

Lions of Lingmere 2

Lion Country

Colin Dann

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Also by Colin Dann

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LION COUNTRY

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RED FOX

For Thomas and Bethany

Preface

The two sister lionesses stirred as the sun rose over the game park. They had spent their first night of freedom in the African savannah. This was their home now and they were at liberty to explore all its strange and exciting new possibilities without any restraint. The memory of Lingmere Zoo in England, where they had grown to adulthood, was dimming. The zoo had closed and the two lions, after some difficulties, had been transported to the continent of Africa and resettled in their ancestral home. It had been an adventurous plan and it was yet to be proved successful. But the sisters, particularly the bolder of the two, were keen and alert as they viewed their surroundings.

Their old keeper Joel had overseen their transfer from England to Africa, and had taken the job of assistant to Simon Obagwe, the game warden in charge of the Kamenza animal refuge centre where the lions had initially been penned on their arrival. Now he hoped to be able to monitor their progress. With some help from his boss's little daughter, Annie, he had chosen new names for the sisters. Their old English names, Lorna and Ellen, were no longer appropriate. They were African lions in every sense now and must have African names. So Lorna became Huru, meaning free, and Ellen became Kimya, meaning quiet.

Joel said the names over to himself, savouring them. 'Huru, Kimya. Yes, they *sound* like lions,' he remarked to Annie.

She smiled. 'They must behave like lions too,' she said.

A Lot to Learn

IT WAS STILL early in the dry season. There was plenty of prey in the wooded areas and out on the plains. The lionesses stretched and greeted each other, nuzzling and brushing their heads and bodies together, before climbing to a vantage point on a rocky outcrop near their resting place. Mixed herds of zebra and wildebeest could be seen milling about in the foreground, munching the thick grasses that were still cool with dew. The sisters watched them keenly, but they were not yet hungry. They had fed the previous day, and afterwards they had groomed each other, reinforcing their sisterly bond.

The sun rose higher. The lions narrowed their eyes slightly against the gathering glare.

‘We can be ourselves here,’ said Huru. ‘Like the other animals. There’s no pretence.’

Kimya took in her sister’s words. She understood. But she said, ‘There may be little comfort, though. The heat is intense. When I first arrived I thought it would crush me.’

‘There’s plenty of shade,’ Huru pointed out.

‘And competition for it too,’ Kimya said. ‘It’s not like our cage back there with its cool spots and water for us alone.’

‘And its narrow, cruel confinement,’ Huru reminded her. ‘Here there seems limitless space. How we yearned for that.’

‘Yes. You’re right,’ Kimya acknowledged. ‘We belong here. Once we were reunited I felt the pull of this country

just as you did. Its power couldn't be denied.'

'So many sounds ...' Huru breathed. 'Calling to us ... We were meant to be here and it's as though we're fulfilling our destiny.'

They stood a while longer, inhaling the new scents deeply and contentedly. Then Huru said, 'I need to drink. Are you thirsty too?'

'Yes,' said Kimya. 'Let's go to the pool.'

They descended the slope and Huru led her sister at a steady trot, breasting the tall grasses, their bodies swinging rhythmically. Their pace slowed to a walk as they saw, half hidden by growths of rushes, a number of other creatures drinking around the marshy waterhole. Eventually Kimya sat down, but Huru continued slowly. She could see that the other drinkers were smaller than she was. A family of jackals and some baboons lapped at the water; a warthog wallowed in a patch of mud. Huru turned, sensing Kimya was lagging.

'Nothing to fear,' she called and, as she did so, the other animals looked up and saw her emerging from the grasses on to bare ground. They scattered immediately. Kimya quickly joined her sister. The two took their time, drinking their fill at the water's edge but always keeping a look-out for new arrivals. They were not interrupted.

The heat of the sun grew in intensity. As the lionesses wended their way back towards their resting place, they began to pant. Cautiously, they looked for some shade. A small stand of woodland beckoned.

'Is it safe?' asked Kimya nervously. 'Are there others about?'

'We shan't know that unless we investigate,' Huru grunted. 'Come on, sister. Let's see.' She strode on purposefully. A spring hare darted up in front of her and dashed for its burrow. Huru watched it disappear without much interest. Kimya drew level with her sister and they walked together, shoulder to shoulder. Kimya's ears

twitched at every new call she heard: near or far, beast or bird. Huru concentrated on the belt of scrub ahead of them. A slight, refreshing breeze began to blow against their flank. They reached the shade and sank down in a small copse of thorn trees and thick bushes.

For a time it was peaceful. Even Kimya managed to relax. Then a muffled roar made them both scramble to their feet. Another roar, nearer this time, answered the first one. The sisters knew they were hearing other lions calling, asserting possession and dominance. A third call came, apparently from the other side of the copse. Kimya was ready to run, but Huru hesitated.

