mother. She wasn’t always called Shaha you know.”

Nengwe looked at Falana incredulously. The unbelievable thoughts that flooded him made him feel unsteady once more.

“She was born Nyala. Her family always called her Yali. She was the last of the great pride that lived here, on this rock, in this cave. She was born here, right here.”

“She was here Falana. She saw it all, she said so.” Falana looked puzzled. “Your mother was here to see our presentation.”

“Yes Nengwe, I think she was. I think that’s what she came here to do: to make you king.”

“Me? I’m no one. She couldn’t have known I would come along. I know it’s not me that matters: it’s you. This is your land, not mine. She told me so. I just came along for the ride.”

“Wait the pair of ya! There’s load o’stuff your mother knew, tons o’stuff she did. Did ya ever stop to think about what she *didn’t* tell ya?” Nengwe and Falana looked blank. “Come on you two; let’s get out of this sun. I don’t feel so good.”

“Falana?”

“Yes Nengwe?”

“If, and I just mean if, we have cubs, will they be born here?”

“Later Nengwe, later.”

25. *Full Circle*

Nengwalamwe paused and looked back, smiling. A few lengths behind his elegantly groomed dark tail tip a cub was struggling to keep up with his father. As Nengwalamwe looked on the cub paused and started to sniff about, unsure as to the nature of the new world that lay all around it.

“Wait up! Do you want to wear them out on their first day off the rock?” came a voice from some way behind the rise.

Nengwalamwe, the proudest father the Pridelands could offer, turned his head easily to watch his cub. He seemed so small and yet so unafraid, as if he had no idea of the dangers of the world. Nengwalamwe’s pride fell, his pleasure at the sight of his own first cub turned to dread fear. He was a father and it was his responsibility to see that his cubs, both of them, lived to become lions and lionesses as strong and healthy as he and their mother, Falana.

Where was little Yalima? They were no further than two strikes away from Priderock and he had already lost one of his cubs. What was he to do? Leave Nengwa alone and go back? Pick him up and carry him between his rhino-hide piercingly sharp teeth? He lifted his head and looked deeper along the rise. A rustling ripple floated across as the grass caught the faintest of breezes then nothing as the heat shimmered over the paper-dry grasses once more. Yalima: “Little Yali” Falana had said it meant. Little Yali... now there was a name.

She must have been in great pain after the birth as she had mumbled something about naming her after her grandmother. Even now she was growing more like another lioness every day, but like Shaha? No, surely not. The lion looked down at his son sitting at his foreleg. Just maybe there was something of her in him too. Nengwalamwe missed her and perhaps more so the cub he met in the mountains. Young Yali: The cub that brought him here. The cub who none but himself ever....

“Nengwe, is Nengwa with you? I can’t see him? I’ve lost him already. I don’t know what to do, I can’t leave these two here!” Falana’s voice was distant but that could not disguise the fear it carried.

Nengwalamwe’s spirit rose when he heard Falana’s call, for he now realised that he shared that fear with her. He now knew that he would never really be certain that he was doing the right thing by his cubs. What parent ever could? He, like every other parent was simply doing the best he could and none could ever do more.

‘Cubs have to grow up,’ he thought, ‘and I’ve got to let them grow, help them and watch over them. I can’t grow up for them.’ His smile broadened. ‘...and they can’t grow up for me.’

“Yes, Fal, he’s with me - for a moment there I thought I’d lost you two.”

“Is that right? For a moment there I thought you two males had run off and left us lionesses to fend for ourselves, isn’t that right Yalima?”

As Nengwalamwe dropped down close to Nengwa, who seemed quite unconcerned with anything, the two, father and son, pricked an ear each to a small ‘meaaarrrr’ which could almost have been Yalima agreeing with her mother. If she had been a little older that is....

“Mother, are we there yet?”

“No, not yet Yalima.” Falana looked down to the cub by her off forepaw. “We’re only at Silent Rocks, there’s a way to go yet.”

