

The Matriarch's Tale

*story and illustrations
by Meshack Asare*

Once, somewhere in Africa, a small herd of elephants disappeared suddenly, without trace. It was a long time ago, but some people still remember this story. They believe that descendants from those elephants live among us.

The elephants were led by the wisest female, the Matriarch. Her wisdom came from her mother, who had been the matriarch before her. It had been this way since the beginning of a time that only elephants can remember.

The herd loved and respected their young matriarch beyond compare. They were loyal and obedient. In return, their leader had to follow one rule: she was to birth a female calf, never a male. A male might one day try to seize power, and this herd accepted only female leaders.

When the Matriarch became older and got big with baby, the elephants rejoiced. They waited patiently for two years until, one day, the chief midwife finally made the much-anticipated announcement: "Our beloved Matriarch has delivered a healthy infant!"

The younger elephants raised their trunks to the sky to trumpet the happy news, which echoed across the plains. "We have an heiress. Rejoice!"

But inside the enclosure, the mood was solemn, for the story was quite different. The Matriarch had given birth to twins, and the second was a boy.

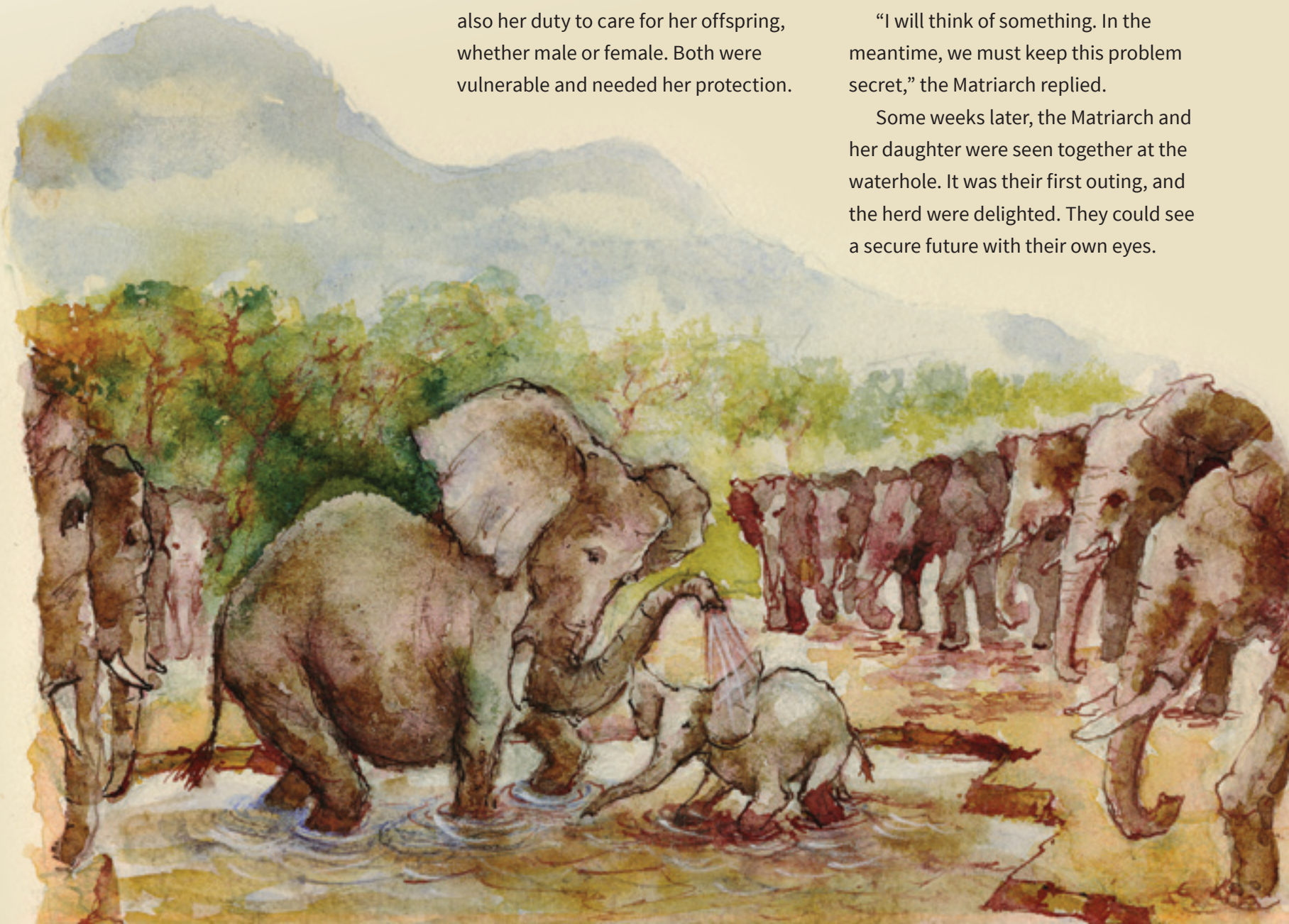
The Matriarch was conflicted. She had produced a female heir – as was her duty – but now she was a mother, and it was also her duty to care for her offspring, whether male or female. Both were vulnerable and needed her protection.

