

The Seven Kings: The King and His Pawn

by

DakotaWereWolf

"The King and His Pawn" (C) DakotaWereWolf, 2013

Nzuri, Ishonda, Nunka, Tatu (C) Khione

Sanaa (C) Namacub95

Simba, Nala, Kula, Tojo (C) Disney

All others (C) Me

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As soon as the day turned to night, he departed for the den that he shared with his mate. The events of the day continued to replay in Adwin's mind.

The messengers.

Then the gray lion.

It had been too much excitement for one day for him, and all he wanted to look forward to was sleeping the night away with Timira and Gwandoya by his side. But he couldn't, not yet. He needed an explanation for what had happened with his mate today. She had agreed to tell him everything once everyone had fallen asleep, and he agreed to the terms. Now that the stars were coming out and the temperature was cooler, Adwin knew that there was going to be no reason for anyone to remain awake. Even Ngosi and his companion, Dawn, were fast asleep.

Adwin paused a bit before the den he shared with Timira, breathing in her scent. He was not blind to smelling her doubt and fear, and it made him sad. When Timira joined their pride, that's all she was - a young lioness who had seen too much in her short life. She was distrustful, hateful even, but Adwin had chiseled and broke through her walls to find a scared lioness deep down. He didn't want her to revisit that road again.

"Timira?" he softly called her, not daring to enter their den until she called for him.

"You're good," she answered back.

Sighing with relief, Adwin slowly entered their den, careful to step over Gwandoya, who had settled near the entrance. He found Timira curled up tightly in the back of their den.

Settling behind her, he pressed his nose against her cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," she growled, pressing closer to him. "Really, really terrible."

"I'm sorry."

"It's scary, Adwin..." Timira pushed herself so hard into Adwin that he nearly fell over onto his side. "I saw her die before my eyes, and now she's alive? I don't understand..."

"Ssh, it's okay. Just explain everything to me." Adwin laid his ear on her shoulder, his head pointed up at hers, ready to listen.

Taking a deep breath, she explained, "Lindiwe and I met a long time ago, and we got along really good after some... issues were taken care of." Adwin noted Timira slightly tilting her head back to gaze at Gwandoya. Now her history with Gwandoya was beginning to make sense to Adwin. "Then she started getting sick of being with her family. Felt that she wasn't able to experience anything in her life. So I told her that we could just run away, find some adventure, and she said sure. I didn't tell her that the big reason I suggested it was because I didn't have a family anymore."

Adwin nodded his head. That was one of the tales he got from Timira - her father, named Chumvi, had run a pride before he was killed. Timira was chased from her pride by her step-mother, but that was as far as the tale went. Timira never indulged her history with the lioness named Lindiwe, or even mentioned her name.

They must've been close, he had thought to himself. After all, why would Timira tell

him about her father's death and her being run out of her own pride, and of the lion named Tojo who had given her the scars she now wore, but say nothing concerning Lindiwe?

"We traveled for a bit..." Timira went on. "But then I... there was a lion. He was being sweet, and I... kind of set him off. Lindiwe, she... The lion chased us for a while, and Lindiwe said... she said..." Timira's voice grew shaky. "G-Go, r-run. She wanted me to... I didn't want to! But she said, and then she... oh god, Adwin, it's like that all over again!" Tears began to fall freely from Timira's eyes. In alarm, Adwin leaned forward and began to lick them away.

"You don't have to tell me more," he said gently. He didn't want her to grow more upset over the matter. "I got the idea."

"S-So how can s-she b-be alive then, Adwin? How?"

Adwin couldn't offer her an explanation for that. If Timira was adamant that Lindiwe had sacrificed her life for her, who was he to say he disapproved? But, on the other hand, she did not mention she went back for Lindiwe when she fled...

"Maybe she didn't die," he offered.

Timira shook underneath him.

"Did you go back for her when she told you to run?" he gently pressed.

She shook her head. "No..."

"Then maybe she didn't die after all. She might've survived."

To his surprise, Timira scoffed, "Yeah, maybe..."

Adwin licked her ear and resumed, "But if she's living with that lion now..."

"We have to get her back, Adwin. We need to."

"In time. But we have to think about what we're going to do."

"I know someone who could help... I'll have to find him, though."

Adwin sat up and Timira rolled away to face him fully. "You know someone?" he asked, his head cocked.

She nodded. "Gray lion, red mane. His name is Judas. He's Lindiwe's father." She hesitated, then added, "And Gwandoya's as well."

Ah, now everything made sense to him.

"He never liked me though," said Timira. "Might hate me now."

"I'll go with you," Adwin offered.

"You sure? Would Mheetu like that?"

Adwin was unsure. Would Mheetu like that offer? He was still practically holding onto his title as leader since Adwin always went to him for advice. It was Mheetu's final call for everything, and Adwin was just the piece that acted on it. He could beg Mheetu to let him go.

"We'll see," was all Adwin could say. "But thank you, Timira."

She cocked her head, not quite understanding him. "For what?"

Adwin smiled. "For trusting me."

She also smiled. "I love you, Adwin."

