

THE PRINCESS AND THE LION

**Inspired by a story about my mythical ancestors from
The Mahavansa - the ancient chronicle of the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka.**

Author: Suchinta Abhayaratna

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this story for my daughter when she was in fourth grade, researching ancient history for her school project on Sri Lanka. As I read the story in the English translation of the Mahavansa, I wondered how I was I going to tell my eight year old that we were descended from a princess and a lion.

In the original story as it was told since antiquity, the princess got bad press for being smart and strong minded. That's certainly not what I wanted to communicate to my daughter.

As folk tales are told and retold over time, storytellers bring in their own perspectives and tell the stories as they choose to. I believe that if you don't like the story, you simply have to change it. I also believe in magic, so chose to bring magic into this story. Well, this is exactly what I did.

CHAPTER ONE

In the far and distant past, when human beings were still new to the earth, a baby was about to be born to the King and Queen of the Land of the Vangas, in the south of Asia. At first a head of black hair emerged, wet with newness of life. The tiny body that followed bore a diamond shaped birthmark in the middle of its back - the sign of succession to the throne. If the baby was a boy he would be the next king and ruler of the land. "It is a girl!" announced the midwife. This meant that someday, whoever married this princess would become king and ruler of the land, and she would sit at his right hand as queen, but never on the throne.

In those days, when a baby was born, the soothsayers studied the alignments of stars at the time of birth, and made predictions about what lay ahead for that child.

"She will be so beautiful, that any man who sees her will want to marry her," said the first of the soothsayers.

The King kissed the Queen. "Thank you for our daughter, my dear. You did very well!" he said proudly.

"She will not only be beautiful, but she will be so kind, that she will help anyone who is in need." said another soothsayer.

The King kissed the Queen again. "Like her mother, she will be a boon to the kingdom!" he said, smiling.

"She will not only be beautiful and kind, but she will be so clever, that she will have knowledge of mathematics, languages and music as well as healing arts and magic."

The King raised his eyebrows at the Queen. He nodded his head for quite a while, not certain of what to think, but neither smiled nor spoke.

"She will not only be beautiful, kind and clever, but she will be so strong willed, that no man will marry her. Not even the King, her father, will be able to rule her," said the last soothsayer.

The King sat down hard on the bed, and pointed an accusing finger at the Queen. "It is all your fault!" he said, his face red.

"It must have been the Durians, dear," said the Queen, passing the blame on to the sweet-tasting fruit with the foul smell. During her pregnancy, the Queen had had the most uncontrollable craving for Durians. Unfortunately, the smell left everyone else at the palace holding their noses for the nine months of her pregnancy.

The King ignored her explanation. There was a long uncomfortable pause. "Oh dear me, whatever shall we do!" the Queen said, when the impact of the last prediction finally hit her with its full meaning, "We shall never be able to find a husband for our daughter, and the land will have no king to rule it after you."

The King silently thought of possible solutions to the problem. "No one else shall hear of this!" he said with determination. With two claps of his royal hands he had the guards at his feet, bowing low, awaiting his bidding. "Behead every soothsayer in my kingdom by dawn tomorrow!"

"It shall be done, Your Majesty," said the guards in one voice as they backed out of the royal chambers, bowing all the way. They hurried off to carry out their gruesome task.

"That should put an end to the horrible rumors about our daughter!" said the King, much pleased with his brilliant idea.

"How very clever!" said the Queen, catching his drift, secretly glad to be off the hook.

"When she grows up we can marry her off to some unsuspecting prince."

No sooner had she said this, than a big puff of smoke appeared in the room, and a voice said, "Be not troubled, O King, and be not disheartened, O Queen. Your daughter shall marry the most powerful, the most wise, and the most handsome one of all. What is more, he shall be a great king himself."

"O wisest of all wise men, tell me who you are, so that I can make you the chief soothsayer in my court," said the King, while the Queen scanned the room for the body belonging to the voice.

Being very wise indeed, and having undoubtedly overheard the King's instructions to the guards, the puff of smoke replied, "I am much honored, your Majesty, but no thank you! For I serve another king. It is he who sent me to you with the proposal of marriage on behalf of his newborn son to your newborn daughter. Do you agree to the marriage?"

The King and the Queen looked at each other. They didn't have to say a word; they both knew that this was an offer that they could not refuse.

"Yes, but...!" they said in unison, feeling slightly uncomfortable about making such a serious agreement with a puff of smoke that talked.

"Splendid!" said Puff of Smoke, "You shall hear from me again when the time comes." The next thing they knew, he was gone. They did not have a clue who he was, where he came from, nor any other details of the arrangements they had made for their daughter's future.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time the Princess turned six, the King and Queen could tell that she was going to be everything that the soothsayers had predicted. She was the most beautiful child anyone had ever seen. Her skin was a golden tan. Her hair was dark brown, almost black with copper highlights. When she smiled, her coal black eyes lit up her face with a radiant glow.

