

A family reunited

by

BlueWolfStoryteller

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Part one: The Journey

Setting the scene

A couple of weeks had passed since Vitani and Nassor had left their home in the Pridelands. Nassor was the son of Ni and his second mate Kula. Ni had arrived in the Pridelands with his daughter Aketch a few months after Kopa had been born. Ni had lost his first mate Katlogo during the drought not long after Aketch had been born. His eldest daughter Majani had left their old home with a pride of rouges shortly after Katlogo had died. Her act and the drought had forced Ni and Aketch to seek a new life.

Time had passed Ni and Kula had fallen in love. Their son Nassor had been born at a similar time to Kiara, Kovu and Vitani. Shortly after the four had been born Imoo, Scar and Zira's son had betrayed the Outsider and joined the Simba's pride. In the battle that followed his treachery Scar had been killed. In his dying gasps Scar had proclaimed Zira's son Kovu as his heir, in doing so forgiving Zira for having cubs with a rough male. Months later Kopa and Imoo had gone to the jungle to help a leopard prince retake his kingdom, which had resulted in both lions staying in the jungle.

Now over two years on the war between the prides had ended and Imoo and Kopa had returned to the Pridelands. In the aftermath of their return a long held secret had been revealed to Simba,

that Scar and Zira had a daughter named Zola. Zola had vanished on the night Simba returned and many on both sides suspected Simba had played a part in her disappearance. It was then that Nala had revealed that Zola was alive and that she had promised Zola not to reveal her existence to Simba. The revelation had sent shockwaves through both prides, causing long held beliefs to be upturned. The revelations had caused Vitani to question her mother's motives and her own self-worth. Nasser had been the only lion who had seemed to understand what she had been feeling, as he often wondered what his own half-sister Majani was like. In the end both had decided to leave the Pridelands to search for Majani and Zola.

The Kingdom of Bluewater

During the past two weeks of travelling Nasser and Vitani had crossed several kingdoms, some had been welcoming and in those the pair had made new friends. In others they had faced hostility where they had been forced to hurt into thieves and poachers. Now the pair were in the Kingdom of Bluewater that was ruled over by a king and queen cheetah. The cheetahs had been welcoming and happy to help the pair. To the pair's surprise only one lion lived the kingdom. The cheetahs had suggest the pair meet him as he might have some good advice for them.

Walking through the kingdom Vitani and Nasser admired beauty surrounding them. Coming to a waterfall the pair were mesmerized by the clear sparkling water. Looking at the water Nasser jumped in, landing with a loud splash. Surfacing he was grinning from ear to ear, mischief alight in his eyes. Looking at him Vitani hesitated for a second before diving in. Surfacing she gasped for breath as the cool water hit her fur.

- "Never dived in before?" Nasser asked laughing.

- "We didn't have time to play in the water," Vitani replied.

- "Oh yeah you guys spent most of the time training," Nasser replied, flicking water at her.

- "That doesn't mean I can't water fight," Vitani replied jumping onto him.

As the pair fought their delighted shouts carried through the air. Surfacing after a particular powerful attack Vitani surfaced near the edge of the pool. Her eyes widened. Standing at the edge of the pool was a large male lion with dark brown fur, a lion who looked very much like Kovu. Swimming over Nassor looked at the lion with astonishment for he could see some of Vitani's characteristics in the lion.

- "Hi guys I'm Ekene (African meaning salute), you two must be the pair Hadiya (Female African name meaning gift or sacrifice) and Jengo (African male name meaning material used for building) told me about."

Ekene looked closely at Vitani, studying her face carefully and gazing into her eyes. Memories swam to the surface, a realization dawned in his mind that sent his heart racing. In a desperate bid to remain calm Ekene spoke, his voice betraying a note of panic.

- "Lioness who are and who is your mother?"

- "My name is Vitani. My mother was Zira, I was born in the Outlands that border the Pridelands," Vitani replied, a note of caution in her voice.

- "Once I knew a lioness with that name who lived there. While I lived on the border of the Outlands we became close..."

- "Zira died recently...my brother is the same colour as you," Vitani asked, barely able to believe what he was implying.

- "Then Vitani you are my daughter. As soon as she realized she was pregnant it was made clear that I was to get out," Ekene replied, lowering his eyes with regret and remorse.

- "Mother explain the circumstances that led to my birth. I understand...if you had tried to stay then without doubt you would have been killed. I'm happy to meet you," Vitani replied smiling.

- "I always hoped to meet you. Now tell me, what brings you and your friend here?" Ekene asked, turning to face Nassor.

Climbing out of the water Nassor and Vitani explained about their hunt for Zola and Majani. Ekene listened intently, accepting everything with question or passing judgement. Listening he felt a snap of connection to his daughter and instantly vowed to help her and her friend. Speaking up Ekene offered to help them both and to find them a place to sleep while they loved in the kingdom. Nassor and Vitani accepted with delight.

- "Tell me about the Prielands," Ekene said.

Between them Nassor and Vitani gave him a history of the recent events and the part they had played. They went back to the start of all the trouble so Ekene could fully understand the part he played. As the story ended Ekene's heart went out to both of them, raging at Zira for what she had done to Kovu and Vitani. Ekene hung his head in shame and regret, he felt guilty that he had never gone back to find the pair.

- "Ekene could you give us a tour?" Nassor asked, trying to lift the mood.

- "I'd love to see more of this place," Vitani replied gently.

- "It would be my pleasure," Ekene replied smiling.

Together the trio set off through the kingdom. Climbing the cliffs they past magnificent waterfalls, slipped under dense foliage, raced through long savannah grass and splashed through the river. Around the waterfalls they saw high caves cut into the rock, in the trees they heard the chatter of hundreds of birds and raced through herds of antelope, zebra, elephants and wildebeest on the Savanah. Laid under the tress they met leopards, ocelots and other cats though to their surprise no other lions. Noticing this Nassor brought it up.

- "There used to be a pride here a few years ago. They did some bad stuff, their leader was this insane female called Fumbe. They left a big scar on the cheetahs. I had to jump over a lot of logs to be accept and even after that it look a year to be fully trusted."

Listing to the tale Nassor and Vitani shot an uneasy look at one another as they had heard of such a pride before. A pride that had caused so much pain and suffering to so many. Pushing the thoughts from their minds they turned their attention back to the kingdom and what Ekene was showing them.

Later that day Vitani and Ekene stood alone on the top of the large waterfall. Standing together they looked out across the land both unsure what to say to each other. Looking at each other they tried to speak.

- "I don't have much to offer you Vitani. If there was any honour in me then I should have gone back to find you. I could have offered you both a different life," Ekene said, hanging his head in shame.

- "I don't blame you. If you had tried to come back Scar would have killed you."

- "You are kinder to me than I deserve. I can't change the past but I would love to be part of your future," Ekene replied shifting from paw to paw.

- "I'd like that a lot, Dad," Vitani replied, laying her head on his shoulder.

Sitting side by side Ekene and Vitani looked across the magnificent kingdom. In that moment both had found something expected and answered long held questions. For the first time Vitani had a parent who loved her unconditionally. Looking his daughter Ekene felt a sense of responsibility descent.

- "Great King's only knows the kind of life Vitani has experienced growing up! I have to care for her for as long as she and Nassor are here. Damn it Zira! You used her just like you used me. I was young and naïve back then.....Well I am grown now. I'll do what I can to help our daughter."

The days passed. Each day Ekene taught Nassor and Vitani how the live as rouges, sharing all the tricks and wisdom he had gained. Each day was rounded off with fighting lessons, Ekene shocked at how skilled Vitani was. He received a bigger shock when Vitani beat him which made

him see it was Nassor who needed to tuition not her. After that Vitani joined her father in teachings Nassor and she often spared with the older cheetahs.

Spending time with Nassor, Ekene found in him a lion he could trust. Ekene saw through the rebellious streak and in fact quite liked that side. In return Nassor started to look up to Ekene as a trusted mentor.

The relationship between Ekene and Vitani grew each day. Both seeing the truth of the matter there was no guilt, hatred or blame laying between them. Through his care Vitani experienced the love of a parent who had not hidden agenda. Laying under tress Vitani told Ekene all about Kovu, finding that Kovu was quite different to their father. Listening Ekene's heart went out to his son, seeing in Kovu only Zira's upbringing.

- "I wish it could have been different for both of you," Ekene said.

He and Vitani were laid in the branches of a large tress, Vitani had just finished telling him how to war between the prides had ended. Ekene's eyes were full of something akin to guilt mingled with anger at Zira. As an outsider Ekene had a very good perceptive on things and what he saw was manipulation by Zira.

- "Would it help Kovu if I went to see him?" Ekene whispered.

- "I might not be accepted but..."

- "Dad to be honest...Kovu has never been curios about you. Even when Mother told us, he just brushed you off....he doesn't care. He has never needed or even wanted to know. He looks up to our brother Imoo. I think going would make things difficult for him," Vitani replied, regret and a spark

of guilt in her eyes.

- "I understand, Kovu is better off without me interfering in his life. If staying away makes him happy then that is fine by me," Ekene replied smiling sadly.

- "If I ever go back I'll tell him about you."

- "I'd like that."

A few weeks after their arrival Nassor and Vitani stood on the edge of the kingdom side by side with Ekene. After spending time in the land the pair had decided it was time for them to leave. The air was full of sadness as the cheetahs as well as Ekene had grown to see the pair as part of the kingdom. During their time both had made lifelong friends with the young cheetahs and they had earned to trust and respect of the adults.

- "I'm proud to call you my daughter," Ekene whispered hugging Vitani.

- "Whatever happens with Zola...I want you to know that you will always have a home with me."

- "Thank you Dad. I'm so happy to have met you, from the start you have been honest with me, that's something not many lions have been," Vitani replied returning the hug.

- "I believe in honesty. All I want is for you to be happy," Ekene said, his voice full of emotion.

- "Part of me wants to stay with you...but I have to find Zola," Vitani replied, tears falling from her eyes.

- "I understand. When all your questions are answered then with clear eyes you will be able to see what it is you want out of life."

- "How did you become so wise?"

- "Years of experience," Ekene whispered.

- "Take care of yourselves both of you. Nassor it has been a pleasure to know you."

- "Likewise Ekene, you've been a good mentor," Nassor replied smiling.

- "Go with our blessings," King Jenko said stepping forward.

- "Should you be on our borders again please cross them without fear, you have both earned our trust and respect."

Bowing deeply the pair turned away and crossed the border. Tears shone in Vitani's eyes as they walked away, her heart calling to her father.

- "It'll be okay Vitani. Once this stuff with Zola is sorted out you could always go back. You can go back now, if you want to stay with him I understand," Nassor said gently.

- "Thanks. I can't go back...not until I've met Zola," Vitani replied sadly.

- "We'll find them Zola and Majani. Come on Ekene said we needed to go north east at the forked tree," Nassor said.

The shadow of Zira's past

Nassor and Vitani had been travelling for a couple of weeks since leaving Ekene in his beautiful kingdom. They had been finding it tough as in the past couple of days the animals around them seemed strangely hostile towards lions.

Arriving on the border of a kingdom the pair stopped a wild dog and a lioness were on what appeared to be a joint border patrol. Both stared each other for a moment.

- "What do you want?" asked the wild dog eyeing the pair with suspicion.

- "We are travellers, all we want is rest and somewhere to hunt for a few days," Vitani replied.

- "This kingdom is ruled by a wild dog lion coalition. We will presented you to the council who will decide your fate," the wild dog replied while the lioness nodded silently.

Entering the kingdom Vitani and Nassor allowed themselves to be escorted through the kingdom. Their escorts maintained a stony silence throughout the journey giving out an aura of hostility. The kingdom seemed well stocked with life yet Vitani and Nassor felt the eyes of the animals follow them in a manner never experienced before.

A couple of hours later the four reached an area of small hills on which sat and laid a large lion pride and several wild dogs. The lions were well fed and had a similar colouring to Zira, with a large male sharing a particular resemblance to Vitani. Seeing the four approach the male lion got up, followed by several of the adults. His eyes widened in shock as he took in Vitani, a look close to hatred and utter distrust instantly appearing.

- "Who are you?" the male demanded looking at Vitani.

- "I am Vitani and this is Nassor," Vitani replied bravely, assessing the situation.

- "I asked who you are lioness not him. Now I'll say it simply so you can understand little cub. When I ask who you are I want your name, the names of mummy and daddy and your pride," the male snapped in a patronizing tone.

- "Fine if that's how you want it. My name is Vitani, my father is Ekene I come from the Pridelands and my mother is called Zira."

A hiss escaped followed by a snarl sprang from the male's throat followed by roars from a few older females. Nassor, Vitani and the other younger lions looked at one another in utter confusion as Vitani continued to explain about her mother.

- "So you are my half-sisters cub. Well this is a surprise, I never thought that piece of dirt would ever have cubs," the male snarled.

- "Half-sister? So this is her birth pride," Vitani gasped with wide eyes.

- "Don't think that fact gives you anything. She was a worthless illegitimate mistake who deserved all the treatment she got. She was rightly kicked out as soon as she could manage alone. I am Gero (African name meaning fierce) ruler of this pride," the male snarled, anger and contempt in his eyes.

- "Then her stories of neglect and beatings are true," Vitani hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously.

- "Of course they are," an older female said stepping forward.

- "Zira received only what she deserved. She was punished for being born and for the crimes committed by her father."

- "Mala (African name meaning bitter) is right," Gero said gesturing to the lioness.

- "Now what brings you both here, what do you want in my pride?"

With fear, hatred and courage in her eyes Vitani swiftly explained about the quest she and Nassor were on. As she talked the wild dogs settled down to listen, their leaders sitting close to Gero and Mala. When Vitani's explanation come to a conclusion the dogs and Gero muttered harsh words about Zira and Zira's father. For a moment or two dogs and lions conferred, shooting black looks at Vitani as they did.

- "We will give you seven days after that you leave on pain of death if you return," a large male wild dog said.

- "Fine of that's how you want it," Vitani retorted.

- "Stay clear of my pride. If I want you involved I'll send for you. You answer anyone who talks to you. Any of the cubs ask you don't mention Zira, you are rouges," Gero snapped angrily.

- "So be it, it is your life, anything else?" Vitani said, unable to disguise her contempt.

- "Glad to see you have a dose of sense. Stay out of trouble, we will be watching," Mala snapped.

Turning away the pair were led by one of the wild dogs to a shady spot along the river bank where they could sleep. As the spot was away from the main pride it maintained a distance that Gero and Mala seemed to want. As the pair began to settle in some of the teenage lions and dogs approached, clearly ignoring their parent's words of caution. Nassor and Vitani listened as the teens described their upbringing, having fun, lessons and endless hours playing. Listening to the tales Vitani realized her mother's upbringing had been a twisted form of punishment. Ice cold realization swept through her body, in a single moment of blinding clarity Vitani saw the scars her mother had carried.