He shuffled his paws against the ground, his body tingling as she said that. It was the first time that word had even been said between them, and Adwin always suspected that he would be the first to say it.

She rolled back down on her side, back facing him. "Tomorrow, can we go see Mheetu about this?"

"Of course," he said as he settled behind her, once again laying his head against her shoulder. "Even if he says no, we'll go anyways, okay?"

Her eyes brightened, and she laughed. "When did you stop taking orders?"

He flashed his teeth, and licked her ear. "Go to sleep, okay? We'll talk to Mheetu in the morning."

That night, Adwin slept like a king.

-Back in the Pridelands...

"Um, who are you?"

Ashiki had his eyes wide open, and his claws unsheathed as quickly as he could. Not far from him stood an unfamiliar brown lioness, whose eyes gleamed green. He definitely did not recognize her as being part of the group at the funeral today.

She was an invader to him. And too dangerously close to Chipo.

"Leave," he snarled, only giving her one chance.

But the lioness merely stood there, her face scrunched up in contempt. Good, she thought no better of him than he thought of her. Now he had reason to attack her.

He crouched, preparing to strike, when Chipo poked her head out of their den. "Ashiki, I-" She froze as she spotted the lioness. "Oh..."

"Chipo, get back in the den," he growled.

The lioness snorted. "Where's my mother? I know that you're not Pridelanders."

Oh, so she was a Prideland lioness then? That changed everything. Ashiki straightened himself, but left his claws bare. "Apologizes, I didn't realize you lived here," he said, not losing

the edge in his voice. "And your mother?"

"Kiara. Queen Kiara," the lioness said. "Does she know you're here?"

Oh, how very interesting. This lioness definitely was absent from everything.

"Oh, Queen Kiara," said Ashiki. "I'm afraid that... she's no longer with us."

The lioness's ears perked. "Excuse me?"

"Maybe it's best if you talked to King Abel about this-

"King?" Realization seemed to dawn upon the brown lioness. "He's not king. Mom said-

"Queen Kiara was killed earlier this evening by a rogue. King Abel now rules the lands."

The brown lioness took a tentative step back, shaking her head. "No, that's not..."

"Don't believe me? Then go speak to him about it."

"Oh I will." She had such a defiant tone in her voice that it intrigued Ashiki, amusing him so. It reminded him of when he first stumbled upon Lindiwe. But unlike Lindiwe, this lioness was trying to keep herself together. He could hear that much beyond her tough exterior.

But when she refused to make good on her word and instead stared more at him, Ashiki grew increasingly irritated. "Well?" he growled, swishing his tail. "Aren't you going to go?"



Blinking rapidly, the lioness turned to climb the Rock, snapping out of whatever daze she had been. Ashiki watched her shadow begin to ascend, and snorted. Lionesses are always so snappy. Just like Ikuta was...

Just thinking about his sister made him angry beyond all comprehension. She betrayed him, kicking him down when he needed her help the most. Probably because of that idiot, Ikinya. She always liked him the best, he thought resentfully.

"Ashiki?" Chipo called out.

He turned to her, his mind and attention now fully on her. "Chipo, I'm-

"Why did you kill her?" the lioness asked timidly, not leaving her spot from the den's entrance. "She supported us..."

Ashiki moved so that he was in front of his mate, staring down at her beautiful face. "Chipo, she knew what needed to be done," he reasoned.

But his mate shook her head. "She didn't know anything. She loved you, and you..."

"I needed their help here. They knew who I was, who we are. I'm sure Ikuta already told them what I did."

"Ashiki, I think we should run away somewhere else. Live a long happy life. Raise a family."

Ashiki's face darkened, and his mate took a quick step back. "We had a family, remember?" Suddenly he didn't want to be in the presence of his mate anymore. "Chipo, go

back to sleep."

"Ashiki, I'm-

"Go back to sleep." This time he did not hesitate to raise his voice.

Chipo quickly nodded her head and darted back into her den. Ashiki sighed, his anger now quelled and instead replaced by regret. He didn't want Chipo to be more upset by him, but he couldn't have helped it. He never wanted to be reminded of what couldn't happen for them.

A cub. There was a cub in their future. But now it was dead, and the old Ashiki had died along with it. They couldn't even tell if it was going to be a male or female. What a shame.

The clouds roared over their heads, and rain began to descend upon them. Ashiki gazed up, wondering if this was a sign. Whatever. He'd have his day, one day.

Your sister approaches, warned Zuri.

Abel sat up, blinking in the darkness. There, outside the entrance, stood a brown lioness who stared directly back at him.

He knew who she was - Adanna, the first daughter of Kiara. The one who hated him for good knows why. The one who fled their lands because she couldn't stand the sight of him. A traitor.

Abel growled lowly as he approached her, not inching to stand outside because he did not want to get wet. "You have some nerve showing up here again," he snarled.

Adanna didn't seem to be fazed by him, which only agitated him more. He wanted her to be afraid of him! "I can just banish you from these lands, you know," he continued. "I can call you a traitor, and exile you, and no one would bother to question me."

"Where's Mom?" Adanna asked, lightning cracking in the background.

