Mvulana na simba wake
a.k.a.
The Boy and His Lion

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The sun crept through the horizon peacefully like a dove. The sky illuminated an orange-brown hue. The sounds of secretary birds could be heard from afar, as wildebeests ran freely across the picturesque, grassy field. A new spring day had begun in the Serengeti.

Villagers awoke to take part in their daily activities. The hunters went out to search for gazelle. The farmers went out to plant the crops. Some of the children went out early for school. Other children had to look after their orphaned siblings. Many grown children left the village to live in the bigger cities, such as Dar es Salaam and Nairobi.

At noon, the community was called to assemble by the village elder to discuss the agenda for everyone’s benefit. The village elder acted as chief of the kraal and had final say in the enkang. If there were any grievances, for example, the elder would decide what would be best for the dissenting parties. He assigned most of the tasks of the villagers, and if there were any children present, he would also give them certain chores to do as well as play.

One of the children who showed up at these enkangs was a young boy named Zahur. A humble, demure boy of medium stature, he was not a perfect example of the tribe. Many of the men considered themselves brave, cunning warriors and hunters. Zahur, on the other hand, was far different than his peers. He cowered at the thought of a lion in the village. He spooked easily. It was a difficult nature for him, twelve years of age, to overcome the trials of early adulthood.

His nonconformity embarrassed his father, Chuma. He was a tall man with a growing dark-gray beard. He was stern, always believing in tradition, never much time for entertainment. He always wanted his son to follow the elder’s orders: to do the chores properly and consistently, to speak diplomatically, and to uphold dignity.
Zahur’s mother, Dalila, was of a different sort. She was a kind and gentle person, very protective of her son, and always wanted Chuma to restrain his strictness. Whenever he did anything foolish, she usually admonished him in the right way. The same went with Zahur. She always prevented him from getting into unnecessary fights with the other children, and told him never to wander off after dark.

Today was a special day for Zahur, however. He had reached a fair age when he would be tested to seek his destiny. Since he was chosen personally by the elder, he must show up at today’s *enkipaata* so he could choose the path that would determine his place as a man. This proved very difficult, however. He was too passive to be a warrior. He was too compassionate to be a hunter. He did not seem faithful enough to be entrusted by the god Enkai. He knew this would be a challenging period of his life, but knew that he had to take it eventually in order to prove his worth.

“A-allright, father. I think I am ready,” Zahur quavered to his father, entering silently into his room.

“You mean you *are* ready,” Chuma grunted. He walked over to his son who was wearing his new dashiki that his parents gave him for his twelfth birthday. “Don’t worry, young man. I understand how you must feel to go on this important path. As long as the path is good, you will not disappoint me.”

Zahur paused, feeling slightly more relaxed. “You mean…I can choose my path, right?”

“Yes, as long as I approve. Nothing feeble. Always respect our customs, son.”

Zahur tensed up again. He knew he would not make a good warrior. He had fewer spines for that. He had to think of some good options quickly before showing up to the assembly, and
his parents were going to accompany him. He did not know what his destined path was. He was also only twelve years of age; aspirations change with time.

At the moment, Zahur’s lifelong dream was to travel to the United Kingdom and study geography at Oxford. Dalila had given him a few brochures on the education programs they offered there. He always held an intellectual fascination in geography and the social sciences, so he wanted to go down that road. Chuma, on the other hand, wanted him to be a brave, aggressive hunter just like him. His father, strong as an ox with steel, thought that aggression was what held the family together.

The family left the hut. The ceremony was only a few minutes away. Zahur had to decide quickly before his confronting the elder. Did he want to go to school or use a spear? Being the academic type, this was a very hard decision to make. He could do both, but the elder always preached that one fate held more water than the other. Which one was more voluminous?

Everyone was there. The children frolicked by the clotheslines. Call-and-response handclapping accompanied tribal dancing to honor Enkai and the earth he forever presides. Even the lone Christian missionary was there to observe the ritual. It was quite a spectacle.

“The boy has arrived!” shouted the elder. Kudu horns played a fanfare to everyone’s attention. Zahur and his family arrived punctually before the elder would stand before the body.

Zahur stepped forward to the middle of the ring surrounded by his peers. His judgment has come at last. He knew that whatever he chose, he would choose with dignity and audacity. He just had to take three deep breaths after the elder made his opening speech and he would make clear his decision.

“Fellow tribesmen. We have gathered here today in Enkai’s presence to witness another boy, coming of age, resolve his destiny and by god shall make him a man. Now this is an
important decision…” Zahur’s heart began to pound quicker than a wildebeest. “…for this boy. He will have to overcome the trials ahead to reach his goal. If deviated, unless by an understandable reason, the consequences could be severe. So he must think carefully for his own welfare.”

The elder then turned directly to Zahur. “So, young Zahur, son of Chuma, standing before your neighbors, which path will you take?”

Zahur’s heart kept thumping. His parents were watching intently, making him really nervous. He did not want to upset his father or many of his friends. Whatever option he would take, he would have to make the sacrifice. He had to think carefully, sweating sorely in the hot sun.

In a short time, Zahur took a long, deep breath and came to a decision. He replied, “S-sir, I think I will go the…way of the…hunter.”

Applause followed. Chuma looked at Zahur with a smile on his face. He was very happy his son decided to follow in his father’s footsteps. Dalila shrugged, but was neutral on everything, anyway; she only wanted what was best for her son.