The days passed in an uneasy peace between Vitani and Nassor and the lion pride. After some initial reservations the wild dogs had reached an understanding with the pair. This had been greatly helped by the realization that the adults who older remembered Zira were in the minority and didn't lead the pack.

- "Vitani take care. Gero and Mala hate you. I would not be surprised if attacked," the wild dog leader said.

- "What did my grandfather and mother do that was so terrible?" Vitani asked.

- "I'm not sure. That time is never spoken off. Ask Mala she should be able to tell you."

- "She is Gero's mate anything she tells me will likely be a lie," Vitani replied.

- "Not entirely. She'd glory in telling you, it would suit her twisted mind to see you upset."

A few days after their arrival Nassor and Vitani joined the pride on a hunt. The pair excelled in an attempt to impress the pride. The pair's raw ferocity came as a shock to many of the members causing some to reevaluate their views. At the same time the older adults called Vitani a whole host of cruel names, muttering she doesn't deserve food and some deliberately trying to sabotage her. After hours of slowly building tension Vitani and Nassor snapped back, airing their views in public and telling the senior pride members just what they thought.

- "How dare you say such things to a senior member?" Mala roared, her eyes blazing.

- "You are not pride members therefore mind your place."

- "I am not a victim. If you think I am going to let you mistreat me than think again," Vitani hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously.

- "I have never seen such insubordination," Gero roared.

In a blinding flash hatred boiled over, Mala and Gero attacked, sending Nassor and Vitani to the ground. Seconds later the pair sprang to their paws. Hatred burned in Vitani's heart fuelling her attack. All her training, the darkest, the most deadly skills and all trickery came flooding into her mind. Skill honed to deadly perfect over years. In a blinding spark of clarity Vitani felt ice cold desire for revenge, in that moment she became the deadly assassin she had been trained to be. With utter ruthless skill Vitani attacked, with every stroke making Mala and Gero pay for the past. By her side Nassor fought with almost equal power, his strength matching that of Gero. All the while the lion pride stood silently watching, to them such things were normal, unless asked they did not interfere with punishment. With cries of pain Mala and Gero fell to the floor, Nassor and Vitani standing over them victorious. Never before had Mala and Gero been defeated in combat, not since becoming leaders had the pair engaged in single combat. Looking up at the powerful Vitani and Nassor the pair felt fear. The look in Vitani's eyes turned their blood to ice. In that moment Gero saw the crimes of the past come to haunt him.

- "Kill me if you dare!" Gero roared, his eyes full of shock and hate.

- "No, no that is far too good for you. Death will come to you but not by my paw," Vitani sneered.

With utter coldness Vitani struck, blinding Gero in his right eye before inflicting an injury so severe to his left front leg so that he was crippled. Laying in pain Gero felt his whole future slip away, a crippled lion would be killed easily.

- "My Mother learned the lessons of this pride well. Now tell me oh great leader. What did my Mother do to deserve the abuse?"

- "That is," Gero began, fighting to overcome the pain.

- "Gero just tell her," Mala said, a note of desperation in her voice.

- "Please tell her than she and this male will leave."

- "If I tell of the scandal you will and never return," Gero hissed.

- "I accept that bargain," Vitani replied.

- "That scoundrel next to you must agree also," Mala snapped.

- "I accept," Nassor replied instantly, his voice full of coldness.

- "At the time the events took place I was just approaching my first birthday. My Father was a well-regarded lion from a neighbouring pride. Zira's father was a rouge lion with a dubious reputation who was known for causing trouble. He tricked my Mother into falling in love with him. He had very fine words but he was slyer than a fox. He deceived her, he used her to get what he wanted. Grandfather discovered his tricks and saw that he was punished. The pain that lion caused my Mother.....Zira was hated from the moment of her birth. She was a reminder of her father's tricks. She was given the treatment she deserved. She was worthless filth, she was taught to fight, at every

meal last to eat, beaten for the slightest mistake. When she was old enough Grandfather cast her out. Oh some called for her death long before but my soft hearted Mother pleaded for Zira's life."

- "You abused on innocent cub," Nassor roared.

- "My Mother choose darkness because of what she suffered her. Never knowing innocence or love. Everything she became.....You all have innocent blood on your paws. The legacy of your treatment of her stretches for years," Vitani snarled.

- "You vile little viper, the same worthless blood of your Grandfather runs through your veins," Gero hissed.

- "Oh I am much worse than him, brains and training combined.....Nassor we are done here let us leave this pride to its fate," Vitani spat.

Vitani and Nassor walked with their heads held high as the pride parted to let them path. Smirking they walked away. Nassor wore a mask of power. His heart felt like lead, never before had he seen the darkness take such a hold of Vitani. Her cruelty both shocked and worried him, was this the point she embraced the darkness? Evil shone from Vitani yet she felt so good. As they walked some of the pride called out yet the pair kept walking without a backward glance. Together they crossed the border leaving the land forever.

- "They tried to destroy my Mother," Vitani whispered.

- "All her life she lived with the scars of their abuse. They caused everything that has happened, the war between our prides....they forged the lioness. Mother could never escape the shadows of what they did."

Tears fell down Vitani's cheeks. For the first time she was able to grieve for Zira. All Zira's actions suddenly made perfect sense. Then a leg wrapped around her body, Nassor drew her close to him in a move that surprised them both. At the same time the gesture felt totally right. Looking at one another the pair smiled awkwardly side by side they continued on their journey.

C3 Legacy of Banishment

Three weeks had passed since Nassor and Vitani had left the land of Zira's birth. The pair stood in mountains looking down on a rich and fertile land that stretched all the way to the sea.

Both were weak, the past weeks had been hard. Both were skinny and desperately in need of a good meal. Nassor had narrowly avoided being trampled by a rhino and Vitani had had a close call with a cobra. The rulers they had encountered had not been welcoming. They had been forced to turn into poachers in order to survive.

As the night fell both slipped out of their hiding place onto a plateau to hunt. Catching dinner they began to wolf down the meat. The air was alive with the sounds and smells of other creatures. Their senses were high and both constantly looked around for danger.

Then both looked up. Twigs snapped, a scent drifted towards them and out of the darkness a dozen yellow eyes appeared. Into the light stepped a pack of hyenas. Vitani snarled. In front of her was Yejida, daughter of Shenzie. Yejida who once long ago had been the best friend of Zola and Masika. Over the passing years the hyenas had been in the Outlands many times. For a moment the pair stared at each other in shock.

- "Vitani what are you doing here....Zira?"

- "I'm looking for Zola," Vitani began.

Quickly Vitani explained all that had happened in recent months. Yejida snarled in anger, feeling genuine grief for Zira, utter resentment at Imoo and seeing Kovu's actions as a betrayal. Hearing of the end of the war Yejida felt fury rip through her being, unable to understand why Vitani or Aina would allow it. Slowly the words traitor began to form.

- "Yejida tell me what happened to you," Vitani said gently.

- "Shenzie, Banzi and Ed are dead and the pack has been decimated by illness. All those who remain were born during Scar's reign of later in exile," Yejida replied shortly.

Times had changed Yejida. Yejida was merciless, refused to tolerate weakness and hated the Pridelanders. She had become a tyrant who ruled through fear and dreamed of retaking the Pridelands. The pack lived on the edges of the world never more than a week from starvation.

Hungrily the hyenas eyed the kill. Jumping forward the younger members began to challenge the lions. Seeing the numbers panic surged through Nassor and Vitani as the odds were very much stacked against them. Standing their ground the pair tried to look more confident than they felt.

- "Very brave. Why are you out here Vitani?" Yejida asked in a sly tone.

- "My reasons are my own Yejida," Vitani replied.

- "Back of, we don't want any trouble," Nassor said eyeing the pack.

- "Keep quiet Pridelander! Vitani you are a filthy traitor."

- "The fighting was going to destroy both prides, it had to stop."

- "It would have ended with Simba's death!" Yejida snarled, her eyes shining with malice.

- "It would have carried on. Look where you are. You live a life consumed by exile and hardship. Let go of the hatred. I've already lost my Mother."

- "Through weakness."

Emotions running high the pair faced each other. Then the wind changed bringing with it the scents of an approaching lion pride. Panic ripped through the hyenas while Yejida looked confused as one of the scents she recognised. Looking between the approaching lions and the kill Yejida suddenly sprang. The hyenas attacked, their numbers sending Nassor and Vitani to the floor. Desperately Nassor and Vitani fought for their very lives. The attacks were constant. The odds were not in their favour. Laying on the ground Nassor and Vitani exchanged the briefest of looks, they were done for, and no amount of trickery could win against such numbers.

In that moment when it looked like the end five powerful lions jumped into the fray scattering the hyenas. Yejida's eyes went wide with astonishment. In front of her stood Chumvi and Masika. Masika her former best friend who had vanished with Zola and who Yejida had believed dead. The hyenas cowered at the sight of the lions, all five lean yet well fed, the power radiating out of them.

Seeing Vitani and Nassor laid on the ground Masika and Chumvi walked over and the pair felt a brief spike of fear. Their faces changed to ones of concern while still maintaining an air of authority.

- "I am Chumvi. This kingdom is ruled by King Delmar and Queen Zola. Who are you?" Chumvi asked.

- "I am Nassor son of Ni, half-brother of Aketch and Majani," Nassor said, slowly climbing to his paws.

- "We come from the Pridelands. I am Vitani daughter of Zira," Vitani said softly.

Hearing the words Masika and Chumvi looked at each other than to the other three lions. Majani stood among them her face a perfect mask of calm. A spike of panic raced through them, knowing the words meant trouble and bringing a million questions. Over the years birds had brought news of events in the kingdom, they both knew what had happened to Scar and Zira. Their hearts beating wildly Masika and Chumvi turned back to the lions in front of them.

- "Don't worry the pair of you are safe," Chumvi said, his face softening.

- "Thank you," Nassor whispered.

- "Get behind me, this could turn nasty," Chumvi replied as other lioness arrived on the scene.

Now the hyenas were vastly outnumbered by lions who were in the peak of health. The eyes

of the lions were filled with hate for the hyenas had long troubled their borders.

- "I sentence all hyenas to imprisonment. Queen Zola and King Delmar will decided your fate," Masika said glaring the hyenas.

- "You'll kill us before we get there," Yejida laughed hysterically.

- "THAT IS NOT OUR WAY!"

The voice caused all to turn around in shock. Zola had appeared from the tress. The years had changed the teenager into a powerful adult. Zola had Zira's colouring on her body, though where most lionesses had lighter fur she had black. In appearance she looked more like Zira yet she had the bright emerald eyes of Scar.

- "I have listened silently to what you have said Vitani and Nassor. You bring much welcome and unwelcome news. As for your motives for being here they are as yet unknown."

- "I can guess why that male is here Zola," Majani said stepping forward.

- "He will be looking for me."

- "You're Majani?" Nassor stammered.

- "Correct cub," Majani replied.

- "This is neither the time nor place for these conversations. Vitani, Nassor you are welcome," Zola replied.

Before another word could be said Yejida tried to jump forward. In a swift movement the other lions pinned her to the floor. Gasping for breath Yejida climbed to her paws, her eyes locked on Zola. The encircling lions closed in around her. Tension filled the air. Nassor and Vitani standing awkwardly to one side. Zola and Masika looking coldly at Yejida, unsure what to say, torn between the past and present.

- "Why didn't you return? Why allow your parents to die at Simba's paws?" Yejida asked, an almost mad look in her eyes.

- "Silence poacher! I am fully aware of what has happened. Word has reached my ears over the years. I am not the cub you once knew Yejida," Zola replied silkily.

Turning away Zola ordered some of the lions to take the hyenas to the prison while the rest were to follow her. Silently the lions walked together through the kingdom. Filled with uncertainty Nassor and Vitani walked with the lions in-between Chumvi and Masika. Both were nursing injuries which made their pace slower. To their surprise the pride took it at their pace. At all times Zola made sure the pair were close to her. Neither friendly nor hostile she seemed to be assessing them.

After a few hours of walking the lions came to the sea. Arriving at the shore they saw a magnificent cliff, rocks jutted out into the ocean, in the cliff wide paths led down to a multitude of caves. The paths were very wide, wide enough for lions to lay on without fear of falling. Stopping Nassor and Vitani gazed in awe. A magnificent male lion approached. He had a mane the colour of beach sand, a body various shades of brown, handsome blue eyes with four scars on his left scar and a deep red scar on his left cheek. The scars shaped hinted that it had been it had been given deliberately.

- "Zola welcome home," he said nuzzling her.

- "Delmar allow me to introduce Nassor and Vitani," Zola replied licking his cheek.

- "Welcome you my kingdom, it appears both of you have suffered," Delmar replied looking at the pair.

- "They were attacked by those hyenas," Zola replied softly.

- "This time we got them."

Zola and Delmar exchanged a look that spoke all that was needed. Turning back to the pair Delmar called to an older lion. The lion bore a striking resemblance to Delmar, the same sandy body streaked with grey, a whitey grey mane and brilliant purple eyes.

- "Uncle Ramala please meet Nassor and Vitani. They have run afoul of the hyenas, please treat their wounds," Delmar said.

- "It is a pleasure to meet the two whose fates I have long watched. Come with me, healing and sleep are required," Ramala replied kindly.

- "Come on, don't worry he doesn't bite," Zola said seeing the confused looks on Nassor and Vitani's faces.

Walking up the paths the five passed other pride members who greeted them cordially. In a large cave Nassor and Vitani lay down on beds of grass. Around the cave were herbs, plants and shells filled with potions, crystals and shells hung from planks of driftwood and pictures were drawn on the walls. Swiftly Ramala treated their wounds then giving them both a potion to make them sleep. Exhausted from travelling and their injuries the pair gave into the potion, falling into a deep sleep.

Leaving the pair under the watchful eye of Ramala, Zola and Delmar re-joined Chumvi, Masika and Majani outside. Together the five walked to a series of underground caves in the middle of the savannah that were used as prisons. There was only one entrance into the system and that was kept very well guarded. The area had a terrifying reputation. Many believed it to be haunted by the restless ghosts of animals who had died down there.

Standing at the entrance the five watched as Yejida was led towards them by members of the prison guard. Yejida's eyes were filled with malice yet also disbelief. Standing together Zola and Masika looked down on their former friend.

- "You've been alive all this time, why didn't you come back? Simba exiled us and your parents are dead!" Yejida asked.

- "I chose freedom....not to be defined by my blood line," Zola replied calmly.

- "You could have retaken the kingdom!"

- "I am queen here. This land is my home. Yejida let go of the hatred," Zola implored.

- "Never. I remember the past. I know the life....."

- "Yejida please listen to Zola," Masika said, her eyes pleading with Yejida.