By the time she turned seven, the Princess could read and write without effort. Her favorite place in the palace was the Great Library. There, the scribes gathered to read, discuss and write on Ola leaf books, made from the finest Ola Palms in the land. The Princess would listen, and learn. She could do complicated math computations in her head, like dividing a five digit number by a three digit number. She could play the sitar, the flute, the tabla, the veena and several other instruments, and shoot an arrow straight to its target. The Court Magician, who was also a doctor and an alchemist, taught her magic and the healing arts. Once, when her Maid-in-Waiting, who was also her playmate, fell off the guava tree, and was scratched and bruised, the Princess collected leaves from the tree, and soaked them in hot water, and placed them on the wounds. By the next day, all the scratches and bruises were healed.

By the time the Princess turned eight, the King and Queen were beside themselves with concern. Their little girl would do just about anything she pleased, paying no attention at all to the *Protocol for Princesses* chapter of *The Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol*. She had read it, of course, but to it sounded quite boring and made no sense to her, so she simply ignored it.

It was on her tenth birthday that the Princess asked her parents the dreaded question. "I have lived in this palace for ten years, but have never been outside its gates. May I go out and see the world?"

The Queen burst into tears. The King grew red in the face and looked away, avoiding his daughter's eyes. "Go to your room!" he shouted, pointing his royal finger in the general direction of the Princess's chambers.

"I said see the world, Father, not see the walls," the Princess explained, thinking that perhaps the King heard incorrectly. She even walked around him so that he could read her lips, look her in the eye and give her a straight answer.

The Queen quickly dried her eyes, and tried to calm everyone down. "Don't ask silly questions, dear. Princesses are not permitted to leave the palace grounds. Besides, you have everything here that you could possibly need to be happy."

"Perhaps you do, Mother, but I don't," said the Princess.

"I know what you need, dear. I shall have the court seamstress make you a beautiful new dress, and you can have some of your little friends over, and have a lovely party. And tomorrow, you can start sitar lessons."

"Mother, I already have more clothes than I will ever wear. I already know how to play the sitar...and the flute, and the tabla. I also have read every book in the library, climbed every tree on the palace grounds, and know every plant, every remedy and every magic spell there is to know. I have to go beyond the palace gates to expand my horizons!" said the Princess, raising her voice a little too loud to comply with the *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol*.

The Queen fainted. The King roared, "Guards! Take her to the tower, and lock the door!" The guards looked at the King in horror, for they loved the Princess dearly. But they quickly

composed themselves, for they had no choice but to obey his orders. So they hurriedly took her away, kicking and screaming, to the tower.

"You shall stay there until we find a prince suitable for you to marry so that this land can have a proper king after me," the King bellowed. That was the last thing the Princess heard her father say, before she entered the tower.

"But Father, I can rule the land after you. Why should I have to marry a boring prince, just so he can be king!" she screamed, just as the tower door was shut, and the key clicked in the lock. There was no telling what her fate would have been if the King had heard her words.

CHAPTER THREE

So it was that the Princess stayed in the tower, coming out only when she had a suitor. The first prince who came along to ask her hand in marriage fell madly in love with her the minute he saw her. But, in compliance with the *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol*, he had to go through the True Prince Test to determine that he was, in fact, a true prince before he could claim her for his bride. The Princess used magic to confuse him. When he opened his mouth to answer the king's questions, gibberish came out.

The King bellowed furiously, "You are no prince! You are some sort of beast from the jungle pretending to be a prince. Be gone from my sight, and never return to this palace, if you value your life."

The prince, in utter confusion, bowed his head to take his leave, and ran from the palace as fast as his legs could carry him.

This scenario was replayed with just about every suitor who came to the palace hoping to marry her. It always ended with the princes being sent away in shame and the Princess being sent back to the tower. At first it provided her with some entertainment. But by the time the hundredth prince had come and gone, the novelty had long since worn out.

It was her thirteenth birthday. The Princess had 'come of age' which was another way of saying that she was now officially recognized as a woman. She was now in her childbearing years. As was the custom of the land, during her first menstruation, the girl in question had to stay in her room for three days, completely cut off from the rest of the world. For the Princess, who had

stayed in her room for three years, this was business as usual. The only person she saw was her maid-in-waiting who brought her food and drink every day.

On the third day, the cleansing ceremony was performed strictly according to the *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol*. The laundry woman came gave the Princess the ceremonial bath pouring twenty-one cups of water over her head, symbolizing the passage from childhood to womanhood. Then she took away every item of clothing the Princess owned, leaving her with nothing to cover herself with. Embarrassed, the Princess hid in the closet.

Shortly, the Queen arrived in the tower, with her twenty-one maids-in-waiting, carrying twenty-one sets of new clothes, made of rich silks from India, brocades from China, and fine cottons from Egypt. Another maid-in-waiting brought twenty-one pieces of gold jewelry; earrings, bracelets and necklaces studded with rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and pearls so big they could only have come from giant oysters found in the depths of the Indian Ocean. Another brought in new silk bed linen and curtains to match.

Preparations had been made for the biggest feast ever to have taken place at the palace. Everyone who was anyone in the way of royalty in the world had been invited, except, of course, the Princess, even though it was her party. The King and Queen were convinced that the puff-of-smoke soothsayer was either a figment of their imagination or a practical joke in very bad taste. So in a last effort to secure a husband for their daughter, they sent special invitations to the last three princes left in the world who had not yet sought her hand in marriage:

Hear Ye Princes Everywhere:

The Princess of the Vangas, beauteous and fair

With a heart of gold, beyond compare

Awaits the Prince whose life she'll share:

The future King of the Vangas!
The King, the Queen and the Gods above
Invite a prince to claim her love
And celebrate on this auspicious day
The coming of age and thirteenth birthday
Of the future Queen of the Vangas.
Princes all, come take the test
To prove you are the very best
The future King of the Vangas.