“Can me and Nengwa run on a bit?”

The lioness looked up, narrowing her eyes, “Hmmm, what do you think Nengwe?”

“Yes, all right. Just don’t talk to any strange lions, you hear?”

“Nengwe!”

“I’m serious kids, don’t go so far that you can’t call to us, you hear? And don’t talk to anyone, you understand? Stay safe like we told you: if you see any leopards you come straight back.”

“Or hyenas right Dad?”

Nengwalamwe smiled lightly. “Yeah, that’s right. Go on now.” He turned to Falana, his smile broadening. “I guess these rocks aren’t so silent now with our lot around.”

“It’s been a long time since these rocks heard cubs.” Falana dropped her head. “You know we ought to rename them now.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. What about Lizzie’s Folly?”

“No Nengwe. I don’t think she deserves any memorial.” Nengwe nodded, the smile dropping from his fur-soft mouth. “But there is someone who does.”

“Shaha?”

“Yes, and it couldn’t be more appropriate.”

Nengwe saw their cubs prance-pouncing away through the dry grasses. He shook his head lightly. “Oh, they’re OK” he said under his breath. “Why?”

“Nengwe, do you know why she liked it here so much?”

“No, of course not Falana. She never told me. I was only just beginning to get to know her.”

“Yali, and she was Yali then, only her grandmother called her by her full name, Nyala. She’d sit up there...”

“There?”

“No, the lower one; just there. She’d lay there, her head resting on her tucked and crossed forelegs, her earmarks framing her against the flaming sky, and tell us stories in the sunset, just as her mother had, and hers before. Our voices echoed around these rocks.” Nengwe looked on quietly in the late afternoon light. “One by one we all went away. We grew up. Some died. The males moved away. Then there was no one to tell stories to. These rocks fell silent, and Yali began calling herself Shaha: the storyteller, perhaps just to remember. It wasn’t very long before those memories became too much for her and so we left for the south.”

“Falana, this place, Shaha’s Rest... it doesn’t have to stay silent.”

Falana thought for a moment: a flood of memories, none as bad as she feared.

“I couldn’t. I’m not my mother. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Oh yes, it would be right Falana: ‘just as her mother, and hers before’. That’s what you just said.”

“Well, maybe.” She looked over Nengwe; back out towards their great rock. He had almost given up when she quietly went on, “Do you know ‘The Lion in the Moon’?”

“No, I... I don’t know that one.”

“I think I can still just about remember it. I remember my mother telling it right there see, so many times. It was one of her favourites.”

“Then Falana, I think it’s time it was told again.”

Ahead the ground opened out onto a wide treeless area of low hills. A young lion walked out to a tiny knoll in amongst long grasses. He looked around, standing as tall as his pain would allow. Neither seeing, hearing, nor smelling any signs of danger, he drooped down to the ground exhausted. In a few minutes he was asleep for the first time since the high mountainside.

He blearily opened his eyes.

“Hey, are you a lion?”

Where was the voice coming from? Who was it? He looked around; his shoulders ached. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I... I don’t want anything. I’m no one.”

The lion lay still for a moment then lifted his head and yawned. ‘Cub?’ he thought, ‘Yes, that’s a cub. Now where is she?’ He scanned the long grass around the knoll. Whoever the cub was, she was well hidden.

“Where are you?”

“I’m... I’m not over here.”

“Come out. I won’t hurt you.”

“No, I can’t. You might... might want to kill me, chase me and kill me.”

“No, I won’t. I can’t.”

There was something, a pained tension in the lion’s voice that led the cub to believe him.

“You can’t kill me?”

“Maybe that I can, but I can’t chase you.” He paused, looking down, “I’m very tired, and I can’t run far.”

“Why?”

“It’s OK. I’m not ill. Its, well it’s an old wound.”

The cub broke cover to the lion’s left while still holding back. She looked puzzled.