- "Yejida listen to me. We used to be friends. I can help you if you are willing to let go of this hatred. I can spare you the fate that awaits but only if you promise to change."

- "You will not" Yejida snapped.

- "If you cared the past you would never have left the Pridelands."

- "Yejida for Great Kings' sake see what is in front of you! Zola is trying to help you!"

- "I am no traitor!" Yejida snarled, her eyes wild with madness.

- "Then so be it I cannot help you!" Zola roared.

- "Guards take her way."

As Yejida was taken away Zola felt a spark of sadness that was swiftly replaced by cold hard sense. Yejida has sealed her fate and that of her pack. For too long the hyenas had harried the borders, committing countless crimes and threatening the security of the kingdom. Until today neither Chumvi, Masika nor Zola had realised Yejida was the pack leader as she rarely took active part in raids. On the occasions she had participated other pride members had dealt with her, having never met her neither Majani or King Delmar had known who she was. The subjects of Delmar and

Zola had demanded justice, the highest justice available in the kingdom, the kind only Delmar and Zola could pass.

Walking away from the prison the lions turned their attention away from the prisoners whose fate were decided to Nassor and Vitani.

- "It seems the past has come back to haunt us," Masika said heavily.

- "Masika we have known for a long time this might happen. Ever since we became aware of Scar's death, Vitani's birth and Zira's death. This is the very reason we have gathered news over these past years," Zola replied seriously.

- "It's still a shock though. I hoped we were done with the past," Masika replied.

- "So did I. Nassor and Vitani are obviously here for a reason. Perhaps by hearing them we will be able to lay the past to rest," Zola replied.

- "Zola is right Masika. We all knew a day would come when we would have to face the past. I think Nala might have been forced to reveal your existence," Chumvi said sadly.

- "I want to hear what Vitani has to say. She is still my sister," Zola replied.

Standing on the edge of the sea the five prepared to face the future that was for shadowed by the past.

Part 2 Kingdom by the sea

Zola and Majani

A day had passed since Nassor and Vitani had arrived in the seaside kingdom. Having had a full night's sleep and a good meal the pair had recovered their strength. On the rocks in front of the caves the pair looked out to the magnificent sea that glittered in front of them. Next to them lay Majani, Masika, Chumvi, Zola and Delmar. Hanging out on a ledge just above them were the cubs of four of the adults, their eyes fixed on the two newcomers. The adults were relaxed yet determined to have their questions answered. All six looked at one another hesitantly, unsure where to begin or what to say.

- "News has reached us about the events of the Pridelands, all that has happened there we are aware of. I know you are my sister Vitani," Zola began softly.

- "I know about everything, how is that possible?" Vitani asked hesitantly.

- "We have had birds monitor events there. For you to understand us you both need to know a little of our pasts," Zola replied.

- "I need to know," Vitani replied a touch of steel in her voice.

Slowly the adult lions began to tell their tale. On leaving the Prideland the owl Tau guided Wanderer, Zola and their small pride through the savannah. Along the way they met Chumvi who eventually joined them.

On reaching the seaside kingdom it was revealed that Wanderer was in fact the true king Gatura's son. Gatura had abandoned the kingdom in favour of a life of freedom. In his stead his illegitimate half-brother Ramala had been forced to rule. As a shaman and illegitimate Ramala could only ever be considered regent. Ramala's powers had allowed him to find Gatura and Wanderer along with him. Gatura had refused to return to the kingdom and a week after this visit he had abandoned Wanderer and his mother. Over the passing years Ramala and an owl Tau had watched Wanderer grow. When Wanderer had been forced out Tau had been sent to guide him to the kingdom.

With the truth revealed Wanderer had claimed his heritage and taken the name of Delmar. In time Zola and Delmar married and Zola became queen. In time Masika and Chumvi had fallen in love and mated. Majani had found the better life she had been looking for. She was happy for Ni and Kula. Past experiences and time had turned her into a fierce warrior who had no desire for cubs.

- "If I had stayed there would have been only bloodshed. Leaving was the only way to save all from the darkness that could have consumed me," Zola said bitterly.

- "Mother thought you died," Vitani said with a hint of anger.

- "I am truly sorry for the pain my actions caused. You are my sister, any help you require I will give you," Zola replied, placing a paw on her shoulder.

- "Thank you Zola. I just want to understand....." Vitani replied, lapsing into silence.

- "Majani.....Dad misses you," Nassor began.

- "I miss him too, I'm glad you've come little brother," Majani replied.

- "Come on the four of you, enough skulking above," Zola said looking up at the four cubs.

In a line the four cubs walked down. Delmar and Zola's son was the same age as Nassor and Vitani while their daughter was just a few months old. Both cubs were a mixture of both their parents in appearance. Next to them stood Chumvi and Masika's daughter who was the same age as Vitani and their son who was a few months old. Standing awkwardly the cubs looked at Nassor and Vitani. Stepping forward Zola and Delmar's son broke the silence.

- "I'm Arjana (African name meaning paradise) crown prince of the kingdom Kingdom. This sister Penina (African name meaning red coral or pearl). It's good to you meet you Aunt Vitani, Nassor," Arjana said smiling awkwardly.

- "Aunt Vitani, that seems strange as we are the same age," Vitani laughed, breaking the tension.

- "Yeh pretty complicated family we come from. Guess that's what you get when you have a psychotic tyrant as a relative," Arjana replied.

- "Very true my son," Zola smirked, seeing the surprised look on Vitani's face.

- "Oh Vitani don't look so surprised, you're naïve to think I kept the truth from them."

- "I guess Vitani and I thought you'd make Scar nice or just not mention him," Nassor said.

- "Don't be foolish. The blood of Scar and Zira runs through their veins so both are bound by their legacy," Zola replied.

Hearing the words Nassor and Vitani saw the wisdom in the statement. Their own problems had been caused by deceit, the truth had allowed Zola and Delmar's cubs to accept their arrival with ease. Breaking rank Arjana flopped down next to his father while Penina curled up next to Zola. With apparent ease Arjana began to tell them about growing up in the kingdom. In return Nassor and Vitani began to tell of their own lives.

A short time later after Chumvi had recounted a particularly humorous story from his own cubhood, Vitani abruptly left the gathering. Quickly Zola followed her, the older lioness concerned for the younger. A few meters apart they walked to the tops of the cliff well out of the earshot of the pride. In the distance far out to sea dolphins leaped. Standing on the edge of the cliffs Vitani stopped, her eyes fixed on the leaping dolphins. Sensing her pain Zola walked over to her. For a moment the two sisters stood side by side in silence.

- "Your kingdom is beautiful.....I never imagined a place like it," Vitani said softly.

- "It is paradise for me. I understand how strange this is. No matter what impact the past has on us.....I am glad you are here. I can imagine what my actions might have caused. I will answer any questions to have, anything you need, all you need do is ask," Zola replied, her voice full of gentleness yet devoid of regret.

- "Thank you Zola. I'm not here to cause trouble. I just want to find out who you are and perhaps who I am," Vitani replied, a hint of melancholy in her voice.

Side by side both sisters looked out across the water. They had made a start. Though the path ahead was full of uncertainty they had embarked upon it together.

Seaside Paradise

A couple of days had passed since their arrival. In the passing days Delmar had made Nassor and Vitani honouree members of the pride. Delmar and Chumvi had decided to take Nassor under their wing and both lions were on the way to becoming friends with their older cubs.

High in the mountains Nassor and Majani walked side by side on border patrol. As they walked they talked about their family. With utter honesty Majani admitted she felt no guilt over leaving the family nor walking out on Aketch. In her view the welfare of Aketch had been the sole responsibility of Ni. Majani still blamed him for the death of her mother. In fact Majani saw Ni as a coward and didn't much care what happened to him. In the same vein she did not hate Nassor's mother Kula.

- "If you had the chance to see him and Aketch....even in just so they knew you were happy.....would you?" Nassor asked cautiously.

- "If that is an offer then I'll have to think about it," Majani replied coolly.

- "That's fair," Nassor replied shrugging his shoulders.

- "You're a smart cub, I like that. Too many lions act first and think later."

- "Which would get me where exactly? I'm not some naïve little cub, I wasn't expecting all fluffiness from you."

At that statement Majani laughed. The pair had found an understanding. The silence broken Nassor began to ask Majani about her early travels. The chattering of monkeys from a large tree broke through their conversation. Glancing up into the branches Majani smiled.

- "Ever climbed up a tree in this kingdom?" Majani asked.

- "No, is that a challenge?"

- "If you like," Majani replied, deliberately goading Nassor.

With the monkeys swinging next to them the pair climbed to the very top of the tree. From the top the entire kingdom was laid out in front of them. Down across miles from the mountains border across to vast savannah to the river outage to the lions cliff top cave down to vast sea. The stars and the light of a new moon gave a magical quality to the kingdom. Nassor's eyes went wide in awe at the spectacle.

- "This place is nothing like I've ever seen before."

- "I'm not good with feelings.....I want you to stay here for as long as you want.....I'm happy you're here," Majani said awkwardly.

- "Thanks..... I didn't expect anything from you Majani, other than not getting killed."

- "That expectation I can live with. I'm not the type to commit murder just for you being curious."

On the sea shore Zola and Vitani walked next to one another. In the passing days Zola had struggled to speak to Vitani. Old wounds had been torn open and forced her to confront a past she had tried so hard to forget. In the silence of the night Zola had finally found the strength to confront the issues. Night provided a cloak for a private conversation well always from the scrutiny of others.

- "I'm happy to have you as a sister. You've brought up the past, old pain and an old life. I want to explain.....that much I owe you.....will you listen?" Zola asked.

- "I came here to listen.....to find out," Vitani replied, her voice filled with yearning and her heart a spark of hope.

- "I was born when Scar's power was absolute. The pride loved me despite what my parents did. Growing up I had fun with Nala, Chumvi and the other teenagers. Masika and Yejida were my best friends."

- "What changed?"

- "Darkness and power corrupted my parents turning them into tyrants. The land was destroyed so

the pride grew to hate them. Zira saw Nala as trouble so suggest Scar trick Nala into believing he loved her. I found out this plan and warned Nala then helped her to escape."

- "Nala told us what you did, that took courage."

- "I started to question everything my parents had taught me. I found out the truth about Simba and told Rafiki. I saw my parents for what they were. Rafiki told me Simba was alive. He told me I had the power to decide my own fate. The following day I met Delmar....."

- "You left to be with Delmar."

- "Delmar opened my eyes to the possibility of a different life. I knew that staying would have meant fighting Simba. I saw only pain and death. Leaving was the hardest thing I have ever done but there was no other way. I refuse to be bound to my parent's crimes!"

Vitani stopped. Slowly she was beginning to understand. The stories of Scar's reign floated back to her. Then she mind drifted to her half-brothers Nuka and Imoo and the pain they had suffered. She thought back to the difference the truth had made to her life. She put herself in Zola's paw prints, thinking about what she would have done in the same situation.

- "I understand why you left."

- "Staying would have meant death. If I had been allowed to live in exile.....condemned to fighting a relentless war. You have seen first paw what that life is life. I thought all would be better if I left."

- "Mother never stopped hoping you were alive. What you did broke Scar and Zira's in the end. I was raised to be a replacement for you."

Raw pain and resentment shone in Vitani's eyes. In anger she slashed the air. Zola snarled in response glaring at Vitani angrily. In a flash both pounced at each other causing them to tumble into the water. Surfacing the pair fought, hitting each other with their paws and using their claws to scratch.

A sudden change in current carried them out into deeper water where the waves as well as the current was stronger. Zola swam easily while Vitani struggled to keep afloat. A large wave upturned Vitani, catching her by surprise and sending her into the depth. Diving down Zola grabbed Vitani by the scruff of her neck, pulling Vitani to the surface. Swimming against the waves Zola dragged the semi-conscious Vitani to the beach.

Reaching the shore Zola let go of her sister. Both lionesses lay gasping for breath exhausted on the sand. Vitani's eyes were wide with relief.

- "Thank you....I'm so sorry," Vitani spluttered, looking away in shame.

- "You need swimming lessons. I don't blame you," Zola replied gently.

- "I still shouldn't.....you've welcomed me."

- "I never intended any of this to come about," Zola said, guilt in her voice.

- "The situation was impossible. There was no other choice if I wanted happiness. It breaks my

heart hearing what Zira did to you. At the end of the day she and Scar made their own choices. I will not accept responsibility for their actions."

Power and darkness shone in Zola's eyes as she spoke those final words. The same darkness that once ruled Scar was present in his daughter yet it took a different form. The look stopped Vitani for a moment, causing her to think about her words.

- "I don't know who I am. I just want to understand my place in the world. At times I wonder if Mother had known you were alive.....if things would have been differently.....I might not have been born."

Tears fell freely from Vitani's eyes as she revealed her deepest feelings. Zola's face softened, gently she placed a leg around her shoulder.

- "Nothing can change what has happened. Stay here Vitani. The sea can be used to cleanse wounds and cleanse a creature's souls. I did just that when I arrived, I dived in and allowed it to cleanse me of all past pain, fears and links to my parent's actions. Jump back in now, tonight cleanse yourself of the past."

- "What about your family?"

- "Better alone then condemned by their actions. Don't live in the shadows of the past. Be who you want to be."

Standing up Zola walked into the water. After hesitating for a moment Vitani followed her. Above them a new moon hung amount the stars and waves crashed around them. A pod of dolphin swam around them. Then Zola and Vitani found themselves lifted up on the back of a dolphin. Looking at

the lions the two dolphins laughed with delight at the lionesses' surprise. With a burst of speed the dolphins took the pair on a ride through the waves. The lioness yelled in a mixture of fear and delight. Standing on the dolphin's back Vitani felt the taste of the salt water. She thought back to everything she had experienced and felt. Zira's lessons came flooding back along with all of her opinions.

- "I won't become who you wanted me to be!" Vitani screamed, staring at the sky.

As the sun began to break on the horizon Vitani and Zola emerged side by side from the water. A new light shone from Vitani's eyes while an aura or something akin to innocence swirled around her yet hints of darkness and cunning swirled on her edges.

Finding who we are

The days passed bringing a marked change in Vitani, she seemed to gain an air of innocence and joy. With Arjana and Penina as her guides Vitani explored the wonders of the kingdom and revealed in the utter joy her niece and nephew had around them. The teachings of Zira were slowly replaced by new lessons now at last Vitani was able to experience a loving family life. Watching from afar Nassor felt his heart lift with delight at his friend's happiness while at the same time experiencing his own changes.

The pride lay together under the shade of the trees. They had just eaten a good meal and all were feeling a little lethargic. Laying next to her friends Vitani cast her gaze over to Chumvi and Masika. Vitani hadn't spoken much to Masika about the past despite Vitani having a very close relationship with Masika's mother Aina. Aina had been Zira's best friend and an aunt to her cubs. It had been Aina along with Nala who had helped Vitani come to terms with Zira's death and Zola's existence. Vitani knew how much the revelation that Masika lived had meant to Aina. Taking a deep breath Vitani spoke.