While the invitations extolled the beauty and kindness of the Princess, they carefully omitted any mention of her wisdom, knowledge and strength of character, just to be on the safe side.

Just to be on the safe side, the princes, on receiving the invitations, consulted the oracles in their respective kingdoms to find out if they should accept the invitation, having heard rumors of the disastrous experiences of others before them. The oracles came back with the ancient equivalent of "Forget it! She is not for you!" So the princes declined gracefully, giving such excuses as:

Recovering from deadly communicable disease;

All bones but one, broken in wrestling match with giant;

Transformed into a frog by the spell of a wicked witch.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the palace, the celebrations went on as planned. Only the testing of the princes was struck off the agenda. The best musicians and dancers had been commissioned to perform. Through her open window, the Princess heard the haunting music of the ragas and longed to be dancing with the dancing girls. This was out of the question according to the *Protocol for Princesses* chapter of the *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol*. But she was alone in the tower, and so she imagined that she was one of the dancers, and danced to her heart's content.

During the last raga of the Raga Master, he was very rudely interrupted by a puff of smoke that appeared in the room, right in front of the King and Queen. Everyone froze mysteriously in mid-action, except for the King and Queen.

"Oh! I am so relieved," said the Queen, "I thought you would never come!"

"It is about time, we were getting worried!" said the King.

"It is time, your Majesties, for me to take the Princess with me." said the voice, getting right down to business.

"Where is this prince who wishes to marry her? Let him come forth, and be tested like other suitors."

"I am afraid that the Prince cannot come here for reasons I am not at liberty to divulge. I must take the Princess to the Prince."

"Well then, he cannot have our daughter. It is written in *The Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol* that a princess may not marry anyone who has not passed the True Prince Test," said the King, putting his foot down, but privately wondering what on earth he was going to do with his daughter now.

"We are not sending our daughter off with a disembodied voice in a puff of smoke!" said the Queen, sitting on her high horse, but privately wondering if she wasn't being a bit hasty with her words.

Meanwhile back at the tower, the Princess heard the key turn in the lock, and then silence. She stopped dancing, and listened. Dead silence. She tiptoed over to the door and listened again. Nothing. She peeked through the keyhole. No movement at all. She turned the doorknob and opened the door. The maid-in-waiting who had unlocked the door, was as stiff as a board, and fell flat on her face. The tray of food he was carrying flew all over the room. The Princess could not believe her eyes. The tower guard was frozen in the act of picking his nose when he thought no one else was looking.

Knowing that this was her only chance to escape, the Princess gathered the things she needed to pack: a tortoise shell brush and comb set, a mirror and her charcoal stick tooth cleaner - which is what they used instead of toothbrushes in those times. She stuffed them into the pillowcase of the small pillow she had hugged at night ever since she could remember. *I suppose I will need a few clothes*, she thought. She looked down at what she was wearing. They were spun out of gold thread. *Not exactly appropriate for running away in*, she thought. She looked at her maid-in-waiting lying flat on the floor. She quickly exchanged clothes with her, and was off, down the tower stairs and onto the palace grounds.

Just beyond the palace gates, she was startled by a puff of smoke that suddenly appeared before her. It said authoritatively, "Follow me! I will lead you to your destiny." The Princess assumed that talking puffs of smoke were a perfectly normal phenomenon beyond the palace walls to lead travelers to their destinations. She followed, excited at having made her first contact with the real world beyond the palace. Had the palace guards been awake, they would have thought that she was a maid, running out of the palace gates on an urgent errand, following a little cloud.

The Princess ran behind the puff of smoke until she came to the edge of a jungle. "Rest here for a while, Princess. Tomorrow, you shall meet your destiny! I must take my leave of you now." "Wait! Puff of Smoke, please, stay with me and show me the way through the jungle!" she entreated. But the Puff of Smoke was gone. She sat under a tree and waited. She was brave, but she was not stupid enough to try to find her way through a jungle alone the first time she had been out of her yard.

Soon, the group of musicians from the palace came by. "Have you seen the Princess?" they asked her, "The palace is in an uproar because the Princess is missing from the tower."

"No, I have not," she said, not really lying, because she had not looked in a pool of water or in a mirror since she left the tower.

"What is a nice young lady like you doing in a place like this?" asked the Raga Master, very concerned.

"I am following my destiny," replied the Princess.

The Raga Master raised his eyebrows. In those days it was very unusual for young ladies to be following their destinies at the edge of jungles. Perhaps times were changing, he thought, so made no comment. The Princess went on, "I have always loved music, I can play several

instruments, and I can perform one hundred dances. Kind Raga Master, may I join your troupe of traveling performers as a musician or a dancer?"

The Raga Master smiled, "Well, we shall have to see. But you will have to wait to audition until we get to our next destination, two towns hence, beyond this jungle. Yes, you may go with us. We rest here tonight, and start the journey in the morning."