“See? Here on my haunch.” He rolled over to expose his off side. The cub moved forward a little.

“It’s OK. Here take a look if you don’t believe me.” The cub moved closer still, close enough for the lion to have lunged for her. He didn’t. She was now close enough for him to smell her. There was something in her scent that reminded the lion of someone... but whom? She noticed something about him too.

“Who are you?”

“My names Talashi, but my family call me Tashi.”

“Can I call you Tashi too?”

“If you like. Where are the rest of you?”

“What rest of me? Oh.... you mean my pride don’t you?”

“Yeah, like I said: the rest of you.”

“My father...” The cub looked a little sad and alone, “He’s not here right now.”

The cub sniffed at the lion’s wound. It was old, unevenly healed, and long, running down almost the full length of his off thigh.

“Not here? Where is he? Are you lost?”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, not all the time. It does now.” Now it was the lion’s time to be afraid. “Is your father nearby?”

A call sounded, close and clear, “Yalima?”

“Yes Tashi, he’s nearby. Are you going to be OK? I’ve got to go.”

Talashi had come a long way. It had been a hazardous, arduous journey. He had got lost more than once. He had led all that remained of his pride to this place. His mate, lightly with cub, lay resting, all but exhausted, at the edge of the trees. The void had claimed his mother high on the mountainside. He had got his mate this far, only to lead her into terrible danger into some pride’s territory and now that pride’s male was bearing down on him. Maybe he could somehow lead him off, giving her a chance to get away.

The cub ran off. Talashi could barely stand, let alone fight. He wondered if his father’s words, “No one who asks for help deserves it” were really true. If so he was in deadly trouble.

The next few minutes were confused for Talashi. His haunch shot him through with piercing pain. His tiredness blurred everything. Sounds floated through him. He lay down, his final reserves of energy, determination and spirit gone. He heard muffled voices, confused and fragmentary, “...and didn’t I tell you not to talk to strange lions...?”, “...he’s not strange... smells like you.” He waited for the lion to come and kill him.

“Tashi? Come on, you’ve got to get up, we’ve got to get you home.”

Talashi showed no sign of movement, indeed little sign of any life at all. Nengwe ran his nose over the lion’s cheek, sniffing the slumped form and feeling for movement with his whiskers. Then he licked his lion’s neck with the tip of his tongue, but there was no response from the still warm flesh below.

Yalima nuzzled the lion, “Yeah Talashi, come on. You can get up. Please.”

The lion opened an eye; barely, but definitely open. He thought for a moment he saw his mother.

“Mother? I thought we’d lost you.”

Falana was surprised, and worried for him. He was clearly very weak and delirious. He seemed in very poor condition, but still carried a ghost of athleticism: tall but strongly built. “I’m not your mother. My name is Falana.”

“Melakwe? Help me,” the lion said weakly, with all the little hope he had left.

“Melakwe?” asked Nengwe incredulously.

“Later Nengwe, later,” said Falana seriously. “This lion need our help. Who is he?”

Nengwe really couldn’t believe what he was about to say: “He’s Talashi.” Here, on the very edge of the Pridelands, was, well, it simply couldn’t be happening. He lay down, supporting the lion’s head gently with his shoulder. “He’s... he’s my brother.”

Yalima and Nengwa gathered round their parents, and now, their uncle. Soon, they would gather in the sunset shadow of Shaha's Rest to hear the story.

As night drew in under a new moon; to find food for her family, the huntress set out once more.

Afterword

The *Huntress at Sunset* started as an idea for a story I shared with my friend David Morris in an email in late 1997. I still have a copy of that email.

My idea was to follow a few characters intensely, to get into their heads and under their skins, over a period of weeks rather than to range wide over many more over years. David challenged me to write something, anything that my main character, then the unnamed young lion was up to, "What is he doing now?" In an hour or so I wrote back with what was eventually become the opening of "Llasani".