- "Masika, Chumvi if you don't mind.....could you tell me your stories?"

Chumivi and Masika looked at her then looked at their son Chipu (African name meaning gift) and daughter Hasina (Egyptian name meaning pretty) who were sitting nearby, their ears pricked up. Neither cub knew the full story of their parent's pasts yet both were fairly curious. Glancing at Zola, Masika saw understanding flicker in her friend's eyes. Looking back at one another Masika and Chumvi shared a message.

- "It all started long ago," Chumvi began.

- "I was a teenager when Masika and Zola were born. Is long and complicated, will you listen for a while?"

- "I am happy to listen to anything you tell me," Vitani replied softly.

Together Chumvi and Masika told Vitani and their cubs all about their long hidden past. Chumvi had once been the best friends with Simba, Nala, Kula, Tama, Togo and Malka in a time of plenty they had shared many adventures. Scar's reign had brought changes yet at first their lives had progressed as normal. As a teenager Chumvi and the others had been given ever increasing responsibilities and the males had been distrusted by Scar. Despite this Chumvi had been friends with Zola and Masika.

In their late teens Chumvi, Togo and Malka had been forced out by Scar. For a while the trio had travelled together until they had met a small pride lead by a female named Fumbe. Malka and Fumbe had taken a liking to each other which had driven a wedge between the friends, in the end the trio had gone their separate ways.

- "Not long after I ran into Zola and her friends. It was a shock seeing her and Masika again, their

story took me completely by surprise. Deciding to join them was the easiest thing in the world," Chumvi said, a smile gracing his face.

- "Falling in love with Chumvi was so the most natural thing. We never planned it. We were just meant to be together," Masika said.

- "I am glad you are happy. That sounds so romantic Masika. Aina would love to see you again," Vitani said, her eyes full of genuine understanding.

- "I would love to see Mother again. Leaving her was so hard but living with the uncertainty of the future was even harder," Masika replied, sadness visible in her eyes.

- "Simba was one of my best friends. When we were told he was dead. It changed all of us. Even once I learnt the truth. I couldn't go back. This place is home," Chumvi replied.

- "Sometimes I think it would be nice to go back to visit, just to let Mother know what has happened to me," Masika said softly.

A spark lit in Vitani's mind, looking sideways at Nassor she realized the same spark had lit up in his mind. Why not suggest Chumvi, Masika and Zola go back to the Pridelands with them? Not to stay, just to visit. Long enough for everyone to make their peace....

A question from Masika about Aina's health brought Vitani back to earth with a bump. Shaking away the daydream Vitani replied honestly, telling Masika all about Aina's life as an Outsider. This brought the talk over to Nassor and Vitani's early lives, Hasina and Arjana joining the conversation. Soon the teenagers were chatting as if they had known each other for years. Caught up in the

chatter Vitani laid her head on Nassor's shoulder causing him to feel a funny jolt in his stomach. From the side-lines Zola, Chumvi, Delmar and Masika exchanged sly looks.

A couple of days later Zola, Delmar, Arjana, Penina, Maiska, Chumvi, Chipu, Hasina Vitani and Nassor walked along the coastline. In a large area full of water filled gorges, narrow pathways, large caves and rocks built for climbing the lions explored. Small beaches were dotted everywhere many covered in shells. Some caves were full of water that you could swim inside, other were dry yet would fill with water later on.

Swimming in a large gorge the lion laughed with delight as a pod of friendly bottlenose dolphins swam up to them. The playful creatures darted around the younger lions, lightly tapping them, pulling at their tails and flicking water at them. In reply the teens lunged forward, patting the dolphins with their paws claws carefully sheathed. The water shimmered a millions shades of blue in the sunlight, while brightly coloured shells shone like jewels beneath the surface.

Surfacing for air Vitani threw her head back. She was having the time of her life, delight was written across her face. Every fibre of her being was brimming with energy, the simple joy of play. Dodging an assault from a dolphin Nassor caught sight of her, his eyes unable to help but watch. Seconds later Nassor found himself sailing through the air and landing underneath the water. Four cheeky male dolphins had caught him off guard while he had been watching his friend. Coughing and spluttering he surfaced to find Vitani giggling, a sly grin spread from ear to ear.

A short time later the lions were stood on one of the small beaches inside one of the many gorges. Above them rocky paths wove while just above them the narrow gorge opening was wide enough to let light in and for a lion to jump.

- "Aunti Vitani are you going to stay here forever?" asked Penina, her eyes full of innocence.

- "I might. This place is beautiful, you have been very welcoming. It is starting to feel like home," Vitani replied, happiness evident in her voice.

Her words caught the lions in their tracks, each one thinking their own thoughts. Zola's heart leapt with delight while Nassor felt a tightness in his chest. Opening his mouth he closed it again, unsure if speaking was the right thing.

- "Nassor Vitani come with us," Arjana said, gesturing with his right front paw to a section of rocks heading up the cliff face.

With Hasina in front of them, Nassor, Vitani, and Arjana climbed up to the top of the cliff. Taking a running start Arjana jumped across the gorge gap, sailing effortlessly over the heads of the lions below and the water. With similar ease Hasina daughter jumped as well. Then eyes turned to Vitani and Nassor, eye daring them to jump. For a moment the pair just looked at the gap. Then Nassor gathered his courage. His eyes filled with determination he ran at the gap, using all his strength to propel himself forward with a might roar. Seconds later he landed with a crash on the other side, going head over paws, his mane all a skew. Getting up he let out a whoop of joy. His eyes flickered over to Vitani who had been watching him. Her eyes hardened. Summoning all her training she ran at the gap, springing forward with all her might. Time seemed to slow as she flew over the water. Then she landed on the other side, the other teens roaring with delight. Gasping for breath she laughed in utter delight and relief.

Side by side the teens dived into the water in near perfect synchronicity giving the adults another heart attack. Surfacing in the water the teens roared with delighted. Looking across at each other Vitani and Nassor felt their words shift a little, the water had revealed the truth. In a second the spell broke as the teens climbed out of the water on the beach.

Walking up into a large cave the lions passed through a wall of shining rock that was illuminated by the sun. Stepping out of the cave the lions stopped. In front of them the sea was stretched out in a beautiful painting. Words could barely do the view justice, the water glittering a dazzling array of blue, and the coral turning some areas a haze of pink, green and purple while magnificent turtles

swam beneath the waves. Nassor and Vitani were silent in utter awe.

- "Vitani did you mean what you said regarding staying here?" Zola asked.

- "Being here.....I'm starting to discover who I truly am," Vitani replied, her body shining with light and confidence.

- "You are more than welcome to stay," Zola replied.

Together the lions looked out to a small island with a small beach covered in jungle. Nassor asked what it was and what if anything lived on it. In reply Masika suggested they all swim out to explore it. With swift bounds the lions jumped into the water. In the calm water the swimming was easy and sea lions swam with them.

Reaching the island the lions walked into the jungle where in every tree birds sang, butterflies flittered on gossamer wings and the trees provided shade. From a large pool the lions drank cold water. Under the trees Delmar told the origin myth of his family. According to legend once a lion prince fell in love with a sea lion. Magic turned the sea lion into a lion so the pair could marry. In time they became King and Queen and had cubs. Some of the cubs remained lions while others turned into sea lions. In memory of the sea all lions of his line have a mane the colour of sand and feel drawn to the sea.

The following day Chumvi, Delmar, their teen cubs and Nassor were out in border patrol with a bit of training thrown in for good measure. The teens brought up the subject of girls, mentioning a couple of the lionesses have their eyes on Nassor. Rolling his eyes he laughed it off. Then came the question about him and Vitani. At this Nassor felt his blood boil, quickly snapping angrily and lashing out. In a flash Chumvi told them both to lay off and that Nassor's friendship with Vitani was none of their business. Nassor had a look of uncertainty on his face as the question sank in.

The training proved a great success. Delmar and Chumvi beat the teenagers though to their credit the teenagers gave a very good fight. Both Delmar and Chumvi walked away from the training bearing several small injuries. Arriving home that evening the males discovered that girls had also been honing their fighting skills. A couple of them were nursing broken bones and Vitani had given out some severe beatings. Zola herself bore severe bruising while Majani had several cuts from Vitani's claws. Vitani's skill and ferocity had taken the lionesses by surprise and shown to Zola the life Vitani been forced to lead.

- "It is clear Zira trained you well Vitani, all the marks of her regime are evident," Zola said facing her sister.

- "I was trained to kill from birth, that was my only purpose," Vitani replied coldly.

- "Blinded by hate our Mother....."

That night as the lions slept Nassor found himself watching Vitani who was laid next to Zola. Vitani looked utterly peaceful and utterly beautiful. The question Arjana had asked him surfaced in his mind

- "What is it with you and Vitani?" Rolling over Nassor tried to ignore the question but it continued to nag in his mind.

Climbing to his paws Nassor left the cave in an effort to clear his head. Walking under a star filled sky he thought about Vitani. A couple of hours later Nassor found himself in the mountains. In the passing couple of hours he had run over all the time he had spent with Vitani and the rage he had felt when Chumvi's son had commented on her beauty. Climbing up a large tree he sat on a branch.

- "Why did I let Chipo's comments affect me? Vitani.....we've been friends for a while now...

Damn why is that stupid comment getting under my fur? It is not as though Vitani and I are together or anything."

The words died in his mind. His eyes went wide, his heart began beating wildly. He looked deep inside. In a flash everything became clear.

- "Great Kings I'm a fool. Those feelings of being happy with Vitani.....I've fallen in love with her. I'm just like my father. Now it all makes sense.

Nassor stop it! She might not feel the same way. We tried to kill each other in the past, three scars on her shoulder came from our claws. Even if she does then what? We've not talked about the future. What if she decides to make this place her home? Will you stay or go back?"

A few hours later Chumvi found Nassor sitting despondently in the tree. The older lion easily climbed the tree and sat next to Nassor. For a moment they sat side by side in silence.

- "So this is where you got to. Want to tell me what is bugging you?" Chumvi asked casually.

- "Can we keep it confidential?"

- "Confession time is it? Fine provided you're not confessing murder," Chumvi said with a wink.

- "I've not committed murder but what I'm about to say might hurt someone."

- "Out with it Nassor, let's hear the worst."

- "I'm in love with Vitani. I'm not sure whether or not to tell her."

- "Well that is better than I was expecting. I can see what you mean about causing pain. How long?"

- "I've only just realized tonight thanks to your son's jibe earlier on. A while I guess. She's my friend. Three scars on her shoulder are my doing."

- "Don't feel guilty about them, things were a lot different when they happened. The past cannot be changed, Vitani understands that."

- "How could there ever be a future for me and her?"

- "Masika is younger than me, I looked after her when she was a cub. Falling in love with her.....I never believed it possible. It is possible for love to overcome the past. For your own sake tell her. Even if nothing comes.....the uncertainty will drive you mad."

- "Then I'll tell her tomorrow. Those caves we went to.....are they private?"

- "Most of the time and especially at sunset. In fact I'll make sure they are," Chumvi replied.

The following day was a try one for the pride. Several issues within the kingdom that had been bubbling along for a while boiled over. Between dealing with fights over females, a family of vultures accusing one of their number of betraying them, a female meerkat throwing her pregnant daughter out and several other incidents the pride was kept busy.

That evening Nassor and Vitani walked side by side along a section of the way well away from the pride. It was the first time they had spent any time alone since they had arrived a couple of months previously. Now full members of the pride both knew the situation had changed dramatically. Nearing the gorges the pair stopped looking at each other with uncertainty. Both had a mass of thoughts itching to burst out yet neither quite knew where to begin.

- "Vitani since coming here you seem happier," Nassor began as they walked into one of the gorges.

- "I am happier. Everything I hoped for has happened. Zola has helped me so much. For the first time I feel free to be who I decide to be, rather than what others expect me to be," Vitani replied, a smile gracing her face.

- "That's great," Nassor replied, making an effort to smile.

- "You seem happier as well," Vitani replied as they walked along a beach.

- "Yeh I am. Majani has been honest from the start about who she is and why she acted as she did all those years ago. I can't say fairer than that."

- "Zola has been the same, it has helped me a lot, and how open she has been."

- "It sure beats the lies we grew up," Nassor replied with a hint of resentment in his voice.

Entering the cave network the pair fell silent. The tide had risen. They raced through the gorges in the light of the setting sun. Nassor was leading then Vitani would lead. They jumped over gaps in the rocks sailing effortlessly over the water. At times they landed on top of each other in a jumble of paws. Each time they tried to beat each other in the distance they could land away from the gap. The sunlight shone brightly on the rocks. Reaching the highest point in the whole area they dived into the warm, clear water. Surfacing they looked at one another as the waves suddenly changed, pushing them into each other so their lips touched. Blushing they looked at each other. Their hearts beating faster.

- "Vitani you are the most one amazing lioness I have ever met," Nassor said softly.

- "How can you say that to someone like me after the things I have done?" Vitani asked in disbelief.

- "I have seen beneath the warrior to the soul inside. I love you Vitani, never in my life have I felt this way before."

- "Nassor I feel the same way about you. I love you."

Smiling with utter joy the pair swam side by side through the gorges. The sunset turned the water a swirling mixture of deep orange and pink. Shoals of fish swam around them in a heart shape. The waves crashed gently around them throwing up patches of rainbow light. In the coastal paradise Nassor and Vitani had found something beyond their wildest dreams.

Choosing our fate

The coming together of Vitani and Nassor as a couple marked a change in the dynamic of the pride. It began a time of utter bliss. The third birthdays of the pair past along with those of Arjana and Hasina. They had left their teenage years behind them and emerged as young adults.

One day while the entire pride was drinking at the river estuary when a flock of birds in front of them. The birds had brought news from the Pridelands. The pride listened intently as the birds told of recent events. Simba had been involved in a severe accident that had resulted in several broken bones. The accident had weakened him and it would take a long time for the injuries to fully heal. In the wake of the accident Kopa had come into ascendance, having more power over what took place in the kingdom. At the same time Aketch was taking ever increasing responsibility from Nala. Imoo and Kamaria were also taking a prevalent role, acting as Kopa and Aketch's deputies. Sarafina had passed away to the sadness of all. Kovu and Kiara were taking active roles yet there was still hostility towards Kovu. Ni was growing weaker, his leg had been gored by a wildebeest and the years were taking their toll.

After the birds had finished giving the news the lions looked at one another. Fear ran in the hearts of Nassor, Masika and Majani for their parents. The situation had greatly changed since Nassor and Vitani had left. The news of Simba was a shock and that of Ni was near terrifying.