“Good choice, young one. You have considered the tribal ways of combat. From here, you will need to journey beyond the kraal and kill a beast. One that is deadly. One that you must prove your humanly worth. You will need a weapon.”

The elder presented Zahur with a spear, a rifle, and a knife, as well as a burlap sack to put them in. Zahur took the gear and wrapped the sack up.

“Now, you will have the choice of having a guide with you or going solo. If you choose the former, you will accompany a Oloiboni prophet and a senior warrior with experience in the wild.”
It did not take Zahur long with a response. From previous experience, he was not willful enough to handle the Serengeti alone.

“I will take the team. When shall I pursue?” asked Zahur.

The elder raised his staff. “When I lower the stick, you three will depart.” The staff eclipsed the sun for a little bit, and then slowly lowered with the head moving away from the sunlight.

“Luck be with you. Now go!” The villagers cheered as the three ran away from home base. The sun was shining brightly enough for the three of them to invigorate. They ran across the grassy savanna over the horizon, stepping foot into unknown territory.

The three made it to the watering hole in time for them to catch their breaths. The prophet sat for a while to meditate to the sounds of water. He saw an eagle looming overhead and took it as a good omen. The others scouted around to see if they were clear of danger. There were not that many animals around bar two warthogs and a hippopotamus. But they were friendly enough to not pay much attention to the intruders.

“Let’s check out our surroundings,” said the senior warrior, Chigaru, as he was scouting around the pool.

Zahur shrugged. “I don’t think we’re going to see that many predators here. I think our first day will be a peaceful one,” he assured, making sure his sandals weren’t too tight.

All three took a rest beside the calm waters of the watering hole. There was not a sound of a lion or hyena around. They were safe for the moment. Chigaru allowed some of this time to mentor Zahur in his hunting skills. If this was going to be his endeavor, Zahur had to prepare himself for more dangerous wildlife.

Zahur practiced using his spear against the tree. He first did a thrust.
“Good shot,” said Chigaru. “Now do a stab. Stab for the kill.”

Zahur stabbed the tree at least a few times. The more he stabbed the tree, the more comfortable he looked at approaching the enemy.

“Good, good. Now try throwing the spear. This should get your prey’s attention.”

Zahur stepped back a few paces away from the tree. He first tried a modest throw at the tree, which unfortunately missed the target by only a few millimeters.

Chigaru chuckled. “Throw it harder, Zahur. You need to face the target with determination. Aim like you’re shooting an arrow. Keep your focus on the target, and when you think you know the right spot, then throw.”

“All right,” Zahur quivered as he tried to keep his focus on the tree, imagining the tree moving in the dense heat. He made aim and walked forward two steps as he threw the spear directly at the tree.

“Very good, young one,” said the prophet observantly. “I think you know what it takes to be a true warrior of your clan.”

Zahur was still not very sure about his true skill. He still did not want to be a hunter in the first place, but was pressured into doing it to appease his father. He just gave a simple shrug and said, “Maybe. I still don’t know if maybe I made a mistake.”

The prophet just looked sternly, not expressing emotion. “Well, you know in your heart whether you made the right choice or not. Sometimes we have to make sacrifice for the will of the tribe, but on the other hand, you can break tradition and climb a different mountain.”

Zahur paused. *Maybe the prophet is right*, he thought. *Still, I don’t want to upset my father.* He maintained an unbridled pose.
“Zahur, don’t be a coward. You know this path is for you. Just stay determined—rise up to the challenge. Look at where I am now. Enkai has selected me as one of the fairest of warriors,” Chigaru said with conceit.

Zahur still did not flinch although Chigaru’s cocky message was unnerving. He knew that he must go along with the charade and challenge himself to make an effort. It was far too early to walk out on them. He would have to be a fool to not allow himself a chance at striking a predator.

“The sun’s going down,” the prophet shouted. “We must pitch camp here.”

The boys groaned. If it was something they hated more, it was pitching tents. Not one of them was skilled at successfully building one.

Zahur took out the foldable tent from his backpack and tried to place it in the open grassland ten meters afar. He never knew why his father never helped him set up a tent. He assumed that his father wanted him to be a self-made man, but still would have appreciated the help in case of situations like these. But despite the struggle, he managed to set his tent up by nightfall.

The prophet was all ready experienced in building a tent. He inherited that skill from his brother, who explored the sub-Saharan jungles. It did not take him long to build his and he was all ready meditating to the Sun’s slumber. Chigaru, however, disliked building a tent. But it was not that much of a struggle to him. He was able to pitch his tent in twenty minutes. His previous experience had paid off in the long run.

The evening was serene. Not many predators could be heard for miles. The three took some time to enjoy the sunset fade into night and listen to the calm waves of the watering hole. Zahur took some time to practice with his spear and spend some leisure time kicking his feet in
the water to calm himself. After all, he was still only in it for his father. If he threw down the spear, he thought of the shame it could possibly bring to the tribe and to his father. But he knew deep down that it was a regretful decision. He was never the aggressive type. He was more academic; he was more knowledgeable in his own disciplines than killing a lion.

The next morning, Zahur stretched as he walked out of his tent. He kicked his feet some more in the water before waking up the others. It was a clear day. There were not many clouds in the sky. While this made the day hotter, he filled up some water in his canteen and carried it along with the other provisions in his sack.

The prophet was the second person to step out. He was always an early riser, believing it made him feel young. He took some pieces of bread from his bag, spread some apricot jam, and had a little morning sandwich.