‘We’re intruders,’ Kimya warned. She was very jittery.

Huru had to acknowledge it. ‘We’ll go quietly,’ she said. ‘Let’s not betray our presence.’

They crept away through the tufts of grass, heads held low, looking to right and left and ahead of them as they went. Huru caught a glimpse of the nearest lion. His back to them, he stood on a low termite mound and called at intervals, proclaiming ownership of the territory and alerting other members of his pride to his whereabouts. Huru hadn’t seen a male lion since her cubhood. She was afraid; awed by his obvious strength and power. She said nothing to Kimya, whose view was screened by her sister’s body, and the lionesses slunk on hastily. They didn’t look back.

Suddenly the male lion turned. His roar ended on a final throaty grunt and his nose tested the air. He had caught a whiff of the strangers’ scent. His massive maned head swung round and he spotted their retreating bodies. Instantly he gave chase, calling to his pride brothers to join him and drive out the interlopers. Huru and Kimya heard his anger and broke into a run. Huru glanced behind her. The huge male was racing towards them and she noticed another male, far out on their left, galloping to converge on

the chase. A third lion was pounding in their direction from an even farther point.

'Run for your life,' she cried, 'or they'll surely kill us.'

Kimya gave a frightened whimper and stretched her legs to the utmost. The sisters ran blindly, without any thought of direction, their one aim to put as much space as they could between themselves and their angry pursuers. They reached an open area of short grass that spread like a huge mat over the ground and their feet thundered across it, sending clouds of dust spiralling in their wake. They ran at full stretch now, not daring to lose a second by checking to their rear. They could hear the males' panting breaths and the beat of their paws on this harder ground. The lionesses, who were unused to long runs, began to tire. They sensed they were not going to shake off the determined males. Kimya gasped, 'It's no good. I'm finished,' and actually slackened her pace as though she accepted her fate.

'Don't give up,' Huru said sharply. 'There's cover ahead!'

Kimya floundered forward while her sister put on a desperate spurt, and together they blundered into a stand of palm trees where a small herd of elephants was gathered to feed. The huge creatures rounded on them, trumpeting angrily, but more by luck than by judgement the lionesses' momentum carried them right through the elephants' midst and out the other side. Without intention, the great beasts now became their rescuers. Seeing the male lions approaching, the elephants closed ranks to protect their youngsters and gave warning to the lions to proceed no further. Their combined bulk and their threatening posture was enough to deter the lions' rush. The males hesitated, snarling their frustration; then backed away. The matriarch of the elephant herd flourished her trunk and lumbered forward a few steps to underline her message.

'Keep going,' she blared at them. 'And don't cross our path again or you'll regret it.'

The lions turned, muttering between themselves and trying to retain some dignity. One, who had a black mane, said, 'Nothing to gain by getting involved with *them*,' referring to the elephants. 'It's a wise creature who knows when to give way.'

The largest of the three had a battle-scarred face. 'We achieved what we wanted,' he growled. 'Those females won't show their faces around here any more.' The trio plodded back the way they had come.

Huru and Kimya, on the other side of the palm thicket, were busy regaining their breath. They saw the lions' departure. 'Alarm's over for now,' Huru panted.

Kimya wasn't so sure. 'What about the monsters in there?' she said, glancing back at the elephants. She feared they would turn their attention back to herself and her sister.

'They're feeding,' Huru said. 'They've forgotten us, sister. I suspect they're all bluster anyway.'

'Well, I don't feel safe here.'

'No. We must move. Get right away from this spot.'

'Where *is* safe?'

'I don't know. Time will tell. We have a lot to learn.'

A Kill

THE LIONESSES WERE tired after their experience with the aggressive males. Fear, heat and unaccustomed activity had sapped their energy. In their enclosure at Kamenza, where exercise had been limited, the heat of the African sun hadn't troubled them unduly. Mostly they had been able to laze and sleep, Kimya in particular. Now the sun seemed to drain them, beating down relentlessly on their weary bodies. Heads held low, eyes half closed, they forced themselves to continue farther from the territory they had unknowingly trespassed into. Neither spoke. They sought a small, quiet piece of shade where they could recoup their strength a little. In the distance a tall termite pillar offered refuge, but when they reached it the sun was at its highest and there was no shelter there. The sisters stumbled on. Kimya thought of her peaceful pen at Kamenza with longing. It was easy to forget now how miserable she had been there on her own. Less robust than her sister, the flight from the males had absolutely exhausted her. She stopped walking. Her head drooped lower still, her mouth hung open and her sides heaved painfully. But she dared not let Huru get too far ahead.

'Wait. Sister!' she called hoarsely. 'I ... I need a rest.'

Huru turned. The sun made her irritable. 'You can't rest here,' she snapped. 'There's no protection. We have to keep on the move. I'll slow down.'