Overwhelmed with emotions and questions Nassor and Vitani left the pride. The desire to run was so strong that they just ran without taking heed of direction. After a while they stopped on a section of cliff. They sat in silence trying to make sense of what they had been told. The silence was deafening while the tension was almost unbearable.

- "Dad sounds in a bad way....." Nassor said, his voice cracking.

- "He is an old lion. When we left we both knew things would change back there....." Vitani said hesitantly.

- "I promised. I always promised to go back. We've never talked about what we might do once we'd met Majani and Zola."

- "We couldn't. We didn't know for sure how they would treat us."

- "I like this kingdom, being here with you is fantastic. I need to talk to Majani," Nassor rambled.

- "You want to go back and take Majani with you," Vitani replied in a detached tone.

- "Yeh if she'll go. Vitani all I want is to be with you. You're happy here," Nassor replied looking away.

- "I'm not sure.....I've not though about the future. I'm going to ask Zola how she'd feel about going back with me," Vitani stammered.

- "You sure that is a good idea?"

- "No. Maybe. It might just finally put the past to rest. Think about it. For years Nala has wondered what happened to Zola. Simba has questions and fears about what she might do. If they met.....

- "That sounds so crazy that it might just work," Nassor replied.

Together they returned to the pride who were waiting nervously at the caves. The pride had had time to think. Seeing their family the pair asked for a private word. Zola accepted yet Majani refused outright.

- "Just say what you want," Majani snapped angrily.

- "I'd like you to go back to the Pridelands with me," Nassor said calmly.

- "I knew it! Well the answer is no."

- "Why? Father misses you. Aketch has unresolved issues. I'm not expecting you to stay, just to make your peace with them," Nassor replied coolly.

- "I chose my fate years ago," Majani replied.

- "Majani don't be so dismissive of the idea," Chumvi said jumping in.

- "By all accounts you left under a cloud. Don't play innocent, whenever there has been news from the Pridelands you've asked about your family."

- "We all have our lives. Going to them won't do any good," Majani said harshly.

- "You're wrong. The pain from your actions has never left them. Seeing them would clear the air and allow them both to move on. All Dad wants is to see you again and know you're happy. At the very least you owe Aketch an explanation for abandoning her," Nassor replied forcefully.

- "Oh very smart Nassor emotional blackmail. I will think about what you have said but no promises."

Majani left the pride for her stint on border duty without a backward glance. Delmar and Chumvi exchanged worried glances. Majani could very unpredictable when she was upset. She doesn't do emotion and in her own eyes had put the past behind her. At the same time Chumvi and Masika slipped away leaving their cubs confused. Moments later Zola and Vitani walked away leaving their family worried.

Vitani and Zola walked along the beach for a while lost in thought. Walking into the sea they swam out to the small jungle island. Reaching the island they sat on the sea shore unsure how to

deal with the situation that confronted them. In the trees behind them birds sang, the waves crashed on the shore line and the calls of dolphins drifted across the waves.

- "The news has raised a lot of questions. You never mentioned your future," Zola began gently.

- "Zola there is no right for me to ask....I'd like you to go back with me. Not to stay....to meet Simba.....Nala would love to see you."

- "I had a feeling you would ask that of me."

- "Simba fears you. If you and he could make peace."

- "I know what you are trying to say. I am the true heir who lived during Scar's reign. I am the unknown. Still a shadow is cast by the past," Zola replied darkly.

- "The past has been almost put behind us. Perhaps you and Simba meeting could finally allow that to happen," Vitani replied, a trace of hope in her voice.

- "I will think about it. Delmar..... my cubs.....whatever I decide effects them," Zola replied downheartedly.

The following day the entire pride gathered together at their cliff home. The pride was apprehensive, especially Arjana and Penina, terrified at what their parents were going to say. Standing Delmar looked around the pride.

- "I won't explain why we are here. What do those involved in the matter at paw say? The choices made will affect the entire pride," Delmar said, his aurar radiating power.

- "Hasina and I are going back. Hasina has asked to accompany me," Masika said softly.

- "I and Chipo will be staying. Too much has happened for me to face returning to the land. As yet Chipo is too young for the journey without risk to his life," Chumvi said standing up.

Next to their parents Hasina and Chipo nodded in agreement with everything that had been said. Hasina had always been curious about the land of her parent's birth, she especially to meet her grandmother who Masika had told stories about.

- "I'm still thinking about it," Majani said coolly.

- "I might go back it all depends on the rest of you."

- "I'd like you to go but I am not gonna force you cause that sure as heck won't work," Nassor muttered darkly.

The eyes of the pride flittered to Zola and Vitani. The pair seemed oblivious to the looks they were getting. Taking a deep breath Zola stood up.

- "I have decided to return to the Pridelands. The shadows of the past will not be banished until Simba and I meet."

- "What will happen to us Mother?" asked Arjana, a look of confusion on his face.

- "That is for you to decide along with your sister. Arjana you are an adult capable of choosing for yourself. If you wish then you are welcome to go with me. Penina as princess you need to remain here least something befalls Arjana. I cannot take the risk of taking both heirs. Do you understand why you have to stay?" Zola said gently.

- "I understand. Mummy will you be coming back?" asked Penina, her eyes full of fear.

- "Without a doubt. This kingdom is my home, nothing will stop me coming home even if it takes me a thousand years."

All most instantly a babble of chatter broke out, the tension melting away like snow in summer. Yet despite all that had been said they all knew there would be changes. Under the sun they began to plan the return trip to the Pridelands. Nassor and Vitani shared the knowledge gained from their journey. The lions combined all their knowledge both gain personally and what they had learned from others over the years.

Yet in the midst of the planning Majani kept throwing cynical comments. As day turned to evening her jibes became increasingly aimed at Nassor and Zola and increasingly cruel. In reply Nassor argued back point for point. In response Majani aimed her comments to provoke him to react. When she made a comment about Kula being unhappy about her little golden cub being in love with warrior the daughter of Zira, Nassor snapped.

With a rage filled roar he pounced on Majani, attacking her with his full force. Majani was thrown flying into a large rock pool. Her eyes burning she jumped to her paws retaliating with equal force. The pair fought with ferocity, slashing each other with their claws and biting with their teeth. Without warning Chumvi and Delmar jumped into the fray in a desperate attempt to separate the pair. Using all their strength the males managed to separate the pair, Chumvi pinning Nassor to the floor while Delmar was able to push Majani into a corner between two rocks. Nassor and Majani were gasping for breath, blood dripping from a number of wounds and their eyes filled with rage. Pushing Chumvi off him Nassor stalked away from the pride. Glaring at the Delmar Majani pushed past him Delmar oblivious to the comments. Limping she stalked away up off to her cave. Looking around Delmar, Chumvi, Zola and Masika exchanged a dark look. This what just what they had expected to happen.

- "We will have to keep an eye on those two," Chumvi said in a low voice.

- "This was bound to happen at some point. Perhaps if we give both of them some space they will sort it out themselves," Masika replied, concern evident in her voice.

- "We can hope. Maj doesn't like to talk about her emotions or the past," Zola said, shaking her head.

- "We all need to try to take a step away from the emotion of the fight," Delmar said.

- "Our laws have to stand."

- "The laws have to be adapted in this case. For Majani to come to terms and for Nassor to accept....." Zola sighed.

That same evening Zola, Delmar and their cubs walked through the gorges, playing on the beaches, along the paths, swimming in the water and exploring the caves. As they walked they talked about Zola's plan to go back to the Pridelands. As their mother spoke the Arjana and Penina listening intently, asking thoughtful questions and receiving honest answers. Delmar spoke when he felt he needed to, providing a reassuring presence in the midst of the uncertainty. Listening the tales Penina felt a little calmer as and began to understand what was happening around her.

Standing on the edge of a cliff they looked down to see Majani standing below them completely lost in thought. She did not look happy at all and was unaware they were above her. Before they could speak Nassor appeared on the beach. Words passed between the pair then Nassor looked up. His eyes went wide in horror. Majani then looked up, a look of anger filling her eyes. Seconds later the pair walked off away from the gorges.

- "Mummy will Aunti Majani and Nassor be okay?" Penina asked, her face and voice filled with worry.

- "They will be Penina," Zola replied smiling softly.

Over Penina head Delmar, Arjana and Zola exchanged the same looks of concern. All three knew what could happen yet wished to spare Penina any further worry. Penina was young and innocent.

The following day as the pride rose in the morning light Majani and Nassor reappeared having been out all night. Calmly Majani told the pride she would be returning to the Pridelands with the others. Both lions refused to say what had passed between them. The entire pride breathed a

collective sigh of relief. In the morning light the planning began in earnest yet despite the agreements of Delmar and Zola some of the pride still objected, especially those older than Delmar and those of Kopa's age and younger. In the midst of the arguing Ramala let out a mighty roar that caught everyone in their tracks.

- "The future in this instance is clear to me. Zola must return to the kingdom of her birth. The shadow of the past still hangs over her. Now that Simba knows of her existence there is a threat to us all. Only once the two heirs meet will the past ever be fully reconciled."

- "Let the past die than once and for all," Majani snapped her eyes blazing with fury.

- "We all live the consequences of our actions Majani," Ramala replied in an even tone.

- "It is not our actions, Scar did all this not Zola."

- "Majani the past is the past!" Zola yelled leaping to her paws.

- "Whatever has happened I will deal with. I knew this would come one day in fact I wished for it. The Pridelands were my home. Going back will allow me to make peace with my family. My father's legacy. I alone of his cubs lived during his reign. Had I fought the future would have been very different."

Silence descended on the group as her worlds sunk in. turning away Zola walked off into the savannah leaving the pride in silence. In that moment they saw the truth of a past Zola had long hidden. In truth the pride new very little of what had gone before in her early life. The arrival of Vitani and Nassor had opened their eyes to some facts but the implications and intricacies were largely unknown.

A few days later the travellers assembled at the edge of the kingdom on the mountain border. Sadness was written across the faces of many of the members that echoed what was in their hearts. Mixed in was a deep undercurrent of tension, some members resented what had been decided and some had chosen to stay way. Heartfelt goodbyes were said. Chumvi and Chipo's hearts filled with sadness.

- "Come back to me Zola," Delmar whispered nuzzling her.

- "I will fight to the death if I have to.....I have to go," Zola replied, her voice breaking with pain.

- "Take care of Penina."

- "I will Zola," Delmar replied turning to Arjana.

- "Behave yourself, do as your mother and aunt tells you."

- "We will Dad," Arjana replied embracing his father.

- "Penina be a good lioness while I am away. It breaks my heart leaving you. I promise I will come home," Zola said hugging her daughter tightly while tears fell down her cheeks.

- "I'll be a good lioness Mummy. I don't want you to go, do you have to?" Penina pleaded.

- "I have to go. There is something important I have to do in Pridelands. I promise to come home."

- "I'll wait for you Mummy."

- "I know you will do. Take care of your Father for me," Zola whispered licking her daughter's cheek.

Looking at each other the family smiled sadly at one another, their hearts breaking yet Arjana and Zola standing resolute. Turning around they faced Nassor and Vitani who were stood a little away from the pride.

- "It has been a pleasure to have both of you in this pride. Should either of you wish to return here with Zola you will be welcome," Delmar said smiling.

- "Thank you Delmar.....I hope we meet again," Vitani replied bowing low.

One by one the lions said their goodbyes, tears falling from many eyes as the reality hit home. Majani look utterly cool with no trace of emotion on her face other than a cool detachment and an almost scornful view of the emotions. Stepping forward Ramala blessed each of the travellers in turn.

- "Go with the blessings of all may the Great Kings past guide you all. Never forget this kingdom. Zola as queen your status is equal to that of Simba, he should treat you with the respect befitting your rank. Allow the past to be healed," Ramala said.

- "I know what has to be done. I will return on my life that I swear," Zola replied.

Turning away the travellers crossed the border. The past was upmost in their minds as it now was a herald of their future. At the highest path all turned back to look down on the kingdom, the sea glittering far below.

Part 3: The Circle of Life

C7 Return to Pride Rock

A number of weeks had passed since the travellers had left the kingdom by the sea. Standing on the very same spot that Simba has stood on his return they could see the Pridelands stretched out before them in the late afternoon sun. Far in the distance PrideRock stood proudly. Gazing across the land Zola felt a tightness in her chest. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined returning to the land of her birth. At her side the cubs gazed at the places they had heard about. Side by side Zola and Masika exchanged a look, so much had changed since they were last here.

With Vitani and Nassor in the lead the travellers made their way across the kingdom. They tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, taking less used paths and avoiding any lions they scented. For a while they swam in the shallow parts of the river to mask their scents and at times had to hide in the foliage. With each passing second the tension increased, Vitani making everyone swear not to let on about her and Nassor. Now they had returned the pair had suddenly realised their relationship might not go down so well with their families. In a desperate move to ease the path to acceptance Vitani had decided discretion was the best option.

Reaching Pride Rock they travellers saw the lions lazing on the rocks, Kopa and Imoo lazing under the shade of the overhang. Seeing the travellers the pair let out loud roars and leapt to their

paws, skidding to a halt at the sight. Instantly the other lions rallied, all gazing wide eyed in amazement. Running forward Imoo gasped. Seconds later Nala ran down the path. Time seemed to stand still as Nala and Zola caught sight of each other. They saw how much the other had changed. Gone was the young rebel leader who had once left in fear of her life, in her place a wise and regal queen. Gone too was the confused teenager who had fought her heritage. Now stood a cunning, dark, powerful, intelligent queen with a hint of ruthlessness.

- "Zola welcome home, it is wonderful to see you," Nala said, a serene smile on her face.

- "Nala time has healed this land and you have kept your word," Zola replied.

- "For as long as possible," Nala replied smiling slightly.

Then behind Nala appeared Simba looking every inch the powerful king. Tensions simmered as the heirs of Mufasa and Scar took the measure of one another.

- "Zola welcome home. I am Simba king of the Pridelands."

- "I know who you are," Zola replied.

Then Masika stepped forward causing the adults to chock in amazement. From the back of the pride Aine ran forward, embracing Masika with tears in her eyes. The tension broken a stream of hurried chatter followed that introduced everyone. At the sight of Majani, Ni walked forward with tear filled eyes. Seeing her sister Aketch felt her world tilt, anger and sadness combined in her heart, all the while Majani maintaining her cool demeanour.

Turning their gaze on Vitani and Nassor all members of Simba's pride greet them with delighted as the travellers were lead up onto Pride Rock. Settling down the travellers sat together. Slowly the travellers told their story. Simba's pride listened intently. After a while Rafiki walked into their mist, greeting Zola with a warm hug before turning to face all.

- "The last secret of the past has been revealed. Simba, Zola blood ties you together. Peace must exist between you. The shadows of the past must be banished."