“Do you think we should—” asked Zahur, referring to Chigeru who was still asleep.

“Nah, let the boy sleep,” chuckled the prophet. He then whispered in Zahur’s ear, “I think he’s tired from building that crude tent of his.”

Zahur laughed enough to wake Chigeru. Chigeru was still drowsy from just waking up, but he was attentive enough to ask what was going on. “What is it, guys?” he slurred.

“Oh it’s nothing, partner. Just some morning revelry,” Zahur joked.

“Very…” Chigeru yawned. “…funny.”

They both laughed hard as Chigeru got dressed, looking somewhat annoyed.

The three enjoyed their meals. They ate prepared sandwiches on a small green carpet like a morning picnic. And in the while, nothing bothered them except for the early morning heat from the sun’s light. With their stomachs all ready full, they were energetic enough to venture further into the savanna to look for predators to hunt.
Zahur and the others traveled into the tall grass. The tall grass was an ideal place for an antelope or gazelle to graze. And if the timing was right, they could flush out one of their predators. But they had to stay out of sight not just to catch a glimpse of whoever they were hunting down, but that they themselves do not end up injured by the prey. Gazelles are not the friendly type.

“This way,” Chigeru whispered.

The three snuck behind Chigeru and hid behind a big tree. Chigeru scanned the area to see if there was a lion or elephant in sight. Unfortunately, bar the herd of gazelles that were grazing peacefully, the area was calm. All they heard was the sound of tall grass rustling in the wind and merely the lone monkey climbing in the tree.

“Oh well, let me grab my binoculars,” said Zahur. Hopefully if they examined the area more closely, they would see something stalking in the distant brush.

Zahur looked into his binoculars to see if he could get a close-up. Sure enough, he saw a lion running around in the lower section of the area. He seemed mad and about ready to roar.

“Uh…guys. I think we have our eyes on the prize.”

The others looked through the lenses. The prophet remained calm. The boys decided it was time to sneak a little closer at their foe. It was time to take the course of action.

They walked back out in the open crouched in the wild grass. The next safe haven was a few kilometers away, a large thorny bush that could act as a shield if approached from the forward. They had to act quickly. The lion could easily spot them and pounce for the kill.

The three finally made it to the thorny bush. By the time they got there, however, they missed their opportunity: the lion was far out of sight. Maybe the lion had all ready caught his lunch and returned home.
“What do we do now?” asked Zahur in a faint whisper.

“One of us is going to have to take a risk out there and follow the lion to his whereabouts,” whispered the prophet.

Chigeru immediately scoffed the idea. “Are you crazy, old goat? That could easily get one of us killed if the lion had an ambush squad waiting to attack us at all sides.”

“That’s why one of us needs to scan ahead to make sure that the lion is alone,” the prophet assured.

Zahur knew that the prophet’s plan was not going to be easy, but was one of the more viable options available. He just needs to remain calm and cautious when approaching the lion from behind. After all, this was their one chance. If this plan backfired, they might have to stay out in the open for another day depleting their resources.

With his backpack strapped, Zahur glided out into the open and hid behind an acacia tree. He could see the lion but it was far away. And in just a few seconds, the lion leapt out of sight. But at least he knew which direction the lion was going and he used the compass in his mind to stealthily creep behind it.

“Be careful, young one! Make sure you rendezvous back with us by sundown!” the prophet shouted, though Zahur’s partners were so far away from where he was, the prophet’s voice almost sounded garbled in his ears. But he took it as a sort of farewell since he had no idea if he was going to make it out of the savanna alive.

The coast was clear, and Zahur briskly ambled down one hill and into a big plain. There was nothing interesting about it. Hawks flew above his sweaty head. He was very thirsty; he needed to find some more water to drink while looking for the lion, which could prove tough since he needed to track the lion’s path. He decided to drink what was left from his canteen,
anyway. After all, it was better not to die from thirst than to capture an animal for what he thought was a silly task.

Luckily the lion was not that far. Zahur saw the lion straight ahead, feeding off the carcass of a dead antelope he assumed it had just killed. The sight of it made Zahur feel a little hungry as well, so he tried to take his mind off it as much as he could, but found it fascinating regardless. He wanted to get a close-up of the lion eating, but as he slowly rustled through the grass, the lion growled and turned around, frightening him. He knew now that the lion was alert. He hid behind another bush, hoping the lion would not find him.

The lion took its mind off the antelope to investigate the racket. It saw the bush where Zahur had hid. It softly roared and sniffed around for flesh. Its nose never failed him; it indeed smelled like human flesh. He crept up to the bush, its nose still sniffing the trail. Zahur tried to not make a sound. But the lion all ready knew that something was suspicious, that someone was all ready intruding in its territory. It smelled the bush. It could have imagined everything. Maybe it was not being followed. It initially turned around, thinking that it was perhaps mistaken. Zahur suddenly sighed with relief. His life could have been put in danger had he been spotted.

But then the lion realized that the bush looked odd. It gave another slight epiphanic roar. This time the lion did not hasten to check out the bush again. Zahur was almost safe had his small black hairs not been sticking out from the bush! The lion carefully examined his black hair out. Now it knew that someone concealed himself in the bush. It licked it chops and immediately bit the hairs off Zahur. Zahur almost wanted to utter out a loud painful yell, but his reflexes did it for him instead. The lion smoked him out.