The Princess stayed up most of the night listening to the chirping of the crickets and the cicadas; the bullfrog chorus; the sawing sound of a leopard hunting its prey; the crackling of the dry twigs and leaves as a herd of elephants walked by; and the screech of a peacock praying for the voice of a nightingale.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the light of the rising sun, the Raga Master, his troupe of traveling musicians and the Princess began their trek through the jungle. They had not been an hour in the jungle, when out of its denseness came a huge lion. His jaws opened wide, showing a row of sharp teeth, as he let out a blood-curdling roar. Everyone panicked, and ran helter-skelter. The Princess alone stood unafraid, awestruck by the beauty of the animal. She watched enchanted at how his mane blew magnificently in the wind, and noticed how strong his jaw and limbs were. She looked straight into his proud flashing eyes, as she advanced towards him. As she got closer, she noticed that the lion was limping. His roar was one of pain, rather than anger.

"Come here! Let me look at you. Come on!" she said, beckoning to him as if he were her pet cat, instead of the most dreaded beast. The Lion, came obediently towards her, his roar subdued to a whine of pain. He lifted his paw for her to see. "Poor creature! You have a huge thorn stuck in your paw. Do not worry! I will pull it out for you. Now, you just relax. It will hurt a little bit when I take it out. Breathe deeply and blow gently on your paw. It will help the pain."

The Lion gave a great roar as she pulled the thorn out. Then he began whimpering like a hurt puppy. The Princess gently ran her fingers through his mane, until he fell asleep. She made a pack of crushed guava leaves to heal his swollen paw.

When the Lion awoke, he felt much better. He was struck by the Princess's beauty, kindness, wisdom and courage. He felt a great love for her well up within him. He kept it to himself like a closely guarded secret treasure. He lowered himself, inviting her to climb onto his back, and took her to his cave in the depths of the jungle.

In the weeks that followed, the Lion had a cave prepared for the Princess next to his, and made sure she had everything she needed. Unseen hands prepared her food and clothing, and the animals of the jungle provided her entertainment. Teams of monkeys performed acrobatics and tricks for her. Songbirds sang for her day and night. Snakes danced for her and elephants performed trumpet harmonies that rang out like fanfare through the jungle.

During the day, the Princess often rode around the jungle on the lion's back. Every evening, after the sun went down, they would sit by the fire in her cave, and she would tell him stories about life in the palace. He listened as if in a trance. Then he retired into his own cave for the night.

One evening, when he was about to leave, he noticed a great big tear rolling down the her cheek. He stopped and turned around, and looked inquiringly into her eyes.

"My dear Lion" she cried, "You are the best friend I have ever had. You have been kinder to me than anyone has ever been. But I so miss the sound of a human voice and the touch of a human hand."

The Lion stood still with his head bowed, a deep sadness coming over him. Quietly he engulfed her with his great strong body, gently lay down and cradled her in its curve. The Princess fell asleep that night, curled up beside the lion, with her face and arms buried in his mane.

The next morning, at dawn, after the Lion went out of his cave, the Princess collected her belongings and left the cave, not sure of where she was headed. She walked deeper and deeper into the jungle. Towards sunset she came to a small mud hut, with a roof thatched with coconut palms. She tapped on the door, hoping to find shelter for the night.

CHAPTER SIX

The Woodsman opened the door. A mess of disheveled hair framed an unshaven face that was creased and toughened by life. His eyes squinted, and his jaw dropped open in amazement when he saw the beautiful vision standing before him in the golden glow of twilight. "The God's be praised! I must be dreaming!" he said in a voice that sounded like gravel pouring out of a barrel.

"I beg your pardon, sir" said the Princess apprehensively, "but I am hopelessly lost."

"On the contrary, my dear, I think you are exactly where you are meant to be. All my life I have been praying to the gods for someone like you to come along. I never dared to think that they would answer the prayers of a poor woodsman. The gods be praised!" He took her by the arm and led her into the hut saying, "Come in, my dear. Make yourself at home," and closed the door behind him. "You will stay here with me and be my wife. I will give you shelter and food. I always find everything I need here in the jungle. I am an excellent huntsman. I can give you a good life."

The Princess thought fast. "I thank you for the shelter, sir, but I cannot be your wife until I have had a chance of getting to know you. I cannot answer your proposal of marriage until the night of the next full moon." Her mind went back to all those princes she had passed up at the palace.

"The moon will be full three nights hence," the Woodsman smiled, revealing a mouth full of stained and uneven teeth. "Three days from now, you shall be my wife," he replied, certain that in the middle of the jungle, her choices were somewhat limited.

The next morning the Woodsman went out to chop wood and hunt, whistling a tune and feeling like a king. He had no idea that marriage to the young woman in his hut could, in fact, put him on the throne someday. The Princess stayed in the hut all day, pondering her options. Go back to the Lion, and never have any human contact? That is what she ran away from. Go looking for the troupe of entertainers? They would be long gone by now, and she had no idea where she might find them. Tell the Woodsman that she was the lost Princess and ask him to take her back to the palace? NO! For that could mean going back to the tower forever. A huge sigh escaped her. This must be her karma - her destiny.

The Woodsman came back tired after a day of hard work. "What's for dinner, my dear?" he asked.

The Princess looked at him in surprise. "I thought you would bring something back."

"Did you not even light a fire to cook food with? What did you do all day?" scowled the Woodsman.

