

# Leah's Greatest Gift

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Johnson



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Dedicated to our four children, Naomi, Natalee, Cameron, and Brandon Johnson, who inspire us to embrace the child within and live a colorful life. We love you and thank you for igniting our love of storytelling.

As the sun ascended above the plains, the elephants were taking their morning dust bath. The hippos were already looking for a meal at the bottom of the river, and the zebras were enjoying a cool drink at the water hole. The sunlight slowly began to paint the landscape, and even the smallest animals were busy with their morning routines. Yes, the day began like any other, but this would soon change when Keeley, the king's messenger crane, began her descent through the clouds with a very special announcement.

With a slight lean to the right, Keeley turned over the tree-filled valley en route to the water hole. The elephants would be first.

Landing at the edge of the river, Keeley stepped up to Leo, the massive elephant, and leader of the pack. Leo leaned his huge head down until he was eye to eye with Keeley. "Keeley, you've come all the way to our water hole. Do you have a message for us?" Leo asked.

"The king is coming! The king is coming! Prepare to bring your best. The king will bestow a special reward for the greatest gift," Keeley said.

"The king, you say—and a special reward for the elephants?" Leo replied.

"No, no," said Keeley. "The king will bestow a special reward to the animal group who brings the greatest gift."

Keeley explained how each animal group was to present a gift to the king when he arrived, and he would grant a special reward for the animals with the finest gift. Leo spread his large ears out to shade Keeley from the sunlight. "There is no contest here.

It will be the elephants' reward for sure," Leo said with a smile, boasting, as the elephants went to work on their plan.

Keeley took flight from the water hole and flew east toward the mountains until the smooth plains turned to rocky hills. The big cats were next! Landing on a boulder outside a large opening in the hillside, Keeley began to bellow her important message. “The king is coming! The king is coming! Prepare your best—prepare your best!” Keeley said.

Slowly, a figure began to appear out of the darkness into the morning light. It was Ruza, leader of the big cats.

“The king is coming, Ruza,” said Keeley, “to bestow a special reward.”

“The king is coming with a reward, you say, for the smartest and most cunning of all animals, the mountain cats. How tasty,” Ruza said eagerly.

Taking a step back, Keeley looked at Ruza and replied, “Yes, smart and cunning—but the king must choose.”

Keeley stretched out her long wings and took to the sky; her work was not done yet. There were so many animals to tell about the wonderful news of the king’s visit and reward. Keeley told the geckos, the rhinos, the kudu, and the monkeys. She told the ostriches, the flamingos, the hyenas, and even the village donkeys. Keeley flew all day long until there was only one more animal group to visit. The sun was setting, and a familiar eastern wind was now moving across the plains. From the air, Keeley located her final landing spot for the day, a certain tree among many in the middle of a grassy field.

Landing in just the right spot, Keeley lowered her head beneath the tall grass and began speaking. “The king is coming! The king is coming! Prepare to bring your best.”

Soon two small creatures appeared out of the grass. It was Brighton, leader of the field mice, and his daughter, Leah. “The hour is late, and the sunlight will be gone soon; what occasion brings you into our village, Keeley?” asked Brighton.

“Brighton, I bring good news of the king’s return to our lands. He is coming, and a special reward will be granted to the animal group that presents the best gift.”

Leah, a very curious mouse, listened closely and carefully to Keeley’s entire message and to her father’s responses.

“The king’s visit will be a grand occasion for all the animal kingdom. We will prepare a gift for him that will be acceptable,” Brighton said.

With her work now complete for the day, Keeley took flight for the last time.

“Father, we must begin at once!” Leah exclaimed. “After all, we don’t have much time. Can you imagine the king coming here—and with a reward? I wonder what it will be, Father.”