Zahur panicked and ran for his life. The lion quickly chased him down. Zahur’s life flashed before his very eyes as he ran and panted in peril. Why was I destined to do this? Am I
not a man after all? So many questions flooded his noggin at the moment. He had no time to answer them. He needed to get away from the lion lest he becomes its lunch. The two were in an everlasting chase throughout the savanna. The lion’s roar breached through several flocks of birds. There was not much Zahur could do except find a safe haven as soon as possible.

Zahur was tired from the running. He needed to stop and rest, which was impossible to do. But then, without thinking and with great anguish, he tripped on a twig in the grass. He scraped his right knee in the process, but he knew that did not matter anymore. The lion was winning.

But before he could allow the lion to eat him, he immediately saw a big rock ahead. He scrambled up the rock as the lion prepared to claw the periled child. It leapt like a ballerina to attack Zahur’s chest. Fortunately, it missed before it even got a scratch. However, its paws landed in a thorny bush surrounding the rock, easy to miss by the naked eye. The lion received its retribution. It should have been more careful, but instead nature got the better of it.

Zahur should have used that time to escape, but as he started climbing down the rock from the other side, the lion gave a loud whimper. It cried in pain. The thorn in its paw nearly pierced through the skin. Now Zahur was in a dilemma. He could have made a clean getaway and made it back with the others and let the lion cry excruciatingly, or he could have been a Good Samaritan and risked taking out the thorn and free the lion of its pain. He decided it was for the best to help out the lion even though it could possibly attack afterward. It was the right thing to do.

Zahur leapt from the rock and slowly took the thorn out. The lion stopped whimpering and became much calmer. Zahur became somewhat of a modern-day Androcles. The lion slowly
warmed up to the boy. It was thankful for Zahur removing the thorn and decided to repay the favor. And he warmed up to the lion too, but at the same time he felt soreness in his gut.

Now what will I do? Surely I will be disgraced by my father. Zahur found himself in an even tighter dilemma. He now had to think of some way to get himself away from the lion so he could save some face. If Chigeru and the prophet caught him befriendiing a lion, they could run back to tell the tribe that Zahur failed. He did not want that. He still wanted to accomplish something honorably. Maybe there was another lion somewhere that he could hunt down. But doing that would only make him more of a hypocrite. Either way, his character now seemed sullied.

So now Zahur ultimately decided that the best thing for him to do was to try to forget about the lion. Distracting him, however, was not easy. He tried devising some ploy to get the lion away.

He pushed the lion away. “Go away! You’re free, now go on!”

It didn’t work. The lion growled, but it had all ready made a friend.

Zahur was becoming desperate. He started to sweat. “Please go! Go back to your herd! You don’t want to be around a human. We’re cruel! We hunt your kind! Can’t you understand that?”

But it was no use. No matter what Zahur said, the lion ignored his gestures. It had accepted Zahur as its hero and a friend. Zahur then gave up. He felt a bit of despair rush into his heart. He could not bear returning to the village now. So he kneeled and petted the lion on the head. He was still cautious, however. Lions could bit a human’s hand off at any time.
They walked through the savanna together. It was an odd pair to see. They stopped in a patch of tall grass, the grass tickling Zahur’s legs. He needed to say goodbye to him. His traveling companions might be coming back this minute, looking for him.

“Buddy, this is where we must part. It’s been a fun time, but I really need to go.”

The lion was sad. It did not want to see Zahur go.

Zahur took out a piece of meat from his bag. Maybe a parting gift would make the lion forget about ever meeting him.

“I bet you’re hungry, bud. Would you like some dried beef? Here, grab the meat…”

“W-What are you doing?” a voice suddenly uttered.

Zahur quickly turned around. It was the prophet, with Chigeru behind him. Zahur was startled. He did not know what to say next. They just saw him feed a live lion.

“Oh no!” Zahur exclaimed. “It’s not what you think, guys. I’m just giving the lion some meat as bait.”

They did not believe him. The prophet detected a lie a mile away; Zahur would not be foolhardy to use bait to lure a lion who would typically be bound to tear him to shreds.

The lion, however, was displeased and was almost about to pounce both of them. It ferociously sneered and growled.

“No, boy. These are my friends. Back, simba, back.”

They were both astounded. They were not quite sure why Zahur did not return with the lion dead or at least wounded enough for him to spear. This was his trial, after all.

“There, he should be calm now.”

Both their jitters subsided now that the lion was tamer, but the prophet still had many questions to ask him.
“I still don’t understand, young Zahur,” the prophet said, mystified. “You’ve been out in the field trying to kill this lion. Why have you now tamed it?”

Zahur told the truth. “Well—I was running for my life, and suddenly I found a big rock for me to climb. Once the lion pounced, he accidentally landed in a pile of thorns.”

They now understood why. Still though, it was quite a quandary for poor Zahur to find himself in. “So you took the thorn out,” the prophet said. He then smacked his mouth. “So now what? We certainly can’t bring that lion with us. If we tried to hunt another lion down, the lion would probably switch its allegiance and eat us all for betraying its kind.”

Chigeru then jumped in. “He’s right, Zahur. I mean that lion belongs in the wild, even if you’re now considering him your…” Chigeru looked at the lion hesitantly. “…pet.”

They both had a point. The lion’s presence would not make a good impression on the villagers. “Yeah, you’re right. But the question is how? How do we tell the lion to leave?” Zahur had another issue that made him shudder more. “What’s worse, I don’t know how to break this to my father. He’ll label me a good-for-nothing failure. I wouldn’t be a man in his eyes.”

They both nodded.