"I thought about so many things, my head is still spinning," she said.

"Thought?" he boomed angrily, "Thinking is not going to put food on the table, you stupid woman! You might try cooking."

"But I have never cooked anything before in my life. I don't even know how to make a fire." It was true. It was just something she never needed to know before, either in the palace or in the Lion's cave.

"Who do you think you are? A princess?" he bellowed, as he dragged her over to the hearth by her hair. "Now, I'm going to teach you how to make a fire, and I will show you how to cook a meal the way I like it. From now on, I expect a hot meal when I get home after slaving out there in the jungle all day."

The next day, the Princess spent most of the day cooking a meal for the Woodsman. When he came home, she served it to him on a banana leaf (which is what they used in the jungle instead of plates). "You call this food?" he roared, grimacing unpleasantly, but gobbled it down anyway. "Look at this place. It is a mess. Tomorrow, by the time I get home, this place had better be sparkling clean."

The Princess spent the next day cleaning the hut, which seemed like it had never been cleaned before. There was no broom to sweep with, so she made one by binding the spines of palm leaves together as she seen the servants do at the palace. She had just managed to get all the dirt into one corner of the hut, by the time the Woodsman came home that evening. Satisfied with the results of her hard work, she said, perkily, "Do you notice anything different?"

"Yes," The Woodsman bellowed, "There is a pile of dirt in the corner that was not there this morning."

"I was just about to collect the dirt in a large leaf when you walked in. Did you notice that I made a broom to sweep the hut? I had to use coconut husks to scrub everything. There was so much dirt that it took me the whole day to clean. I am so exhausted. I have never worked so hard in all my life!" She actually felt good about it.

"What's for dinner? I'm famished!" the Woodsman demanded.

"Oh! I am too. I was so busy cleaning that I just did not have time to cook dinner. Will you please help me prepare the meal?" the Princess asked politely.

"Help you cook?" the Woodsman raged, "I have spent all day chopping wood, and come home expecting a hot meal and you expect me to help you cook? You lazy wretch! I will teach you a lesson."

First he beat her with the broom she had made. Then he cooked food for himself, but did not give her any. The Princess took a deep breath, determined not to let him see the tears that were inside her. She tried to think of some magic that would make him kinder and gentler, but she had forgotten all her magic. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, she asked, "Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"Hah! She can't cook or clean, but she can tell stories!" he ridiculed. "Alright, let's hear it." he said, giving a great belch, and settling down to rest on a reed mat in the corner of the hut. The Princess sat down beside him, and began to weave a tale out of her head, about a princess who was tied to a rock, and the dragon who was going to devour her in three days. Before long, she was interrupted by the loud snoring of the Woodsman who had fallen fast asleep with his mouth wide open.

The next day, as the Woodsman went out of the house, he chanted over and over again triumphantly, "Tonight the moon will be full, and you shall be my wife!"

As the Princess cleaned and cooked, thoughts flooded her mind. She wondered if she was not better off in the tower, or if she had not made a terrible mistake by not marrying one of those boring princes. She found herself thinking about the Lion. She missed his kindness, his friendship, and she missed telling him stories by the hearth. She remembered the feel of his thick mane, and remembered the kindness in his eyes, and felt the deep love that he had for her and she for him. How sad he must be, and how cruel she had been to leave him without even a good-bye.

By midday, she had finished cleaning and cooking. Her thoughts turned to the fate that awaited her when the Woodsman returned that evening. She could not bear the thought of being his wife and living in the hut a day longer. "No! I will not be the Woodsman's wife. That is not my destiny!" She gathered her things together, and hurried out of the hut. She walked as fast as she could, not knowing where she was going.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She kept walking even after the sun had disappeared over the horizon. She wished that the Puff of Smoke would appear again to show her the way to her destiny. As the full moon took its place in the starlit sky, she pleaded, "Oh Goddess of the moon, I know that the Lion holds more love for me in his heart than any human could. I know in my heart, that I love the Lion more than I have ever loved any other. I pray you, lead me to him." The moon smiled down on her, and shone her light on a puff of smoke that appeared out of nowhere to lead the Princess to the Lion's cave.

When she arrived at the cave she ran into its darkness excitedly, crying, "My dearest Lion, I have come back to you. Please forgive me for leaving you so suddenly the way I did." She ran to where the Lion slept, and threw her arms around him. To her surprise, she found that her arms encircled not the Lion, but a young man. She jumped back with a scream, waking the sleeping man. "Who are you? What are you doing here? This is the Lion's cave. If he finds you here, he will rip you into shreds. Get out of here at once!"

The young man sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Oh! I must be dreaming. Princess, is it really you?"

"How do you know who I am?" she asked suspiciously, standing as far away from him as she could.

"Oh my Princess, I would know you if a hundred years passed." he said, smiling.

"I am not your Princess," she said, snapping back.

"Where is my Lion?" the Princess's voice was distraught. "What have you done to him?"

"Don't you recognize me, Princess? I am he.," he said.

"That is ridiculous!" she said, getting some of her courage back. "I am neither stupid nor blind."