For a while we overflowed with ideas, wrote sketches, outlined chapters and worked them up. It couldn't last forever, but did last for a few years, then my life changed and I put it to one side... for a long time. Every now and again I'd read and edit a bit of it: some parts over and over. After a while I'd put it to one side again. The last time that happened was in 2005 when I put about two thirds of it online for a short time under its original title, *Visions of The Pridelands*. My life was then in turmoil and I felt that as I hadn't finished my journey in life I couldn't finish Nengwe's.

It then rested, unread, on my various computers for years. Abandoned but not forgotten. I had always had the feeling that it deserved to be read, but over the years I had lost sight of who would want to read it. Nengwalamwe and Falana, however, never quite took their claws out of me and insisted on their story being heard.

It was another change of my life that prompted me to finally finish *Visions of The Pridelands*. I took out almost all that linked it back to my earlier writings. Out too went almost all that harked back to Disney's *The Lion King* which was the original inspiration for my writing. I refocused on the main story, that of Nengwalamwe and Falana. During this process I also changed the title, mainly to draw attention to that central aspect of the story. Who then is the huntress at sunset? It could be Shaha or even Melakwe, but no, it is Falana. Maybe not the real Falana; it is Nengwalamwe's vision of perfection, his ideal lioness.

What kind of story is "Huntress"? It's not a romance, it's not tragedy, it's not comedy, it's not detective fiction, nor a drama. What it is, I realise after all these years, is actually a western: an anthropomorphic fantasy western. Nengwalamwe is the young stranger who rides into a corrupt declining mining town from over the mountains. He's the son of a locally infamous gunslinger, who no one's ever heard of anywhere else. Unlike his father, he isn't keen to use his guns, and is run out of town. He gets on a train but something makes him get off and go back. You know it's going to end in a shoot-out. You know he's going to win over the heart of the local backwoods woman whose elderly mother was taken in by the local native people as a child and learned their ancient wisdom and culture. You know Nengwe will become the sheriff and in time will successfully run for mayor. You know there will be spectacular sunsets and lone trees and dusty trails, but then technically much of western USA is savannah.

It took a long time getting here, but I do hope you have enjoyed *The Huntress at Sunset*: a story that started life as a "next generation" fan-fiction idea but which grew up into something else; much as Nengwalamwe himself had to do.

Some Notes for Lion King Fans

Is this a *Lion King* fan-fiction story? No? If so, then what is it? At first sight no characters from *The Lion King* or its sequels appear nor are any even mentioned. There actually are some in this story, deeply buried. That means all the characters that you do meet are original. I want you to get to know them as individuals in their own right. I want the story to be about them, not about any of the characters of the films.

I started writing this story before *Lion King 2: Simba's Pride* was released. I had already written my own sequel, in pseudo-script form, to *The Lion King*. In that script, called *The Pridelands*, I created my own version of the pridelands.

I gave Simba and Nala three cubs, Nyala, Zenani and Thembekile: commonly known and Yali, Zeni and Thembi. As a twist – all the cubs in fan-fiction until then had been assumed to be male - I wanted the cub I used as the main story driver to be a female: Yali. As I had two daughters I decided to give her a sister, Zeni, and modelled as them on my children as they were at that time. Thembi was there because the new cub seen at the end was assumed to be male by the directors and others working on *Lion King*. Three cubs were also unusual for fan-fiction at the time, but I had no problem with it as it fitted with my more naturalistic approach. Yali has appeared in a number of my stories at various ages. In *The Pridelands* she was young, in *Tales at Sunset* she was equivalent to a mid teen in human terms. In *Huntress* she appears in what would be for real lions very old age... in fact she appears as all these ages at one point or another.

So I carried on, for the most part ignoring the sequels. I had already, by giving my Simba and Nala a female cub of primary significance, and in my sequel making the antagonist a disturbed female closely related to Scar, his mother in my case, predicted some of the route Disney went down with their sequels. I did that very much against the accepted expectations of the fan community and the fan-fiction it had already generated. I did not, and still do not feel any need to hack my writing to fit what happened later.