“Your father would certainly not be pleased. If worst comes to worst, he may think of you as a disgrace. The tribe may also think differently of you. They may think of you as a failure,” said the prophet.

Zahur felt sad after hearing that. He might as well run away and never return.

“There can be—exceptions, however. Maybe a boy like you was never meant to hunt. Maybe all you need is your real passions. The real aspects of our life that help unmask ourselves for who we truly are.”
“It’s not the end of the world,” Chigeru reassured. “And even if the village turns your back on you, at least your mother would understand. She and you seem to be fairly natured.”

Zahur’s frown slightly changed. “Yep. I guess I just have that soft side.”

The prophet soon put his right arm around the troubled boy and consoled him. “We’ll think of something. Don’t look too down, young one. ‘It’s all for one, one for all,’ as the old saying goes. We’ll be your personal bodyguards if anything happens.”

Zahur never thought he would hear that statement in his life. Maybe there was more than trying to mask himself from his true self. He knew what he had to do, and if it involved his new friends, he will gladly accept whatever help they could offer.

So it was a band of four: four adventurers wanting to go home. The birds flew in the direction towards their destination. Zahur walked with the lion, followed by Chigeru and the prophet who still thought it was somewhat strange to be walking with a wild predator. The sun was about to set, so they knew they should return home before nightfall so they would not fall into any danger.

They returned to the water hole where they camped the day before. They needed to stock up on water for the rest of the trip. The kraal was not far from the hole, but they did not want to end up tired and parched.

It was starting to cloud up. They heard thunder softly rolling in the distance. They were ready to embark for home before the storm hit. It was too late though. It all ready started to rain.

They did not bring any umbrellas with them so they had to simply hide their heads under their backpacks. The prophet did not care as much about the rain as the boys did, however; an elderly man like him had experienced far worse. He usually only wore a straw hat in rainy weather. But he knew how important it was to get the boys home safely.
But another factor suddenly hit them. It was also getting dark. The heavily overcast night sky would make it harder for them to see. So they had to decide whether they ought to stop and set up camp or risk navigating their way through the storm.

“Young ones, I don’t think it’s very sage to cross through the savanna like this. I think we should just settle down for one more night until everything subsides. Does anyone object?”

They agreed with the prophet although they were reluctant to admit it. It was better to camp out for one more night so they did not have to travel through the storm.

The lion was terrified though. It did not like thunder. As the sound got louder the lion roared with anguish, wanting to join the boys inside the tent. The prophet and Chigeru were still cautious about letting a lion in with a group of humans. Zahur somewhat felt the same way. They could not risk having a lion snore loudly while worrying they were going to get eaten the next morning. After a quick decision, they allowed the lion to sleep near the tent to give it more insurance.

After they put up the prophet’s tent, which was a little larger than the boys’ and enough to fit three people, they needed to build a fire inside to keep themselves warm and dry. They had to do it right in the center though so the tent would not catch fire. Zahur used two rocks to make a spark and successfully built a fire. It made everyone feel comfortable if not a little homesick.

They spent much of the time playing games and telling stories. The prophet was quite a storyteller. He would sit and tell amazing stories about some of his experiences in his youth. The boys especially liked his journey on the Congo River, which almost resulted in him drowning because his raft capsized. He could not swim. But after struggling to get out of the water, someone provided a hand for support. He did not identify the stranger since he elusively
disappeared shortly after the rescue. But he always remained thankful to whoever the stranger was. It made quite an adventure.

But the entertainment was short. While the storm was still going on, they heard strange noises intermingled with the raindrops. They heard a grinding noise, like that of a motor. While the lion was standing guard, the three humans took a look outside to see where the noise was coming from.

It was a jeep. It was an old pickup vehicle with only one working headlight and had two men. But they were not the friendly sort. They both had hunting rifles and laughed like hyenas.

The boys hid behind a small bush behind the tent, staying out of their sight. Zahur realized right away that they were poachers. They saw samples of ivory and animal hides in the back of the vehicle.

“Those people are dangerous. I think it’s best to keep a low profile,” the prophet warned.

“Keep that lion down, Zahur.”

Zahur nodded. He ensured that the lion would not make even one whimper.

But it was too late. The lion already growled, soft but still audible to the poachers.

Zahur tried to hush him. But the lion kept growling. It instinctively knew not to trust anyone who would hunt down its own family.

“Did you hear something?” one of the poachers shouted in Swahili.

They parked the jeep, locked their guns, and scanned the area.

“Are you sure it wasn’t your stomach? Didn’t you eat enough?” asked the other poacher.

“I’m sure it wasn’t me. Something’s out there.”

And they now knew. They just spotted the tent, although it still made out a dark silhouette and could not be seen easily in the rainy mist.
“Look, over there! That bush! I think I see intruders!”

They ran to the bush. They caught Zahur, Chigeru, and the prophet, uncomfortably crouched together behind the bush. They were in trouble.

“Get over there! Hands above your head!” shouted one of the poachers in English.

“Look, a lion! Kill it!”

One of them fired their rifles towards the lion but it missed. The lion took off like a zephyr, fearing for his life. It was not even that protective of them.

“Well, we’ll find more. Do you have the map?”

The other poacher nodded. “It’s in the glove box.” They looked at their new hostages.

“What shall we do about these three?”

“Put them in the back. Tie them up and make sure they don’t say anything. If anything happens, shoot!”

“Worry not; their mouths will be duct-taped. They won’t say anything.”