"I swear by my mane, I am your lion. Look into my eyes. Do you not see there the love I have had for you since the first time my eyes fell on you, like a beautiful vision to soothe my pain. Princess, I love you more than life itself!" The words came out like water from a broken dam, and he, embarrassed at having spoken the love he had hidden for so long, averted his eyes and looked down. It was then that he noticed that he was no longer a lion but a man. Tears of joy welled up in his eyes. "For so long I have wished to be a man, just so I could make you happy, and love you as a man. Perhaps tonight, your spirit wished the same, did it not?"

She looked into the young man's eyes and saw there the love she had always seen in the Lion's eyes. She knew then that a great magic had turned him into the most handsome man she had ever seen.

He took her hand, and asked in a voice that was like velvet. "Princess, will you marry me?" He was the kindest being she had ever met and the best friend she had ever had. "Yes," she replied, without a moment's hesitation, tears of joy streaming down her face.

"You have made me the happiest being in the universe." he said, taking her in his arms and kissing away her tears.

When the Princess woke up the next morning, the handsome young man was gone. She thought that it was all a dream. Three days passed, with no signs of either the lion or the young man. But on the evening of the third day, when the sun had disappeared over the horizon, the man came into the cave, sadness clouding his face.

"Where have you been? And why do you look so sad?" the Princess asked.

"My dearest Princess, in my love for you I wished to be human, and I thought that my wish had been granted the night you came back to me. But when dawn came, I was, once again a lion. I was stricken with grief, and went away, because I could not bear the thought that I could never love you as a man again. For three days I hid in the jungle. In the light of day, I was cursed to live in the body of a lion, but at nightfall, I was transformed into a man."

"There is no cause for grief, my dearest one," said the Princess. "I loved you first when you were a lion, with your mane blowing in the wind, and it was to the Lion that I returned when I came back on that magical night when you were first transformed into a man. How can I love you any less now? I will love you no matter what you are even after my breath leaves my body."

And so, in the light of the moon, the Princess and the Lion Man slept in each others' arms. Many moons later, she gave birth to twins - a boy and a girl. They were the most beautiful children in the whole world, he resembled his father, and she her mother. They grew up in the jungle cave seeing their father only at night, for he did not want them to know that he was a beast by day, even though he was the King of the Jungle.

The Princess and the Lion lived in hope that someday, by some great magic, he would become fully human. But years went by with no sign that their hopes would be realized.

CHAPTER NINE

The twins grew up with the love and affection of both their parents. The Princess taught them all she knew. She told them stories that she had read in the books as a child in the great library of the palace, as well as those she made up just for them, to teach them good from bad. Their father told them stories of the jungle, and taught them to love and respect the animals, and to care for them as if they were of the same blood.

When the twins were ten years old, they asked the question that the Princess knew they would ask her someday. "Why do we never see other humans, nor ever leave this jungle?" asked the boy.

"I would love to live in the palace, and wear all those beautiful clothes and have servants do everything for me. Please, Mother, can we go to the palace?" pleaded the girl.

"When can we go, Mother?" pressed the boy.

"When your father comes back tonight, he and I together will decide when it would be most auspicious for us to leave for the palace." The Princess remained calm and collected, although this was the moment she had dreaded since the birth of her children.

When the Lion Man came home that evening, the Princess told him about the children's request. His face clouded over in sadness as he listened. "It was inevitable. It is time for me to let them go, to live their destiny in their own way." He sighed. "You must leave with the children tomorrow at dawn."

He stood where his son and daughter lay asleep. He kissed them gently upon their foreheads, saying, "My blessings go with you, my children. I know that you will someday be great rulers of the land. I will not say good-bye, for part of me goes with you to the land of the humans. You will carry within you my strength and courage, and in your heart my love will live on." He looked tearfully at them for a long moment, and then went to his wife.

The King and Queen of the Jungle wept in each others arms all through the night. "When will I see you again, my dearest? I will miss you most of all," he said. She held him close and kissed his tears, saying "On every full moon night, I will meet you at the edge of the jungle, and stay with you in the cave for a whole week. But then I must return, until our children ascend the throne. Then I will come and live with you until it is time for me to go to another life."

"Take only what you need for the journey. I will show you the way, walking in the shadows alongside you as far as the edge of the jungle. You will know your way from there. Listen for my movement in the trees and you will know where I'm leading you."

At dawn the next morning, the Princess woke her children. "Today, dear ones, we leave for the palace," she said.

"But where is our father? Will he not come with us?" asked the son.

"No, my children. Your father must stay here." replied the Princess, holding back her tears.

"But Mother, we have not bade him good-bye, can we not stay one more day to see him before we go?" asked the daughter.

"Your father kissed you while you were asleep. He bade you farewell and gave you his blessings," said her mother. "We must leave today. It is what we decided. Come now, let us hurry. We must get to the palace before dark."

The children were full of excitement as they walked through the jungle, and talked incessantly about how wonderful it would be in the palace, and of all the things they would do when they lived there. Once, the boy heard a sound near them, and asked, "What is that sound I hear, mother? Could it be a wild animal trying to attack us?"

"That is just the rustling of the leaves in the wind, my son. Besides, you know that no wild animal will ever attack us if we are not fearful," replied his mother, and they kept on walking.

After a while, the girl said, "Mother, I feel as if someone is following us."
"It must be the spirits who protect us, my daughter. Do not be afraid, for no harm will befall us in this jungle." replied her mother, and they kept on walking. When they arrived at the edge of the jungle, the Princess gave one last long look back, hoping to catch a parting glimpse of the Lion.