The Matriarch called for her most trusted confidantes. "At my feet now you see a healthy female," she said. "But the male calf is also mine. Nothing will make me leave him for the hyenas."

"What will we do?" the head midwife said fearfully.

"I will think of something. In the meantime, we must keep this problem secret," the Matriarch replied.

Some weeks later, the Matriarch and her daughter were seen together at the waterhole. It was their first outing, and the herd were delighted. They could see a secure future with their own eyes.



But the Matriarch was deeply troubled. Eventually, she knew her son would be discovered, and they would be parted. It was inevitable. So she began to plot their escape, making plans with her bodyguards. Years earlier, she had heard talk of a powerful river. They would go there, and on the other side, her family would be safe. They could start a new life.

When the right time came, the small party of elephants headed east across the savannah. All went well until sunrise, when the ground began to shake and rumble. In the distance, the Matriarch could see a great billowing cloud of dust: the other elephants were coming.

There was just time to reach the riverbank. “Take my son across,” the Matriarch ordered. “Don’t wait for me. Go!”

The excited young male rushed forward. He disappeared as soon as his foot touched the water. Loyal to the end, the bodyguards followed – vanishing in the same way.

Great uncertainty suddenly rose up in the Matriarch. She only had to nudge her daughter and follow, and her family would have a peaceful future with no need for secrecy. But as the feet thundered closer, she couldn’t move. She thought of her mother and grandmother and of what they would do in her position. Then she thought of her herd. How would they live without her?

With a heavy heart, the Matriarch turned her back on the river. Her son was safe with familiar companions. Her daughter was at her side. She had a duty to perform. Calmly, her fate decided, the Matriarch waited for the oncoming stampede.

“Is everything all right, our matriarch?” the leading bull asked.

“It is,” she replied. “Let us go back.”

Somewhere, on the other side of the river, a small group slipped quietly from the water. Not a herd of elephants, as you might expect, but people with a young boy in their midst. And like any child, the boy broke away from the group to bound ahead ...



Author’s Note

Why do rivers flow? Why does fire burn? Where did mountains come from? How did the leopard get its spots? People have always asked questions like these and looked for answers. Philosophers find them by using reason. Scientists gather and study facts. But some of our earliest thinkers were storytellers. They came up with fables, myths, and legends to explain why some things are so.

This story is part of that tradition, inspired by the beliefs of the Ashanti people and other ethnic groups in Ghana. In that part of the world, people belong to family groups known as clans. These clans are each represented by a totem – a natural object or an animal that was chosen because of its spiritual importance. My story is a way to explain why one clan chose the elephant as its totem.

Storytellers do not usually want their words to be taken only literally. They use their imaginations to create different ways of seeing the world. Traditional stories encourage people to think and talk about ideas. I have tried to do this, too. However, unlike traditional stories, mine is completely new. It has never been told before.

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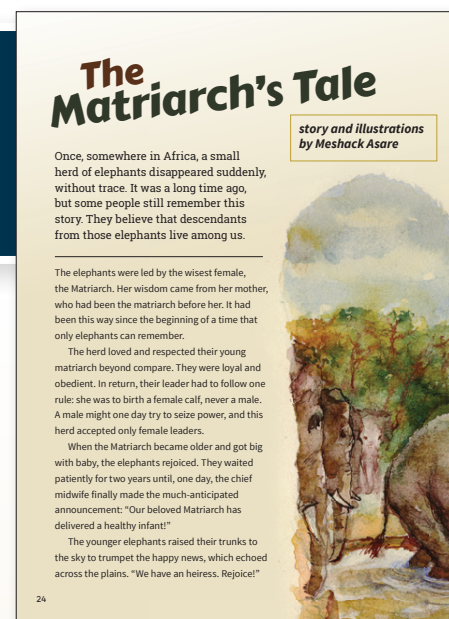
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