- "Rafiki I want peace...it is going to take time.....I want," Simba began hesitantly.

- "We are unknown to each other," Zola broke in.

- "Simba the choices made long ago were my own. This land is not my home. I only returned so Nala could learn of my fate and so the past could be laid to rest."

- "We need to spend time as a family," Nala said gently.

The lions nodded the Nala's wise words. In a fluid motion the group split, Masika, Hasina, Zola and Arjana going with Aine to join the other former Outsiders while Majani allowed herself to be lead away by Ni.

A short time later Ni, Aketch, Nassor and Majani stood together in a quiet cave well away from prying ears. Kula stood outside, having seen the need for the four to talk alone first before she joined them. The lions stared at each other taking in the changes in one another's appearance and unsure where to begin. Looking at his eldest cub Ni broke the silence by telling her what had happened to him and Aketch then asking Majani about her life. Utterly cool and composed Majani answered her father's questions, Ni feeling a spike of sadness when he heard she did not have cubs. Listening to the exchange the anger Aketch had been feeling boiled to the surface fuelled by

her sister's cool almost icy demeanour.

- "How can you stand there acting as if nothing has happened?" Aketch cried angrily.

- "Aketch there is no need," Ni implored.

- "I have no done nothing," Majani shot back.

- "You abandoned me when I needed you most! For months I blamed myself. Do you even care?"
Aketch stammered angrily.

- "Akerch that is enough!" Ni roared.

- "Dad she left.....she comes excepting me to....."

- "I expect nothing" Majani roared, her eyes flashing dangerously.

- "If you wish to hate me then so be it. Do not try to make me feel guilty over the past. I acted to survive."

- "You don't care at all!"

- "Accept me as I am or not Aketch that is your choice," Majani spat.

Aketch turned away unable to face her sister. Calmly Nassor walked over to join Majani taking her point of view on the past to the astonishment of Ni and Aketch. Stepping into the midst he tried to ease the tensions.

- "Use this time to make peace with Majani," Nassor said.

- "She isn't even sorry for what she caused! I hate her," Aketch half screamed.

- "Aketch relax will you. Majani has explained why she left. Whatever happened back then just accept it."

- "You are taking her side in all this, Nassor how?" Aketch hissed.

- "There are not sides in this Aketch. Look this isn't why we came here," Nassor said.

- "Leave it Nassor no worlds will make a difference, Aketch has clearly decided to hate me," Majani snapped angrily.

- "ENOUGH," Ni roared glaring at his cubs.

- "We are a family. Aketch you are soon to be a mother. Accept Majani has changed, accepted her

reasons for leaving just as I had to."

Meanwhile Zola, Masika, their cubs and Vitani had gathered with the former Outsiders on some rocks in the small wooded area. Vitani and Zola had just recounted their tales of their separate adventures and their time spent together in Zola's kingdom. The news of his father meant very little to Kovu though the news of Zira's birth pride had been like a knife through his heart. To all it was clear why Zira had become the lioness that she had. Sitting there Zola told them about life in her kingdom, making it quite clear that she intended to go home. At the same time Masika chipped in, adding her own views on the situation and sharing her own experiences.

- "The pair of you have caused us all no end of worry," Aine said glaring murderously at the pair.

- "Aunt Aine we had little choice. Death would have been involved if we had stayed," Zola said frostily.

- "You are both happy. Now introduce me to your cubs," Aina replied.

The tension broke. The cubs began to chatter. With a smirk at her daughter Aina asked just Masika to explain just how she and Chumvi got together. Blushing from ear to ear Masika began to relate the tale. Looking at her daughter Aina saw a very different lioness to the one she remembered.

That evening the pride and their guests hunted together, the native lions surprised by the

different style and strategies of the travellers. As they ate Simba looked over to where Zola was sat. Catching Simba's look Nassor felt a shiver of tension.

- "So what had been happening here while Vitani and I have been away?" Nassor asked casually.

- "Plenty, where do you want us to start?" Kopa laughed.

- "We can start with your and Aketch's news," Simba replied smiling.

- "Awe Dad did you have to bring that up! They have only just got back, I'd have thought after all the drama of today you'd want to keep that quiet," Kopa replied with a trace of anger.

- "Er not to be rude but what is so important?" Nassor asked looking between father and son.

Kula, Aketch, Ni, Simba, Nala and Kopa exchanged a look, the latter not looking all that happy while Aketch had a radiant smile on her face.

- "Kopa and I are expecting a cub," Aketch said.

- "What!" Nassor said.

- "Oh Nassor don't be so shocked," Aketch replied.

- "Okay I'm just having trouble picturing my tough sister as a mother."

- "Nassor, Majani are you no going to congratulate your sister," Ni asked with disappointment.

- "Congrats," Nassor replied coolly.

- "Likewise," Mjani said coolly.

Looking over at their cubs the adults were disappointed by the reactions to the news, especially those of Nassor and how Kopa had handled the situation. In that moment it had become clear that Kopa was still getting used to the idea. Watching from the side-lines Imoo and Kamaria suddenly spoke up, adding to the surprise further by announcing he and Kamaria were expecting a cub. At this Vitani and Nassor just looked stunned, one piece of cub news was a surprise but two was a pretty big shock. Gasping for breath Vitani congratulated Imoo and Kamaria, delight evident on her face. Next to her Nassor began to talk to Kopa about hunting, eager to change topic as quickly as possible. Smiling with ease Zola and Masika moved closer to Aketch and Kamaria, eager to share their own knowledge. Looking at them Kamaria began to chat with utter ease yet the moment Zola say next to her Aketch walked away with a look of resentment on her face.

- "There was no need for that, I have not done anything to you," Zola snapped angrily.

- "It is my choice who I associate with. Given the history....." Aketch replied haughtily.

Before either lioness could say another word Simba walked between them with his eyes firmly fixed on Zola.

- "Zola at sunset tomorrow you will accompany Nala and I on a patrol of the kingdom. Until we have spoken the fear that divide our prides will remain.....I will not risk the security of this kingdom," Simba said in a firm tone.

- "I look forward to it Simba. I am a queen in my own right so treat me with the respect that is due. I refuse to apologise for the circumstances of my birth," Zola replied in a sly, silky tone that carried a threat.

Look at one another Simba and Zola realized they had reached the point of no return and that their actions in the following 24 hours would decide the fate of both prides for ever.

Midnight Sun

The following sunset Zola and her cubs stood on the edge of Pride Rock looking out across the kingdom. All three felt the weight of the past. For Zola being there brought back bitter sweet memories of her parents, many times she had stood with them on that very spot. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined standing on Pride Rock with her own cub. Yet the feelings were different, she did not feel the sense of belonging anymore.

Walking out of the main cave Simba and Nala stopped in their tracks at the sight of the trio. In that moment they had a glimmer of how different the future could have been if Zola had fought. In image in front of them was that of a queen and her heir. Hearing their approach the trio turned around, a smirk of delight on Zola's face as she saw the looks on Nala and Simba's faces.

- "Arjana go now, what has to be said is for me alone," Zola whispered nuzzling her son.

- "Mum be careful," Arjana said.

- "Simba if you hurt her...."

At that moment Vitani appeared, her eyes cold, calculating and full of suspicion and something akin to hate.

- "Simba consider this a warning. Do not harm my sister. Arjana come with me," Vitani said.

- "Take care," Zola said walking over to her sister.

- "If anything happens to me go to Majani and Maskia. Get yourselves out of here. Swear to me you will get yourselves out of here."

- "Zola on my life I swear to protect myself and your cubs should anything happen to you," Vitani whispered in reply, her eyes blazing.

- "Thank you Vitani that promise means I can go with a lighter heart."

- "Mum please.....don't let Simba," Arjana stammered.

- "Simba has no power over me. The blood of my father runs in me."

Walking away from her son Zola joined Simba and Nala. Together the trio walked down Pride Rock. Passing the base they saw Nassor, Kopa, Imoo, Kovu and Kiara talking underneath the great outcrop. The group appeared to be on the edge of an argument and failed to notice the trio.

In the sunset the trio walked side by side through the savannah. Silence hung like lead while the weight of the past felt like a herd of elephants on their shoulders. They were also aware of the age difference between them. Walking over old ground Zola was overcome by memories of fun times. Nala could see that Zola had changed yet a lot of the characteristics of Zola and Scar were evident too. Nala couldn't help but feel uneasy at how cunning and powerful Zola seemed. Looking at his cousin Simba only saw her parents staring back at him.

After a while the trio arrived at the plateau above the Gorge where a herd of wildebeest were sleeping gently. Looking at each other the lions walked silently through the herd until they came to the edge of the plateau. Knowing her worlds had to be chosen carefully Nala felt torn between her true love and her friend. Taking a deep breath Nala broke the deafening silence.

- "Simba Zola. I have been fortunate to know both of you. The legacy of Scar and Mufasa. Simba you have been able to accept Scar's heirs Imoo and Kovu. Zola you willingly left and rebelled once you had learnt the truth of your parent's actions. You each acted for the good of the kingdom. Hatred should not divide you."

Simba and Zola looked at each other. Invisible next to them stood Scar and Zira next to Zola and next to Simba stood Mufasa and Sarabi. The ghosts looked at each other, their eyes filled with fear mingled with hope. The sun set casting all in a pink light.

- "Everything began when Scar betrayed my father. For years I lived in exile consumed by guilt over my Father's death. I cannot forgive Scar for what he did nor for his tyranny. In you all I see is Scar

and Zira. Zola you represent a time of shadowland, the living embodiment of their rule....a different future that could have been. Their hatred was born out of the belief that I killed you," Simba said, pain and anger in his voice.

- "My life changed forever the day I learnt of your father's murder by mine. When Rafiki told me you lived an impossible reality was laid before me. To fight for my father's kingdom despite knowing it was conceived in murder or to find a different path. I believed you would either condemn me to exile or death. I left in the hope you would restore peace and justice. I chose not to let my parent's darkness consume me yet it was you who determined the course of my life. It all comes back to you," Zola said.

Simba was amazed at Zola's words. Zola looked at him coolly and cynically. Nala's eyes were wide, finding Zola's views and demeanour unnerving. Nala could see both points of view. Catching Zola's eye Nala saw that she too understood Simba's view, clearly Zola's time away had given her perspective on the past.

Breaking away Zola walked down into the Gorge with Simba and Nala walking a step behind her. Walking down they came to the exact spot where Mufasa and Scar had stood to watch the stampede. The ghosts had walked with the trio. From Scar's eye shone regret and remorse while Mufasa's showed forgiveness. Zola and Simba stared down at the spot where Mufasa had lost his life with Nala standing between them. The sun set plunging them into utter darkness yet up above them a new moon and million stars twinkled brightly.

- "It all began here," Simba whispered in a hollow voice.

- "I was an innocent cub. Years of suffering, bloodshed resulted from one murder in this place."

- "By the same token the actions of your pride caused the deaths of my parents and brother. Scar might not have died by your paws but you hold some responsibility for his death," Zola said silkily.

- "He was a tyrant! He killed my father! He tried to take back his old power even after I had given him a chance! He deserved his fate!"

- "Even now the hatred remains in your heart. For all your pride has fought against my family I do not hate you nor blame you for the events that led to their deaths. All you see of Scar is the murder and Zira you see the rebel leader. I love them. They loved me there was kindness, love and compassion in them."

Simba was startled by the last few words, he found it possible to believe that either lion could love.

- "See me. Judge me of the queen that I am not the legacy I represent. Nala had to live through the shadow times yet she was able to look past my parentage. Oh in many ways I am like my parents. The darkness that controlled them is wielded by me," Zola said.

An aurora of power mingled with darkness swirled around Zola. Simba moved to speak yet stopped as her worlds slowly sunk in. the ghosts looked at each other. All four ghosts suddenly became visible to the amazement of the living lions.

- "Simba the time has come for reconciliation," Mufasa said.

- "Scar lives in Zola as I live in you. Yet just as you are not me so Zola is not Scar. You must let go of your hatred so peace can return to this kingdom."

- "Father how can? It could all have been different. If Zola had fought or I'd have known she was alive," Simba replied.

- "Simba it does not do well to dwell on what might have been. Zola was given a choice just as you were. You had the choice to live in exile or return to take your rightful place as king. Zola was given the choice to stay to fight or leave to make a new life in hope she might find happiness and allow peace to come to this land. Neither choice was easy yet both for you to choose. Without Zola's selfless sacrifice your path would have been far harder. See your cousin for who she truly is," Mufasa replied gently.

- "My son I remember Zola fondly," Sarabi said nuzzling Simba.

- "If she was all that you fear that she would not have left. I bear no ill will towards her. Do not condemn her for the circumstances of her birth."

Enfolded in the love and security of his parents Simba allowed himself to relax. Their words were comforting yet surprising and full of wisdom. In his heart Simba yearned to be able to rewrite the past.

- "Mother.....I want....I know it must end. It is hard to accept her existence was hidden from me,"

- "Nala acted out of love for both you and Zola. To save a life she trusted in the hope that a better future would emerge," Sarabi said looking kindly at Nala.

- "I have forgiven Scar and Zira. I do not expect that of you just that you make peace with the past," Mufasa said.

Turning away Simba stared at Zira and Scar with hatred in his eyes. Both were hugging Zola, tears of joy falling from all their eyes.

- "Zola I am so proud of the queen you have become," Scar whispered.

- "My daughter all those years in my heart I knew you lived," Zira said.

- "I never wanted to hurt you.....I couldn't stay," Zola replied, her voice breaking.

- "Oh Zola we understand, you saw what we could not," Zira replied.

- "We do not blame you. It was out hatred that decided our fates," Scar replied, his voice heavy with regret.

- "Zola you have become the lioness I never could be. Be happy I love you," Zira whispered.

- "Go home to Delmar. Do not allow my crimes to destroy your life. Live free. I love you, I am proud of you," Scar said smiling.

- "I love both of you, thank you for accepting my choice," Zola said smiling.

Both sides of the family turned to face each other, the older generation smiling warmly at each other. Simba looked on the face of his uncle.

- "Simba all I ask is that you accept my daughter. Nothing I say will ever atone of my crimes yet she is blameless," Scar said, genuine remorse evident in his voice.

Simba and Nala gasped, never had they imagined that statement. The pair looked at each other slowly feeling the change in the pair. The lions had come full circle. Scar and Mufasa moved to stand next to one another. Both looked utterly at ease. The hatred had gone only peace was between the two brothers. A patch of moonlight suddenly fell on Scar, Zola and Zira illuminating the happiness on their faces. A life so changed by refusing to let hatred dominate Zola had broken free from the cycle of pain. Slowly the family felt the threads of broken lives knitting together.

- "Zola I accept you as princess of the kingdom," Simba said.

The magic words lifted the last trace of hatred and so the last traces of the past melted away.