Just then, she heard a familiar voice say, "Follow me! I will take you to the palace." It was Puff of Smoke, once again, leading the Princess and her children to their destiny.

CHAPTER TEN

At sunset they arrived at the palace gates. "Who goes there?" asked the guard.

"I am the lost princess. I have come back." she answered.

"You look lost, but you do not look like the Princess." said the guard, looking her up and down, a woman, travel weary, in clothes that were too ordinary for royalty.

"Many years have passed since I lived here." said the Princess. "If you do not believe me, call my mother, the Queen. She will know me."

"Do you not know? The Queen died of grief ten years ago. She had a dream that the Princess was alive in the jungle, kept hostage by a beast, and gave birth to a pair of twins who were beasts. The next morning, she drew her last breath."

"Please, take me to my father. Let him see that his grandchildren are not beasts of the jungle." cried the Princess, in a voice breaking with sadness and remorse.

"Do you not know? The King lies on his deathbed. For many years he has been heartbroken at the loss of the Princess and then the Queen. He has not come out of the royal chamber since the Queen died, and the land has gone to wrack and ruin," said the guard.

"Please, believe me. I am the Princess, and these are my two children. Please let us in. I must see my father."

Just then, the Maid-in-Waiting who had attended her in the tower came by. She recognized the Princess immediately, and threw herself down kissing the Princess' feet and washing them with her tears.

She hurriedly took her to the royal chambers, where the King lay on the bed, a shadow of his former self. The Princess stood for a moment and looked sadly at her father, wasting away in his grief. "Oh Father, what have I done! What sadness I have caused you!"

"Who speaks?" asked the King in a voice that was barely a whisper.

"It is I, your daughter," replied the Princess bending over him, so he could see her more clearly.

He opened his eyes for a second, and closed them again saying in an anguished voice,

"Sleep, do not play tricks on me. Do not torment me any longer with false dreams."

"Father, it is not a dream. I have come back with my children. See for yourself, Father, they are not beasts of the jungle. And look, they both bear the royal birthmark."

The King sat up feebly in his royal bed, and the Princess lifted up her children's shirts. There in the middle of their backs was a mark, shaped like a diamond, identical to the one that she had on her back, and that he, the King, had on his.

A smile broke through the King's lips for the first time in years, and he reached out to his daughter. They held each other and cried tears of joy. He embraced his grandchildren and welcomed them to the palace.

"Who is their father? And where is he?" he asked, in the more stern voice that the Princess remembered so well from her childhood days.

"He is a great king, and rules over a kingdom far away from here. He found me in the jungle when I ran away from the tower. He took care of me and made me his queen. He is a

wonderful being, Father, and has been gentle, kind and loving to me and to our children." The Princess chose her words carefully.

"Why did he not come with you to visit me in my palace?" asked the King suspecting that there was something strange about his son-in-law.

"He cannot leave his kingdom. He is different from all others of royal blood, and he cannot mingle with those who are not of his kind. That is all I can tell you about him, for he has sworn me to secrecy."

The King remembered what Puff-of-Smoke had said many years ago, and knew that the Princess had fulfilled her destiny. The sight of his daughter and heirs to his throne made him very happy. The Princess, with her knowledge of healing, nursed him back to health. He spent his days teaching both his grandchildren all there was to know about ruling the land. For the Princess insisted that, regardless of what the now long defunct *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol* said, when they ascended the throne, they should rule together, as equals.

For two years, as she had promised, every month, on the night of the full moon, the Princess met the Lion at the edge of the jungle, and spent the week with him in his cave. She would then return to the palace, and help her father in his task of preparing her children to rule the land. Although the twins always asked to go with her to the jungle to see their father, the Princess would always reply "No! Your father forbids it. You must stay in the palace, and prepare yourselves for the throne. You can never see your father again." The young ones were deeply saddened at the thought, for they missed their father. But they were content to stay and learn the ways of royalty from their grandfather and the few sages left in the kingdom..

It was the night before the first full moon of the New Year on the lunar calendar. The Princess was preparing to go to the jungle. When she bade her father farewell, and kissed his feet

as was customary when taking leave of the King for an extended period. He placed his hands upon her head saying, " I know that you go to your husband when the moon is full. It must pain you to separate yourself from him for so long each month. You have both sacrificed your love for each other for the love of the land and for your children. How foolish I have been as a father, as a man, and as a king to think that I could stop fate by locking you up in a tower all those years. I regret the pain it has caused us all. Go in peace, my daughter, and take my blessings to your husband."

The King kissed her upon the forehead and blessed her. The Princess left the palace for her journey to the jungle.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A few hours after the Princess departed for the jungle, the old King felt a sharp pain in his heart. He called his grandchildren to him and said, "My heart is weak. My body grows weary of this burdened life. I shall soon go to another life. I have taught you all you must know to rule this land. You will rule together in peace and harmony as your mother wishes. I am too old and tired to argue with her. She has always had her way, just as the soothsayers predicted!" he chuckled. Then in a solemn voice, the King said, "At midnight tomorrow, in the light of the full moon, I shall anoint you King and Queen of the land, and tomorrow, you shall ascend the throne, and take my place. Then I will be ready to go to my next life. Go now, and bring your mother back, so she can help you prepare for your anointing."