All that may not fit your idea of what “canon” is. It fits mine, which doesn't include the sequels or the *Six New Adventures*, which were around but not available to me and are not internally self-consistent in any case, and I really don't mind if you cannot handle that.

This story was inspired by *The Lion King* and plays out in its setting. I use many *Lion King* concepts, that of presentation, and that Shaha, through a certain old stick, is the repository of Rafiki's knowledge for example. So I repeat, is this a *Lion King* fan-fiction story? Yes... and no. It's a work of original fiction, albeit set in the world first seen in another story, but as I established in *The Pridelands* it's not a fantasy world, it's our “real” world, seen from a different viewpoint.

Being our world brings certain unexpected advantages, and problems. The advantages include my ability to make “magic” happen without magic. In my *Lion King* world Mufasa survived the stampede, and lived to rule again alongside his son, and grandson. Yet it wasn't some “alternative universe” story, it was a continuation of *The Lion King* that created a plausible Mufasa survival scenario through the timely off-screen intervention of us: humans; humans that had a purpose unrelated to the story told by *The Lion King*. That purpose, the attempted re-introduction of captive bred African wild dogs into the wild, accounts for a lot, in particular why the dogs in this story have English, specifically North London, accents. Re-introduction of dogs is a difficult task in reality due in no small part to the highly complex nature of wild dog society and behaviour, much of which, including hunting techniques, is learned in the wild from one generation to the next and so is almost totally lacking in captive bred dogs. This helps to account for why the dogs have somehow risen to the top in this story.

So, why is this version of the pridelands so empty? Where have all the lions gone? This is something I do touch on in the story, and in an earlier version explain in greater detail. Why did I get rid of all that? In part it was because it was a distraction and dilution of the main story. Partly it was because it was potentially very harrowing and difficult to accept for *Lion King* fans. The cold facts are that in 1994, the very year *The Lion King* was released, an outbreak of canine distemper virus of exceptional virulence swept through the lions of the Serengeti, killing one third of the population of about 3000 lions. Much like the Black Death in humans centuries before, it wiped out entire prides, while leaving others almost unscathed. In my stories the dogs were immune, having been inoculated while in captivity. The dogs are not the carriers, jackals

and hyenas were, just as they probably were in our real world in 1994. The lion the human shoots; puts out of his misery if you will; is in the final phase of this terrible disease. He is also *The Lion King's* Mufasa. The vet who shot him is the one who saved him in the gorge, and if it's any consolation, he went back to his car and threw up in the earlier version. It would not have been easy for fans to deal with that. It's really tough and hard to accept. Hard even to accept that a disease, one of dogs, could play any part in *The Lion King* world, but in my version it does, as do other illnesses and animal weaknesses as well as their strengths.

Many *Lion King* fan-fiction stories start with a weasel worded disclaimer, followed swiftly by a paragraph that describe the appearance of a character. I don't do either. Indeed I never describe any of my characters in any depth. If you have an idea of what Nengwe looks like then you have formed it for yourself in your imagination, and that's exactly what I want you to do. I don't describe Falana either, but I do give little hints about her, in particular about the way she moves, that and that she has "loin aching beautiful emerald eyes." I tell you how Nengwe is proud of his mane, and, at least at first, spends a lot of time cleaning and grooming it. In contrast I spend a lot of time getting the story going. Indeed no says anything at all in the opening and first chapter. I confess that's a mistake I probably wouldn't make now. I'd get the story going a lot faster.