At the break of dawn Simba and Zola stood side by side on the edge of Pride Rock bathed in morning light. Mufasa and Scar standing behind them. Walking out of the cave the pride looked at the scene in utter awe. In perfect unity Simba and Zola let out mightily roars that echoed across the savannah. At the base of pride rock the pride gathered around Nala who was looking up, pride and delight written across her face. The families had at last been united.

Hope of the future

The unity of Simba and Zola banished the last tensions within Simba's pride. The change was almost instantaneous. Simba and Nala seemed to visibly relax and age overnight. The appearance of Zira had allowed Vitani to make peace with her mother. Hours after Simba and Zola had stood together Zola, Vitani and Zira had travelled to the Outlands. What passed between the three had healed wounds. The ghosts of Scar, Mufasa, Sarabi and Zira had remained for one day bringing much joy to their decedents. When they had left it had been a true, happy goodbye that had marked the end of the era of war. Nassor too seemed changed, he was now challenging his parents and taking full control of his own life and expressing his opinions. Watching the Vitani and Nassor the

pride saw just how much the pair had changed during their time away. The changes were hard for the pride to come to terms with. Aine and Nala began to realize Nassor and Vitani had gone through something so profound that they could not simply pick up the threads of their old lives.

A few days had passed since that glorious morning of unity. On the banks of the mighty river the pride lay in the shade of trees and bushes. In the glistening blue water Arjana, Kopa, Hasina and Kiara played tag. On the bank Zola and Nala were laid together watching the cubs play. In the tree above them Nassor chatted to his parents while under a large bush Vitani spoke to Kovu. Turning away from the cubs Zola looked at Nala.

- "Nala all that I had set out to achieve has come to pass. I am delighted to be here, to see this land and pride recover," Zola began softly.

- "However it is time we travellers to return to our home."

- "I understand Zola, I am so glad you were able to come back," Nala replied.

- "We plan to leave in three days' time," Zola replied smiling at Nala.

At her words time seemed to stand still. Vitani and Nassor looked at her than back at one another. Fear and in trepidation coursing through their veins. While the announcement was no surprise the time limit was. Looking around Vitani left her place by Kovu, moments later she was joined by Zola and side by side the sisters headed off down the river bank.

Under the dense foliage the pair were virtually camouflaged. For a while they walked in utter silence consumed by thoughts. At last they reached a small gap in the foliage where it gave way to a rocky crag. Standing side by side they watched the traffic of the river.

- "Vitani it was not my intention to upset you," Zola said, a hint of remorse in her voice.

- "Zola that isn't what has upset me. I've got used to being with you all," Vitani replied.

- "The thought of not seeing you again..."

- "Vitani you and Nassor are more than welcome to go return home with us," Zola replied.

- "Go back...." Vitani whispered in wonder.

- "If you so wish it. I do not make any demand of you. If you wish to remain here that too is your right, I simply offer the chance."

- "I need to talk to Nassor. I love him but....this place...it doesn't feel the same as your kingdom. Being here....I'm trying to fit into an old life that no longer seems right."

- "I understand. I feel the same way. Sometimes a journey changes you so much that it is impossible to go back to an old life. Talk to Nassor tonight only then will you be able to decide a path," Zola replied.

Returning to their family the pair found them still relaxing. Their disappearance was not even commented on. Within seconds of arriving back they were dragged into a water fight that had been instigated by Arjana and Hasina and now involved half the pride. Under the heat of the afternoon sun the happy, sometimes startled calls of the lions drifted down river as the young members tried to outdo the adults. Soon everyone was dripping wet from nose to tail much to the annoyance of some members.

A few hours later the sun was setting over the savannah turning the sky a mixture of yellow, deep orange, pink and red. On the riverbank the lions were getting up to head back home. Looking at each other Vitani and Nassor nodded in understanding then turned to face their family.

- "Mum, Dad I'm gonna stay out for a bit. I need to talk to Vitani," Nassor said casually.

- "The pair of you can talk at home surely?" Kula asked raising an eyebrow.

- "It'd be better out here, I'll catch up with you later," Nassor replied coolly.

Looking at the pair Kula and Ni exchanged a look of surprise, unable to imagine what was so important that couldn't be talked about at home. As he left Kovu looked at his sister with concern and at Nassor with distrust. Kovu had been less than happy with the amount of time the pair had been spending together and struggled to adjust to the changes in Vitani.

Turning away Nassor and Vitani walked through the darkening until they reached a small patch of jungle forest. Jumping onto a very thick tree trunk they looked down at their reflections in the water, they were one. Yet their reflections seemed different, the lions sharing back were powerful and confident adults not the confused and half broken teenagers.

- "Did you ever imagine we would come back with all our plans achieved?" Nassor asked gently.

- "Never. I never thought back then everything would turn out so well," Vitani replied softly.

- "It does seem incredible, our crazy plan has worked out beyond our wildest dreams. We made it possible, us, two mixed up former enemies together."

- "Things have come full circle. Nassor I love you so much."

- "Vitani there is no one else like you in the world, no one I have ever truly cared about until you came along. We don't live under illusions of happily ever after. We both remember what Delmar said."

- "That we would be forever welcome in this kingdom with open paws. Zola and Majani will leave forever..." Vitani replied, tears glistening in her eyes.

- "We have to choose where we belong. Vitani I love you but I won't try to make you stay with me if you want something different to me," Nassor said, sincerity and sadness in his eyes.

- "Nassor please be let us be honest with each other about our feelings. The Pridelands has never been home for me. The past has always been casting a shadow."

- "This place was all I'd ever known but now...I've seen, experienced so many things. I've come home but.....I've changed."

- "So have I. I've finally found out who I am. The pride has changed too..."

- "No kidding. Aketch and Kopa, Imoo and Kamaria both having cubs.....it all seems neat here...."

- "Zola told me some journeys change a lion so much that is impossible for them return to an old life...."

- "She was right" Nassor sighed.

- "To much has happened...for me at least....."

- "I'm not who I used to be. I've made my peace with my past but I don't belong here," Vitani said, tears falling freely from her eyes.

- "I was always seeking something. I've found it. I've found you and my true home..."

- "I can't stay here. I want to go home with Zola. Her kingdom is my home," Vitani replied.

- "I found my home in that sea side kingdom," Nassor replied, a smile flickering onto his face.

- "Do you truly mean that?"

- "Without a doubt. I belong there with Majani and you. I've never felt so alive until now. We have a chance to be happy. I'm not going to throw away that when staying would be a lie. We go back together."

- "Together we can be free and happy," Vitani replied.

Under the star filled sky Vitani and Nassor kissed deeply sealing their futures in a spark of love. The past was long gone only the truth of their own hearts remained.

The following morning found Nassor and Vitani curled up together on a bed of soft grass in the hollow of a tree. Stretching they smiled before climbing to their paws. The sunrise reflected off the water bathing both of them in a haze of yellowy red. Side by side with their heads held high they walked back to Pride Rock. Arriving at the rock they found the pride just waking up with Kovu and Ni anxiously looking out across the savannah. As soon as Vitani and Nassor walked up to the rock Kovu sprang in front of them, cold hard fury written across his face. Behind him Ni looked equally furious.

- "Where have you been? I've been worrying all night!" Kovu yelled furiously glaring at Vitani.

- "I can take care of myself. I do not answer to you," Vitani snapped.

- "I'm your brother it is my job to make sure you are safe. What have you been doing out all night

with him?" Kovu demanded, shooting a purely murderous look at Nassor.

- "I do not have to explain my actions to you. Since when did you care or have a problem with me spending time with Nassor?"

- "Vitani, Nassor both of you will explain yourselves this instant!" Ni roared angrily.

- "What were you doing all night?"

- "Dad cool it now isn't the time or place for this," Nassor replied firmly yet calmly.

- "Now is exactly the time. I don't care what you have been allowed to get away with in Zola's kingdom but while you live here you obey my rules," Nni snapped glaring at Nassor.

- "Out with it Vitani and don't try to lie to me, I'm your brother remember I see through your lies," Kovu snarled almost murderously.

Looking at the pair Vitani and Nassor felt a wave of anger race through their blood. In front of them, drawn by the arguing, Kiara, Kula, Aina, Zola, Aketch and Majani appeared. Looking up the scene the travellers walked down to join the pair causing a ripple of shock to run through the group. United as one a message passed between them, in their hearts Vitani and Nassor realized now was the moment. Above them to their surprise Kiara walked in-between the two sides, her eyes full of compassion.

- "Vitani Nassor say whatever you have to," Kiara whispered.

All eyes fixed on Vitani and Nassor, some full of anger and suspicion other full of understanding. Tension rippled through the air as more lions arrived on the rocks drawn by the commotion. High above them on the edge of Pride Rock Imoo, Kopa and Simba watched with in trepidation.

- "Vitani and I will be going back with Majani and Zola," Nassor said, his voice filled with power.

Stunned silence greeted the announcement from Simba's pride as all tried to make sense of it. Looking at the pair Zola and Majani smiled with delighted as the other travellers pushed their way to the front. Arjana playfully pouncing on Nassor and Hasina hugging Vitani.

- "No! Vitani you have no reason to leave!"

- "Nassor I forbid you to go!"

The voices of Kovu and Ni shattered the delighted mood. Both males had looks of utter fury written across their faces, their body language full of hostility. Facing them Vitani and Nassor narrowed their eyes as an equally furious Aketch and Kula walked up to Ni.

- "Nassor I forbid you to go. This land is your home, it is time for you to act as the adult you are and stop this foolishness," Ni snapped.

- "I am an adult so you cannot stop me. It is my life my choice nothing you can say will stop me," Nassor replied defiantly.

- "Vitani enough of this! Is that why you were out all night? Some stupid idea of leaving? You have no reason to!" Kovu snarled furiously.

- "I have every reason to leave Kovu. I've changed....this land....it isn't home to me," Vitani replied.

- "Don't be ridiculous. Why would you want to leave? What would be more important than family?" Kovu asked looking at his sister in confusion.

In a blinding flash realization struck Kovu and Aketch at the same time, all the strange little instances and the events of last night slotting together in a perfect picture. Utter horror appeared on their faces.

- "No....Nassor tell me you haven't..." Aketch hissed angrily.

- "Vitani you haven't been so stupid..." Kovu snarled.

- "Finally figured it out have you?" Vitani asked.

- "It sure took them long enough," Nassor smirked rolling his eyes.

- "Aketch, Kovu what have you realized?" Ni asked.

- "Nassor I demand an explanation now!"

- "Ni your son and my sister are in a relationship," Kovu spat.

Silence descended once more as the eyes of the entire pride Vitani and Nasser once more. Smirking evilly Nasser and Vitani kissed each other defiantly bringing evil grins of support from Zola, Majani and Arjana. Staring at the pair Kovu, Ni and Aketch roared with utter fury. In a blinding jump Ni and Kovu sprang forward aiming firmly for the pair. Seconds later both fell backwards. Zola stood on top of Kovu, her eyes blazing with ice cold anger. On top of Ni stood Majani with eyes filled with contempt. Nala darted forward only to be blocked by Masika.

- "Do not cross me Kovu, try that trick again you will suffer," Zola whispered.

- "Vitani cannot be with Nasser....he changed her....until he got talking to her she was fine," Kovu spat.

- "Kovu stop being a narrow minded hypocrite. My life is my own. I fell in love with Nasser the same way you fell in love with Kiara. All I have experienced since leaving this land has changed me," Vitani snarled.

- "I cannot let you go with them Vitani, Nasser isn't worthy of you," Kovu gasped.

- "Zola how can you just stand by?"

- "Kovu nothing you say can stop me. I love Nasser and I will leave this kingdom with him no matter what you say," Vitani hissed.

- "Zola please, she will listen to you help me make her see sense," Kovu implored looking up at Zola.

- "Naïve fool, I am fully aware of their relationship. I fully support them," Zola hissed.

The words struck Kovu like a blow to the eye. Deep down he had been praying Zola might have helped him. Before he could say another word angry shouting caught his attention. Looking across both saw Kula, Ni and Aketch arguing furiously with Majani and Nassor. Hatred burned in the eyes of Aketch while cold hard anger filled those of Ni. Standing together Nassor and Majani presented a powerful united team. Their argument had raged as the same time with a similar result.

- "I can't see why any of you object to Vitani and I being together!" Nassor roared.

- "Why then do they?" Arjana asked stepping forward for the first time.

- "Seeing as all the fighting is over I don't see why they would."

- "Me neither, let them answer that question," Zola replied looking from Kovu over to Nassor's family to all the assembled lions.

- "I do not have explain my reasons," Ni spat glaring at Zola.

- "Nassor isn't good enough for her, he caused some of the scars on her shoulder, he forced her to change and he once hated me for loving Kiara," Kovu snapped with contempt.

- "Kovu you are blind to the truth. I'd have thought the events that have taken place would have shown you that lions can change," Zola replied coolly.

- "Kovu please listen to Zola," Kiara implored walking over to them.

- "I support Nassor and Vitani....I'm happy they are together. If going with Zola is what will make Vitani happy then you have to accept that."

- "Kiara thank you for understanding...it means a lot," Vitani said softly while Nassor nodded.

- "I just want you both to be happy. I'll miss and be sad when you go but if that will make you happy then I'm glad," Kiara replied smiling.

Kiara's words seemed to have a calming effect on the watching lions as one by one they began to slip away until only the immediate family of Vitani and Nassor remained. In a calm motion Majani and Zola allowed Ni and Kovu to get up. Forming a circle around Aketch, Ni and Kula, Kopa, Simba and Nala desperately tried to make them reconsider their positions. Standing next to Kovu Kiara pleaded with him to see things in a different light. Backwards and forwards the arguments raged. Words at times so cruel they cut deeper than claws ever could.

Watching from the side lines the hearts of Vitani and Nassor hardened against their family. Suppressing their tears they turned away from their birth families to face Zola and the members of her pride. Zola, Majani, Masika, Hasina, and Arjana gathered around the pair, placing their paws on their bodies with love and compassion shone on their faces. Standing together the travellers became aware just how difficult and different Vitani and Nassor's lives had been in the Pridelands. In that moment Nala and Kiara saw in blinding clarity the situation for how it truly was. Vitani and Nassor had been revealed for what they truly had become, members of Zola's pride who owed no alliance to their former lives.

- "Please all of you listen."

Kiara's voice sounded loud and clear breaking through the tension. Everyone turned to face the princess who was stood between the two groups. Confidence, compassion with a hint of steel shone from her eyes.

- "Ni, Aketch, Kovu please don't be let your own ideas of how Vitani and Nassor should be blind you. They are old enough to decide how they want to live."

- "No Kiara that is the idea of a naïve cub, you may have a life with Kovu but the situation with them is different," Ni snapped.

- "How Ni? What matters is that they love each other."