There was not much they could do. They were completely tied to the back of the truck. Not even a squirm would surprise the hunters.

The poachers drove the jeep out into a big, fenced hilly field in the Serengeti. It looked like they were in a game reserve. But since there did not seem to be any patrollers around, it made it easier for the poachers to sneak through. There they saw a herd of lions and lionesses, all gathered in the savanna eating on carcasses of dead antelope, also giving some to the cubs. It was what they could gather from their evening hunt.

Zahur took a peek out of the truck. *I don’t know how those lions will get out of this,* he thought to himself, not being able to speak intelligibly through duct tape. All he could do was sit and wait while the poachers made their move. He could not even struggle to escape.
The poachers both laughed and clapped their hands upon discovering the herd. They were ready to directly aim their guns towards them.

“This’ll be a catch! We’ll have more skins to sell on the market!” one of them exclaimed back in Swahili.

The poacher aimed his gun, not at the lions themselves, but towards the cloudy night sky, hoping the sound of gunfire would cause a disturbance.

It did. The lions were immediately alert; they began to proliferate, running for their lives like a stampede of cattle. The poachers did not stop until they made their catch.

Now the three hostages could not wait. They needed to break themselves free to save the herd. There was luckily a chainsaw in the back with them that they could use to untie themselves. Unfortunately, that would also put their lives in danger, so they had to wait until the poachers were far away from the jeep so they could stealthily save the lions.

The poachers made their move. They sped the car through the grassy terrain. One of them locked their rifles again and shot behind one of the cubs. The cub was lucky enough it dodged the bullet. If there was anything Zahur and his friends did not want to see was a dead youth that would make them cry in terror.

Suddenly, before the poachers made their next move, they heard the grass rustling. They stopped the car and instead aimed at the grass. It was the lion. It swiftly pounced out of the grass to rescue Zahur.

“Another lion?! It looks like it means business!” said one of the poachers. They were now desperate to shoot the lion so they could save their skins. They tried locking their rifles. But they could not do anything; they were out of bullets. They were trapped.
Now was Zahur’s chance to free himself and the others. He carefully clamped the chainsaw with his feet and dragged it over to himself. He sawed the ropes off, and did the same for the other two. It was a little painful taking the duct tape off, but at least they can now escape without further harm.

But they did not need to run. Right when they were climbing from the jeep, they saw another car in the distance, its headlights shining directly at them. It was a police patrol car, used to scout the Serengeti for any illegal and unscrupulous activities. They were relieved that the patrollers showed up at the right place and the right time.

One of the policemen grabbed his bullhorn. “This is Serengeti Patrol! Drop the guns! Repeating…drop all firearms and put your hands up!” he shouted.

The poachers stopped what they were doing and stiffly put their hands up.

The policeman also looked at Zahur and the others. “You’re from the nearby kraal, aren’t you?”

Zahur nodded. “Yes sir. I was doing a trial which involved this lion. But he actually saved all of us. Those guys were about to kill those lions for their own benefit.”

The policeman smiled. “Well kudos to this lion here! You’re lucky you people are alive. You have no idea what poachers are like.”

Actually, Chigeru was familiar with them. He saw a few of them shoot down a harmless zebra in cold blood when he did his trial. To be sure, he also hunted a lion in the Serengeti, but it was only because the village allowed him to, not to break the law.

“We’ve been tracking these lawbreakers for months. I guess it was only coincidence that they had to arrive at this spot tonight with you three.”
Zahur shrugged, his fears finally eliminated. “I suppose. I mean, we were camping for the night because of the storm. We were going to head back to our kraal in the morning.”

The patrolman knew what Zahur had mind. “Sure, would you three and the lion there like a ride back to the village? I was once a member of the kraal there.” He flashed his badge. “I left for Dar es Salaam at eighteen, and I never regretted my decision—to work for the police force. We do our best, you know, and I’m…just proud that I get to help the Tanzanian force out in capturing suspicious types.”

“And I’m his partner,” the other patrolman finally said a word. “We just hope you are all okay.”

They all nodded with relief. They were lucky to have a friend in the lion that saved their necks in this crisis.

“Now, the lion…” the other patrolman continued. “That lion is wild. I don’t know if you’ve successfully tamed that beast, but I wouldn’t recommend having that lion wandering around in your village where he might frighten some of the children. I wouldn’t be caught dead with a pet lion myself. It’s just not orthodox and—a little unsettling. So I regret that once you make it back, you will have to eventually say goodbye.”

Zahur had a knot in his stomach, knowing well that it was probably the truth and the rightful thing. But it was not fair. He just got to know the lion after he took out the thorn before. He did not want to say farewell so soon. He gave a little sweat, and then reluctantly nodded.

Zahur and the others packed everything up; they folded the tent, brought their backpacks full of their supplies, and loaded them, including the leashed lion, into the trunk. They sat in the backseat with the poachers in handcuffs.
“This is Serengeti patrol officer ZS-K893D. We’ve apprehended the two hunters charged with illegal poaching of ivory and lion furs. We have them in the back, and we are going to return some bystanders home. Signing off,” the first patrolman said on his walkie-talkie.

The car made it back to the kraal by 11 o’clock in the evening. By this time, the rain had stopped and replaced by a casual evening breeze. Zahur got out of the car and took his backpack out of the trunk and also helped carry the others’ gear. It was a warm feeling to be back home. All except Zahur, who had to tell the truth about how it went. He still did not know how to break it gently with his father.

