

Coming soon in 2012

This is a sample of

The Huntress *At Sunset*

A novel by
Chris Boyce with Dave Morris

“...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.

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THE HUNTRESS AT SUNSET:

The Mountains

Part 1. *Alone and Free*

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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

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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 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

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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.

Part 1: Alone and Free

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 un-matted. 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

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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 steadying 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

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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

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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

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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.

The Huntress at Sunset

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

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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.’