- "Then they can live together here," Kovu said angrily.

- "If we are being forced to accept their relationship then they can live here. That is the price they must pay if we are to accept their relationship."

- "You self-serving manipulative son of a hyena! Have you gone completely deaf? Vitani and Nassor don't feel they belong here they want to go home with us," Arjana snarled walking forwards.

- "Stay out of this, none of this is your affair, what do you know anyway?"

- "Well Uncle Kovu it is my affair. I've lived with Nassor and Vitani for months and I know a damn sigh more than you."

- "You dare interfere cub carry on like that," Kovu snarled, ignoring the uncle part.

- "Lay one paw on that cub you will face all of us," Zola roared walking over to Arjana.

- "I do not wish to cause more conflict but I will not allow harm to befall members of my pride.

- "Zola on my oath as king I swear to you no harm will befall your pride," Simba said stepping forward.

- "No harm will befall anyone. Nassor and Vitani are old enough to choose for themselves. If they wish to be together then I will give them my blessing. All here will accept their choice with good grace."

Snarling in utter fury Ni, Aketch, Kula and Kovu stalked off away from Pride Rock, raw hatred burning in their eyes as they passed. Shaking her head Nala moved to follow them quickly followed by Aine. The tension suddenly evaporated as Kopa and Simba walked forward to speak to Vitani and Nassor.

- "Thank you Simba," Nassor said gratefully.

- "We never intended to cause trouble. We just want to be accepted."

- "There is no need to be ashamed or feel guilty Nassor," Simba replied smiling gently.

- "I know neither of you wanted this."

- "Simba is correct," Kopa said nuzzling Vitani.

- "No crime has been committed, neither of you are responsible for the reactions."

- "Give them a little time. I understand that is something you have little of but your revelations have come as quite a surprise for them," Simba said.

- "We only have three days Simba that is all," Nassor said firmly.

- "We will leave together regardless of what our families say," Vitani added, a steely gaze in her eyes

The hours passed. Morning turned to afternoon then afternoon slipped into evening then faded into night. The news of what had happened had spread through the pride like wildfire, each member coming to their own opinion. In the single course of a morning the peace within the pride had been shattered. Some members were delighted or at least supported Nassor and Vitani. Others hated the fact they were together, disagreed with their decisions to leave or hated both facts. Arguments broke out calling on all of the skills of Kopa, Imoo, Kamaria, Simba, Nala and Kiara to prevent all out fighting. Nassor and Vitani spoke to Kiara and Imoo in an attempt to ease the tensions. Under the overhang of the great rock all four talked, Kiara and Imoo proving understanding and supportive. The choices of the Nassor and Vitani had not come as a surprise to either Kiara or Imoo, both having understood and seen how the pair had changed from the moment of their return.

A day had passed. As the sun reached its zenith rose on the horizon Aketch, Ni, Kula, Kovu, Nala and Aine walked up onto the hills surrounding their home, in the wooded area next to Pride Rock the pride lay in the shade. Seeing the group the tensions soared. The faces of Nala and Aine were full of sadness, hints of anger and resignation. Seeing them approach Simba, Kiara, Nassor, Vitani, Zola, Majani and Masika knew their efforts had been in vain. Slowly Nassor and Vitani walked

over to the approaching lions. Across an invisible chasm the two sides faced one another. Without looking at the other lions Nala and Aine walked over to gap, Nala standing next to Simba and Aine next to Majani. All around them the other lions sat or stood alert, readying themselves for the slightest hint of trouble.

- "Nassor you are my son, I love you with all my heart. The love you have found with Vitani brings joy to my heart," Kula began.

- "However I cannot accept the choice you have made. It is my wish you remain here with us."

- "Mother thank you for understanding how I feel about her," Nassor said softly.

- "I have tried to understand your choices, however I refuse to accept either of them. I order you to remain in this kingdom and break with Vitani," Ni said in a harsh, commanding voice that broke no argument.

- "Father you fail to realize the cub you raised has gone along with any authority over me. I will not break with Vitani. I will leave this kingdom with her. I am an adult, only the rulers I serve has any such say in my life," Nassor replied, his eyes, body and voice blazing with strength and power.

- "I still hold respect for Simba and Nala yet the monarchs I serve Zola and Delmar, both have given their blessing."

- "You are a fool Nassor!" Aketch hissed.

- "Running away from your home. Majani has tricked you in the end she will abandon you just as she did me!"

- "Nassor's choice is his own. Any affect I might have had is balanced by his own judgement,"

Majani said coolly.

- "Mother, Father, Aketch if you are all firmly against my choices so be it. You always brought me up to do what is right. Loving Vitani and belonging to Zola's pride is right for me," Nassor replied, his eyes filled with steely determination and sadness.

Turning his back on his family Nassor walked away from them with Majani by his side. In swift bounds the pair jumped onto some rocks away from their family yet close enough for them to watch the events below. Standing on opposite sides Vitani and Kovu stared at one another aware their next words would define their relationship forever. The twin cubs of Zira had reached the defining point of their relationship. Kovu's eyes were hard and cold.

- "Vitani...I cannot accept the choice you have made to leave. You are making a mistake. I get that all the adjusting and Mother's death might have been hard. Nothing is stopping you being with Nassor. I overreacted a bit yesterday that's all. You don't need to leave to be together, everything you need is here," Kovu said, a faint note of desperation in his voice.

- "Kovu you don't see....don't understand," Vitani began, a look of sadness in her eyes.

- "No matter what you say....I never once felt at home here. Being here with Nassor has not changed that. Zola's kingdom is home, the feeling of the sea on my fur, the sand beneath my paws. Paradise, the place I belong."

- "Don't you care about your family....about me? We have always been together. Two halves of a team.....a soul,"Kovu said.

- "Kovu we have found the other parts of our souls, you have Kiara and I have Nassor. I will always love you but.....that isn't enough to make me stay. I don't belong in the Pridelands. I am too much

our Mother's daughter to fit in here. You are the one who has the power to follow Imoo's paw prints to overcome the past. I don't share that strength. Leaving this kingdom is the only way I can ever be truly myself and to free from the past."

Tears fell from Vitani's eyes as the last few words were said. The deepest secrets of her soul revealed. The five children of Zira born into a world full of hatred and marked by the crimes of the past. Zola the shadowland princess who choose exile in the hope of escaping her parent's legacy, Imoo the dark prince turned traitor who was able to take his place as a royal cousin, Nuka the weaker son blinded by his parents beliefs so unable to escape the darkness that lead to his death. Kovu the chosen by Scar as heir yet saved by the love from following the path laid out for him. Vitani the warrior raised in hatred who found freedom by leaving the land and building a new life in the seaside kingdom ruled by her sister. All five shape by their parent's actions yet the younger two defined by the acts of their sibling in the generation before.

In the months that had passed Kovu had dreamed of his sister's return, how happy she would be as part of the pride, the life they could lead as a family. The words of Vitani had shattered his dream into a millions pieces. Aside from Kiara, Vitani was the one lion Kovu would give his life to protect. For all the words Kovu could not understand why Vitani would want or need to leave the Pridelands.

- "Kovu please do not resent me or Nassor. I accept the choice you made for Kiara, please do the same for me," Vitani whispered turning away.

- "For the sake of us all do as she asks Kovu," Zola said in a firm yet gentle voice.

- "I am faced much heartbreak and know what it is like to leave under a cloud of hatred. If you cannot understand Vitani's feelings at least accept the choices she had made. If you truly wish for her happiness the allow her to leave here free from guilt."

With heavy hearts Vitani and Zola turned away from Kovu walking over to join Penina and Arjana on a set of rocks. All they could do now was pray their words had some effect. On the side lines the rest of the pride turned away, they had tried to help to no avail. Shaking her head sadly

Aine walked over to where Masika, and Hasina were laid.

- "If you still wish it I could like to go with you," Aine said.

- "Oh Mother I am so happy," Masika replied nuzzling her.

- "Gran you will love our home, wait until you see the caves and we can go swimming," Hasina replied excitedly.

- "I'm glad you're coming with us Mother," Masika replied nuzzling Aina's cheek.

- "I am not losing you again. I am an old lioness. I want to live out the rest of my days in peace," Aine replied.

Two days later as the sun broke on the horizon Ni, Imoo, Kopa, Simba, Nala, Kovu, Kiara, Zola, Arjana, Masika, Hasina, Aine, Majani, Nassor and Vitani stood on the border of the kingdom. Now at last the time had come for the travellers to return home. In the morning light the children of Zira stood together as one for the last time. Tears glistened on the cheeks of some as heartfelt goodbyes were said. All stood on the very border Zola had crossed so many years before in a haze of fire and rain. The past had come full circle. Where once was hatred now unity born from blood and forgiveness. All that the travellers had wished for had been achieved now at last Zola could leave the land of her birth the right way.

- "Zola it has been an honour having you here. I am proud to call you my cousin, you will always find welcome here," Simba said regally.

- "Zola that day long ago I said we might one day meet again. I am so proud of the lioness you have become, a mighty queen worthy of the great queens of old. I am glad you came back, goodbye my friend," Nala said, her voice full of emotion.

- "Nala seeing you again....you did what I could not. You are the queen this land needs. All the hopes I had for this land have been realized. Should you ever wish to see my home I will gladly welcome you. Goodbye my friends, my family," Zola replied hugging Nala and smiling at Simba.

- "Nassor goodbye and good luck. I cannot agree with you choice but....." Ni said softly.

- "I cannot stop you. Majani take care of yourself and him."

- "Father goodbye. I never wanted to hurt you or Mum," Nassor said, regret and pain in his eyes.

- "Tell Mum I love her."

Looking at one another Zola, Vitani and Kovu felt the weight of the past on them. Nassor eyed Kovu with suspicion. Now at last the time had come for their final goodbye. Earlier that day Imoo had said his goodbyes.

- "Zola, Nassor you had both better look after Vitani. Vitani if this is what will make you happy then I can accept it even if it hurts. Be happy," Kovu said, hugging Vitani tightly.

- "Thank you for understanding Kovu. I will always love you. The choice was not easy to make it is just right for me. I am happy, thank you," Vitani whispered.

- "Kiara take care of Kovu."

- "I will Vitani, I promise, go be happy," Kiara replied licking her cheek.

All attention shifted onto Simba, Nala, Rafiki and Zola who were stood quietly. Simba and Nala had bid farewell to Chumvi.

- "Ah Zola here again we stand on the edge," Rafiki said.

- "All I wished for has come to pass. I never dreamed of seeing you again. A true queen the heir of Queen Ure."

- "Rafiki thank you for everything you did all those years ago, without your guidance and wisdom I would have followed a path of hatred. You should come see my kingdom one day."

- "Perhaps perhaps that might come to pass, my queen," Rafiki replied bowing deeply.

Into the morning light the travellers stepped across the border to begin their journey home. Looking at her daughter Aine stepped cross. A light shone from Aine's eyes that Kovu had never seen before, it was as if the years had been rolled back and Aine was once again a young lioness. Side by side Aine and Masika called their goodbyes, Nala raising a paw in farewell the hurts healed. Turning back Chumvi grinned at his old friends.

Looking at one another Vitani and Kovu smiled sadly yet happiness was mixed in with the tears. Now the moment had come the pain was almost unbearable for Kovu. Side by side Vitani and Zola stood on the border both beautiful and deadly yet Vitani had a softer edge while Zola swirled with regal power. Their similarities and differences were clear yet it was clear Vitani's personality had been moulded by her time in Zola's kingdom. In that single moment Kovu truly saw his sister for the lioness she had become.

- "Goodbye Vitani," Kovu called.

- "Goodbye Kovu," Vitani replied.

In one fluid motion Vitani stepped across the border so leaving the Pridelands for good. Now the time had come for the final reckoning. Zola alone remained in the Pridelands. On one side of the border the other travellers watched and waited. Inside the Pridelands the lions retreated until only Simba and Nala stood with her. History had truly come full circle. Words and recent events hung between them.

- "Zola all we dreamed of has come true. Knowing you taught me how to see past the circumstances of the lion's birth and understand they don't always follow the path expected of them. Thank you for everything you did for me back then. Goodbye Queen Zola," Nala said softly tears running down her cheeks.

- "The one thing I regret over all the passing years was that you never knew how happy my life had become. I cannot thank you enough for the faith you placed in me. Thank you for keeping your promise," Zola said smiling.

- "Zola it should have ended like this the first time," Simba said, regret in his voice.

- "I should have seen you and been able to see all that Nala can. I am proud to call you family. Never fear me, should your cubs ever wish to return they will find welcome. Goodbye Zola."

- "Simba in you is all this land needs in a king. I see the land recovered. The hope I placed in you

had been fulfilled. My sacrifice was worthwhile. Your heirs will never be challenged by mine. You were never happy until you returned home to this land. I never found my happiness until I found my true home far away. Rule Simba."

Tiring away Zola stepped across the border so leaving the land of her birth for the last time. Together the travellers walked off into the savannah. All the years of hurt were gone. No longer would the past cast a shadow over the future. Choices had been made out of desires for happiness not out of fear. For too long had the past held sway. Now at last the heirs of Mufasa and Scar were truly free.

Epilogue

Waves crashed against the shore line as the sun rose over the kingdom by the sea. On the beach Vitani, Nassor, Zola, Delmar, Majani, Masika and Aine looked out across the horizon. A few hours earlier the travellers had reached the kingdom to the delight of all. At last the pride was complete.

- "I am home, now more will the past cast a shadow," Zola whispered.

- "Then all you wished has been achieved. The past months have been unbearable without you," Delmar whispered.

- "I wished so much you could have been with me. Simba and Nala have fulfilled everything hope I had. We have healed the wounds. No more worry will come from them. The past is the past. I am yours fully now, this land is my home," Zola replied, laying her head on Delmar's shoulder.

At the side of the pair Vitani and Nassor walked into the sea, the water lapping around their ankles. The salt cleansed them of the last vestiges of travel dirt.

- "Home it is you and me from now on Vitani," Nassor said softly.

- "I've found my true home here. You guided me out of the darkness," Vitani replied.

Looking at one another true love shone from their eyes. Behind them Zola and Delmar looked on with love and pride. As the waves crashed onto the shoreline the lions looked out towards their future.

Far away in the Pridelands another pride were rising to greet the start of a new dawn. The memories of their loved ones were keenly felt that morning more than ever. Hours before Rafiki had brought news of the safe arrival of Zola and the others in her kingdom. The news had brought a great deal of relief to all. No uncertainty would cloud the future. On that morning it was fitting.

In two separate kingdoms the heirs of Mufasa and Scar greeted the new dawn tied together by love. Hatred had vanished all hurt forgiven. A family untied despite the physical distances that separated them. A family free to live in peace as each member saw fit. Here ends the story that began in a shadowland that ends in the dawn light.

END.