“You people stay careful out there! The Serengeti is not always the safest. If you need anything, call patrol and we will be glad to help!” said the first patrolman.

“Thanks officer! We will,” said the prophet.

The lion disembarked from the truck with a leash tied to its neck. It was now in the village so it had to open up to a new environment for the time being. Zahur gained control of the leash and told it to be quiet until everything was sorted out.

“Is that Zahur?” murmured several voices.

The sound of the truck woke up a few of the villagers, including the elder, who immediately checked what the commotion was.

“Zahur! Chigeru! Koman! Welcome back! Everyone, come out! Zahur is back from his trial! Hopefully your trial was an honorable one,” said the elder.

All Zahur had to do was be frank. “Yes…yes it was, elder,” he said.

But then the elder noticed Zahur was holding on to a live lion. “Are you sure? Because it does not seem like you completed the trial, lad.”

Zahur felt his heart pounding deeply. “W-well, I meant to kill it, but y-you see, I…”
“You were meant to hunt the lion down, not keep it alive.”

The lion growled softly.

“Yes, but…but it was chasing me, and it got a thorn in its paw. So I took it out. That’s it, sir. I didn’t want to hunt another one down.”

The elder felt reluctant to accept Zahur’s story at first, but soon shrugged it off, knowing Zahur intentionally wanted to follow the trial but accidentally befriended the enemy anyway because of sheer luck. “Well, I guess there’s no harm that your intent was clear. I wouldn’t say you passed, nor failed. I will conclude it was…a draw.”

All three took a deep breath upon hearing that news, especially Zahur, who was breathing incessantly, not knowing whether or not he would disgrace his people had he failed.

“T-thanks, sir,” he stuttered. “This means a lot. This lion and I had quite an adventure all to itself.”

The elder continued asking Zahur questions. “So then what happened? Why was there a truck just now? Did something go wrong?”

They all nodded. “We were abducted by two poachers who wanted to hunt down a bunch of grazing lions out in the savanna,” the prophet explained. “We were almost shot!” He then looked at the lion. “If it hadn’t been for this lion, which saved us at the precise time law patrol showed up.”

The elder sighed. “Well at least everyone’s safe. It was not all in vain. You, Zahur, even though you have not fulfilled the task of killing the lion, you have exhibited strength of character out there, which in itself proves you to be a man. No need to lose face, young one.”
And now here came the last challenge he had to face. His parents were the last to walk outside their hut to see what was going on. Zahur’s mother cried with joy that he was home safe and sound. His father seemed glad too. At least he thought that Zahur may have won the trial.

“Zahur, my baby! Welcome home!” exclaimed his mother, giving him a big hug. “What was it like out there?”

“It’s…a long story, mother. But I’m thankful that the three of us are back,” her son replied.

And then she saw the lion and gasped. “Is that the…lion that you were supposed to hunt? Why did you bring that home?”

“Lion?” Zahur’s father immediately asked. He rushed towards the crowd to see the monstrosity.

“Son, why didn’t you kill that when that was your task?” His face soured.

“I didn’t want to kill it. It chased me. I almost died. But then the poor lion got a thorn stuck in its paw. So I put the spear down and helped it. We then became friends. I hope you understand, but I don’t want to be a hunter. I want to help.”

All Zahur’s father could do was turn his head away, not wanting to look at his son. “I knew you wouldn’t. You couldn’t kill anything with a pebble. You’re not everything I hoped,” he whispered gruffly.

“Dad, could you please listen?”

“No, I will not! You have brought irreverence to this family! I will talk about this in the morning, but right now you’re not allowed inside.”

And that was that. Zahur was shamed in front of the entire village. He fell into despair and started to cry.
“I’m sorry, dad,” he muttered. “I thought you would understand.”

The prophet walked over and consoled him. “Don’t fret about it, Zahur. Your father will make amends. It’s not the end of the world, you know.”

It seemed that way to Zahur, however. He always wanted to make both his parents happy. No matter how he tried he could never impress his father potentially.

The rest of the village came over to give him some consolation and encouragement. Some gave him a big hug. The elder told him that he could not please everyone but it was always important to understand that he had to make his own choices in life, some not so easy. At least Zahur knew that he had people who cared.

It was now close to midnight. Zahur was nearly shivering in his dashiki. Although the lion was all ready warming him up with its own coat, he had hoped his father would change his mind and let him in to make himself warm. He sat in front of his hut and thought about his journey. If it was not for the lion, he was sure the three would have met their ends on the back of the poachers’ jeep.

“Son, come inside.” It was Chuma, asking Zahur to come inside. “Except for that. It’ll have to wait outside,” referring to the lion.

Zahur felt his bones knock as he got up and walked inside.

“Your mother and I have been talking about it. And I gave it some thought. And I think it was unfair for me to judge you based on who you really want to be.”

He gave a little smile. “Now, I’m still a little disappointed you don’t have the blood of a hunter. Like myself, like your grandfather, like your ancestors. But—if you want to follow your own path, I will now accept it. You proved yourself that you’re courageous. You’ve been in
enough danger already, particularly the poachers. But from what you told me outside, it seemed like quite the daring adventure. And I’m proud that you’re safe and at home.”

“Thank you, father. Thank you for your blessing,” said Zahur with a tear in his eye. They both hugged.

“Thank you for understanding, Chuma,” Dalila said, overhearing their conversation from their small kitchen. “Our son does not have to follow all of our traditions if he feels like he’s not satisfied. It’s a unique feeling. Be proud Zahur is a resourceful, intelligent, adventurous lad.”