I have a very well developed sense of point of view, even for conventional fiction, and well beyond anything seen in fan-fiction. I use it to hopefully produce all sorts of emotional effects in my readers. Point of view is a lot more than just simple first person, third person stuff. It's more like the camera angles and shots of film and TV. For most of this story I adopted a very close over the shoulder third person point of view alongside Nengwe or occasionally Shaha. The reader sees and hears everything he does, and its close enough to allow the reader to hear his thoughts. I think of this as the "riding with" shot often used in coverage of motorsport. You see the race from that driver's perspective and even may hear his team radio. I use this mainly to invite the reader to identify with Nengwe and to get them deeply involved in the story. It gives a "you are there" feeling. I hope you are almost able to smell Nengwe at times; something that in reality would be impossible and frankly far from pleasant. When I adopt any other point of view, for example Falana's, it's not so close, not being able to hear their thoughts. The point of view rules I set myself initially didn't allow me to follow the dogs, or even Mtundu. We see them through the eyes of the lions. When I finally came to write the final part I realised that I needed to change that to allow the reader to see more of the dogs, in particular their planning in the run up to the final showdown. This gives at one point the same timeframe from three different viewpoints: Nengwe's, Shaha's and the dogs. I also play some specific point of view tricks with Shaha and Yali.

I have worked hard for a long time to make my reported speech distinctive and natural. I want the reader to know who is talking without constantly telling them with "said so-and-so". This allows my dialogue to flow and hopefully to be easy to read. For the record, "said Nengwalamwe" or "said Nengwe" occurs only twice, and never on its own. Two character conversations are simple enough, but three and more way does get tricky. It's about each character having distinct speech patterns and vocabulary, as well as accent. It's all about creating believable characters rather than stamping them out with a cookie cutter.

I write in the traditional English style, which is character led. The story comes out of who the characters are, rather than the characters coming from the plot. That sometimes means that the characters didn't always do what I wanted them to; they took me on some interesting side journeys at times. I also use foreshadowing and other literary devices fairly extensively. The story starts "in medias res", i.e. jumping into the middle of part of the story; using good ol' flashback to resolve it later. The weather and location often both reflect and drive Nengwe's moods; this is an example of so-called pathetic fallacy. I also sprinkle a fair amount of imagery and allegory, particularly within the story itself. So the cave on the rock is important to Nengwe, and its opening and the subsequent hunt are about much more than clearing rubble and hunting.

What is in a name? It's long been a convention to use Swahili, or less commonly, Zulu words as names in *The Lion King* based fan-fiction. I've read it advised, and assumed to be the norm in many places. I have never gone with that, it's not how I generally create names. I like names to be names. Nyala is a Zulu word... probably. It's a type of forest dwelling larger antelope. They're fairly unusual, but they do appear in some zoos. I happen to rather like them. I shortened it to Yali.

Shaha though is a Swahili word that means “storyteller”. She is a shaha. I chose it as I wanted it to be given to her by Rafiki, who uses Swahili in *The Lion King*. I named her sister and brother, Zenani and Thembekile after Nelson Mandela’s first children as I had recently read his inspiring autobiography: *Long Walk to Freedom*. I used the familiar versions he used: Zeni and Thembi. But of course Nelson Mandela is not a Zulu, he is Xhosa. The two are closely related linguistically and geographically. In Zulu Thembi appears to be used as a girls’ name, in Xhosa culture it’s for boys. I don’t know why. Neither have anything to do with Swahili, which is in a different language group.

Falana is a name I made up. It sounded right to me, suitably (north) African and sensual, having overtones of Nala. I can’t remember where Mtundu came from, it might well be Dave’s, as his father’s certainly is, Utawala, but neither means anything: they are just names. Mtundu shortens to Mutt, which Dave and I used often between us in discussions, but only once or twice in the story. He uses many various less than flattering terms to refer to Nengwe, including Fuzzbutt, as due to an obvious physical characteristic of baboons, Nengwe calls him Baldarse. Nengwe’s parents’ and brother’s names: Melakwe, Nengwala and Talashi are also meaningless. I made them up on the fly while writing. As is usual in many cultures I use appropriate short, familiar, nickname version of most of the names. This is something I’ve done right from the start of my *Lion King* fan-fiction writing, though few other fan-fiction writers do.