Two horses were saddled for the journey, for time was short. The Young Prince took his bow and arrows for protection. His sister took a road map showing the way to the jungle. No sooner had they left the palace gates, the Puff of Smoke appeared before them. "Follow me!" he said, "I will lead you to your destiny."

Thinking that he meant to say *destination*, the Young Prince replied, "No thank you, Puff of Smoke, but we have a map to show us the way."

The Puff of Smoke said authoritatively, "Your destiny is your destination. Your destination is your destiny. Follow me!"

"Can you take us on the shortest path to the jungle?" asked the Young Princess, "We must find our mother and get back to the palace by nightfall."

"Follow me!" commanded the Puff of Smoke, paying no attention to the young ones.

"As I said, our map is good enough. We do not need to follow a puff of smoke that talks in riddles," said the Young Prince much less politely than before, since the *Ola Leaf Book of Royal Protocol* had no guidance whatsoever on how to talk to puffs of smoke.

The Young Princess called her brother aside, and whispered in his ear, "Brother, did you forget that it was the Puff of Smoke that always led our mother to her destiny, and led us to the palace when we came out of the jungle? I think we should do as he says." So the young Prince and Princess followed the Puff of Smoke through long and winding roads, and remote pathways, taking much longer than they would have had they followed their map.

The sun was low in the sky when they caught first sight of the jungle. The Young Prince and Princess were exhausted and furious at the Puff of Smoke. But they were angrier at themselves for having been duped and delayed when they could least afford it. As suddenly and mysteriously as it had appeared, the Puff of Smoke was gone.

At a distance, in the light of the setting sun, the twins saw their mother at the edge of the jungle. From the lengthening shadows, they saw a huge lion emerge, his mane blowing wildly in the wind. They saw him spring towards their mother as if to attack her. Their horses neighed, reared up in fear, and stopped dead in their tracks. Being an excellent marksman, the Young Prince skillfully drew his bow and aimed the arrow at the heart of the great beast. In an instant, the arrow hit its target. The Lion gave a mighty roar, and fell to the ground. The twins heard their mother let out an anguished cry and run to the animal. She cradled him in her arms, weeping as though her heart was breaking.

The twins dismounted their horses and ran forward. The Young Prince shouted, "Mother, you are safe now. I have killed the beast with my arrow." But as they drew nearer, the sun sank

below the horizon and the moon rose in the sky. To their astonishment, the twins saw the Lion slowly changing into the human form of their father, now dying in their mother's arms.

The boy realized in horror the awful truth of what he had done. "Father!" he wept, kneeling beside his parents, "I did not know what I was doing. I feared that the Lion would kill our mother. Father, please do not die. Please do not leave us." he cried in utter remorse. His sister wept bitterly as she knelt beside him.

Their father opened his eyes and looked at his distraught children. "Do not despair, my children, for this is our karma, written in the stars at the time of our births, and foretold by the soothsayers. I am happy to die a human in this life, for I will now be reborn fully human in the next, as I have always wished. It was your Karma to send me to my next life. For this I thank you and bless you! My blood will flow through you and your progeny in the veins of a new people for generations to come, and through them, my strength and courage as well as my love and compassion will live on. Teach them all that you have learnt from this experience - that it is fear itself that causes destruction. Use your courage and compassion to protect yourself against fear. Remember that the creatures of the jungle are of one blood with you. Never fear nor harm them. You are their king and queen now, and in your power you must be compassionate and caring of them." The breath was slowly ebbing from his body, and his voice grew faint. The dying man laid his left hand on the head of his son, and his right hand on the head of his daughter. "I bless you and anoint you Queen and King of the Jungle. Rule the land of animals with wisdom and compassion."

He looked at his wife grieving at his side, and the tears welled up in his eyes. "My beloved Queen, you are dearer to me than all else. Hold me close, and soothe my pain as you did that first day in the jungle." She ran her fingers through his hair once more, remembering the magnificent mane and the warm fur of her beloved Lion, as he closed his eyes and slowly let go of his life.

The Princess spoke through her tears. "Go now, my children, and build a funeral pyre with dried wood and twigs. Be sure it is away from the jungle, so that no trees will burn. Hurry now for the moon rises in the sky."

The twins did their mother's bidding, and helped her raise their father's body onto the pyre. In the light of the full moon, the new King of the Jungle lit his father's funeral pyre, and walked seven times around it, while his mother and sister chanted to commend his father's spirit into the next life. The animals gathered at the edge of the jungle to bid farewell to their beloved king. The Princess and her children stood with them and bowed their heads.

Dawn broke as the last embers died out. The Princess said to her children, "Go now, and cleanse your selves in the river before returning to the palace. I will scatter your father's ashes throughout his beloved kingdom, so that his body will enrich its soil. Hurry now, my children. We must return to the palace to prepare for your anointing."

As the full moon rose in the sky that night, the Old King anointed his grandchildren as the new King and Queen of the Vangas. Together, they ruled the land for many years. When they passed on from this life, their children ruled, and so did their children and their children's children for many generations. In time, the new generations traveled far and wide to new lands, carrying the blood of the Princess and the Lion in their veins, and the memories of their ancestors in their spirits.