For the first time, Chuma nodded. Perhaps it was time to break with family tradition. But he had to be firm about one thing and that was the fate of the lion.

“But I must now break some bad news for you, Zahur,” his father said sternly.

Zahur read the expressions on his father’s face. He knew what was next and he was already frowning.

“That lion. Now I know he may seem like your new faithful companion, but he’s not made to be a pet. His presence will surely creep out the village if he remains here. People still do not take kindly to having the King of the Beasts in a compound that has relied on African traditions since before you were born.”

Zahur bit his lips, trying to assure himself that Chuma was right. They were not the easiest words to take but it was probably for the best. He gave a slow simple nod.

“No, he can stay for the festivities tomorrow. He can dance with us and even share some of the scraps. But afterwards, you will have to exchange your farewells.”

“I understand,” Zahur responded.

“Fine. Now off to bed. Tell the lion that he can sleep near the hut tonight, but nothing more after. We will talk with the chieftain tomorrow at dawn. Let’s not forget our masks either.”
The next morning, Zahur and his family, with the lion in the rope leash, came out to see everyone chatting about their guest, the lion. There was much laughter and conversation. The elder was the last one to head outside for his constitutional around the village.

“Ah, Zahur, my boy. Chuma and Dalila, too. Good morning! You have made it in time for the preparations of your son’s festival of honor.”

They were setting everything up. It looked like it was going to be a greatly festive day, filled with activity and food. People were all ready preparing the ugali for the feast. Zahur could smell the rolls being cooked in the communal kiln.

“How do you like it, son? I asked the Elder to throw this feast in your honor and the lion,” Chuma asked. “Just when you went to sleep.”

“It looks like it’s going to be a fun one. I can all ready smell the food. I might need to restrain the lion a little more so it doesn’t eat us out!” Zahur said, chuckling.

His father chuckled back. “Yes, hold it back as much as you can. But I think you can control it.”

After a few hours of preparation, Zahur’s festival finally began to excitable revelry. The children had a soccer match in the grass. People ate freshly made ugali at the village table, while they ate hot bread rolls, and sipped spinach and goat stew. And people were entertained to humorous anecdotes and interesting stories at today’s enkang. The prophet told another one of his stories about his sojourn in Mali with a few of his friends. He even brought up the same mysterious stranger who wandered around the streets of Tomboctou while he was staying at the luxurious hotel there. He still wished he knew who that stranger was who saved his life back at the Congo River.

Then around noon, the elder quieted the rabble to give a speech.
“We have all assembled here to send our congratulations to Zahur for, although he never accomplished what he first stated when he took off, completing his trial alive to tell the tale. As you all that were present at the enkipaata know, he sought to capture and hunt a lion…but he soon realized that…maybe that wasn’t his prime ambitions…much to the chagrin of a few, and perhaps to the blessing of others…and that he did something else that proved worthy enough to be a man of the kraal…to stick by his friends, to take a chance on saving a herd of lions in a reserve from evil hunters who do not understand the ethics of it, to defend a lion who he saved…here he stands, a boy who before the gods today will he now evolve to be a man.”

The elder clapped, accompanied by applause from everyone else at the enkang, including Zahur’s father. He stood up with the lion and walked up to the elder with dignity.

“From this day forward, you Zahur are now a man, and the lion here…” the elder paused to announce the next string of words. “…will forever until the gods disagree be an honorary member of the tribe and will always be welcome on our soil.”

He then tied a green ribbon to the lion’s neck to give it its honorary status. Next, he presented a dark red ribbon to Zahur for his courage and willpower even in the midst of danger. Everyone applauded one last time.

The festival ended with a series of tribal dances at dusk. Some of the villagers dressed up with their masks and danced ritually to worship Enkai. And when the sun came down, Zahur, his parents, and Chigeru wore their masks and danced to the lighting of torches. Even the lion pranced around the circle and had fun. The crowd filled with amusement and even a little awe and terror.

The festival was now over. The sun had gone down and everyone retired to their huts, but still remembering the good time that they all had. And now it was time for Zahur to part with the
lion. It was not going to be simple. But he had to free the lion as he would free a sparrow since a sparrow deserved to fly and chirp freely like a bird.

He took a few deep breaths. He held back tears. He thought about what he was going to mutter and that was all there was to it.

Zahur untied the rope off the lion’s neck, carefully not removing the green ribbon along with it. “There you are, you’re now free. I know it won’t be easy for either of us, but your home is beyond here. And my home is here.”

He gently wrapped his arms around the lion. “Thank you for saving me and my friends. And thank you for being a friend.”

He slowly petted the lion’s head and rubbed the upper back, making it growl happily. And then he whispered, “Kwaheri (Goodbye).” It gave a roar of gratitude in return and took off. Zahur continually watched the lion go until it finally disappeared over the horizon.

“It’s nice that you have a friend in that beast,” his father commented. “I’m proud of you, son. That you have made friends on this journey. You know, perhaps I’ve learned a little bit more myself after witnessing you in action. That friendship can come from anywhere. That you don’t have to be held in high regard to make a friend, but you just have to simply be yourself. I’ll be waiting for you inside, son.”

Zahur told him that he will be inside for a few minutes. He was still looking at the very direction the lion ran. He swelled with tears, knowing that they may never see each other again. But he put his hand over his heart and muttered a final ‘kwaheri’ before heading back inside.