I enjoyed coming up with Kudlavu. It is reminiscent of the Zulu word for elephant: Ndlovu and yet has its own character. Llasani is a character I particularly enjoyed naming. She needed a feminine name, in leonine terms that is, but where does that double L come from? I confess that was a dig I took at the Swahili naming convention. Llasani is not a Swahili name, and it doesn’t mean anything, yet it means a lot to me. Zulu is a “click” language and it has three distinct click sounds, rendered in our roman letters as lh, lq and if I remember rightly, lz. Xhosa has even more; indeed xh in the word “Xhosa” is a click. Ll is none of these sounds however. So what is it? It’s simple, at the time I was working for a company based in south Wales. Ll is a sound that as far as I am aware is almost unique to Welsh. Llasani comes from the south Wales valleys, the Rhondda probably, and is the kind that, were she human, would get trashed every Friday night in Swansea. Meeting her could be as big a mistake for you as it was for Nengwalamwe, and possibly for pretty much the same reason.

So Nengwalamwe, where did his name come from? It’s not Swahili. It’s not Zulu or Xhosa, though nengwe is a word in both. What does it mean? The *Lion King*’s Lebo M translates it as “tiger”, elsewhere its “leopard”. Most commonly and in most learned sources it translates as any generic “big cat”, hence could be used for either tiger or leopard. It’s the root of ngonyama, one of the many Zulu words for lion, others including mbube (which is the form to use when addressing a lion: not exactly common in real life, but would be the right word to use in many places in this story such as in, “Lion, let me introduce you to my mother.”), ihbubeshi and isilo, which both carry a lot of respect and cultural weight. So Nengwe is a “big cat”, and that’s what he is for me, a big house cat rather than one of the big cats. His short name is simple and “friendly”, but he needed a longer, more complicated name; a right mouthful in fact. I wanted it to be awkward to say, both for us and the other characters, so I added some African-esque nonsense syllables to get Nengwalamwe, of which, like his mane, he’s inordinately proud. For good measure I often let him give his full name as “Nengwalamwe, son of Nengwala”. I use his transition from that through Nengwalamwe to plain Nengwe to mark his personal changes.

Finally I must mention the dogs. Their names are of course English. Most of them were once captive; probably in Britain. There’s more however. You may have noticed they are not just any English names, they are English monarchs’ names: kings and queens. Even the short lived Jane: Lady Jane Grey, hence the colouration of her dog counterpart. There’s even a Mary, queen of spots, and the reclusive queen, who else could she be other than Victoria?

Yet with all this, my characters are not lions. No anthropomorphic characters are what they appear to be. These “animals” are all humans with animal skins on. I like to make those skins thick and as convincing as I can but under that skin they are as human as you or I. I try to make them concerned about the things that they should be as the animals they appear to be. I know that in the past some readers have not been able to get their head around the differences in their world to how they assume (often wrongly I have to add) our own is. I regard it as a point of honour to give my characters their own animality, analogous to our humanity, but different. Not worse: different. They don’t share our morality or live in our social structure and they face very different problems and solve them using methods alien to us. My characters don’t have anything

that is recognisable as religion or spirituality, not even the “great kings of the past” stuff from *The Lion King*; they have more than enough just dealing with the harsh realities of life to worry about all that. There is, of course, something of that simmering under *The Huntress at Sunset*, indeed its key to the drive of the story but it’s not in the foreground. I don’t expect, nor indeed want, everyone to be able to cope with these ideas, rather radical as they are in the *Lion King* context.

The Huntress at Sunset is what we brits call a “marmite story”: you either love it or you hate it. If you’ve read this far, and aren’t simply reading the last few pages to see how it ends, you probably love it. Thank you for reading and letting me take you on Nengwalamwe’s journey.

Chris Boyce, February 2012.