Abel was surprised by the question. In his mind he had expected a sarcastic retort thrown back in his face. He knew, from Defir, that his mother and half-sister had always had their troubles, and that Adanna essentially ditched them when he was born. Four years, she had been gone. Where she had fled, no one seemed to have known. Nor cared, which was as it should've been.

Adanna took a step forward. She was bigger than him, and older, but that didn't mean she could be stronger than him. "Where's Mom?"

Abel spat, "Dead. She's dead, and I'm King now, and there's nothing you can do to say otherwise!"

Adanna's jaw twitched. Abel smiled with satisfaction. Good, that was the response he was waiting for.

But the smack that followed, he did not expect. It stung him badly, and when he brought up his paw to feel at his new wound, Abel could feel the beginnings of blood forming.

"So what, did you have her killed? Couldn't wait to be a king?" snarled Adanna.

What an insolent female. Kill her, commanded Zuri.

Abel was near the point of slaying his half-sister. For now, he only glared back at her. "Oh I see. Can't handle the fact that I'm in charge, and you're not. Should've thought about that when you ran off, huh?"

"I knew you were going to be trouble."

"Hmph, not a very nice thing to say to a King. With one flick of my tail, I could have the whole pride chase you down." Abel slowly approached her, baring his teeth. "I could have them torture you, kill you, whatever I desired because they're following my orders now. You lost your right to say anything when you left."

"Abel? What's going on out here?" From the shadows of the den appeared Nala, her eyes blinking the sleep out. Steadily following behind her was Simba, who equally looked like he had just been disturbed from his sleep.

Adanna took a step backwards, looking prepared to run, but it was too late. She had been spotted. "Adanna? Is that you?" inquired Nala.

Abel snorted. "The traitor came back."

Much to his disgust, neither of his grandparents acknowledged what he had said. They were so enthralled by Adanna.

Nala had wrapped her body around Adanna, pulling her into a tight nuzzle. The brown lioness did not react to her grandmother's greeting; her eyes were completely focused on Simba.

"Is it true?" she managed to say. "Is she dead?"

"Yes," Simba said sardonically. "She's gone."

Adanna sighed heavily.

"Where did you go?" asked Nala. "Your mother had been so worried about you, and Defir... They were searching all over for you."

Adanna shook her head, too paralyzed by the news that she was unable to form words.

Disgusted by the exchange, Abel spoke up, "I refuse to have her spend the night in my territory. She's a traitor, and no sister of mine. Now, get out."

"Abel!" Nala cried. "She's still your sister!"

"Did I stutter? I said that she's not my sister. She never was, and I have no use for her here. Get out, Adanna. Consider this a favor."

Simba stepped in between the three of them, his eyes glaring into Abel's. "That's enough, Abel. You can't exile her because you don't like-"

Abel threw his head back and laughed. "Excuse me, but I think that I hold the title of King now. Which means what I say goes. Do you dare to deny that?"

"Abel-"

"Do you dare to deny that I am King?"

"No," the red maned lion admitted. "But-"

"Ah, that's all I needed to make clear. Move aside now, dear grandfather."

But Simba refused to budge.

Abel's nose twitched. "Did I not say it clearly enough?"

"Oh no, you did," growled Simba, his voice beginning to rise. Other occupants from the den were beginning to poke their heads out to see what was going on. "And you might be my kin, but I will not have you exile Adanna. So back off, Abel."

Traitors, they're all traitors! cried Zuri.

"Traitors! You're all a bunch of traitors!" roared Abel, throwing his body at his surprised grandfather. The pair tumbled, claws and fur flying everywhere. The moment Abel's back hit the ground, he was fighting for his life. He became a barrage of claws, swiping out, not even caring whether they hit Simba just as long as they were enough to make the older lion bow before him.

"Simba, enough!" cried out Nala.

Simba began to crawl off of Abel, disgust in his eyes. "You-" he began before Abel interrupted him. The dark lion lashed out, catching his grandfather off guard as his claw caught Simba in the face, slashing the bridge of his nose.

Adanna was upon him in an instant, her teeth digging into Abel's mane, which was still

not thick enough to fully absorb the impact of her bite. Abel threw his head back and unleashed a powerful roar. As soon as his calling ended, Ashiki and his band of lions had raced to the top of the Rock. Ashiki lashed out, hitting Adanna's head with his outstretched claws, leaving the lioness dazed.

"What's going on here?!" Ashiki demanded.

Adanna rolled off of Abel, allowing the young lion to find his feet. To Ashiki he stated, not without a crack in his voice, "My family is full of traitors! I want them exiled immediately! Or kill them, if you have to!"

"This is madness, Abel!" said Nala as she took a step forward. "Banishing us? For what?"

Ashiki moved so he stood in between the two. "The way I see it," he began, a low rumble emerging from the base of his throat, "you attempted to murder the King. Killing you would seem like a much better deal..."

More of the Pridelands lions began to join the growing crowd outside, including Tojo and Kula, who brushed past Ashiki's own forces to join the inner circle. "Simba, what's going on?" inquired Tojo.

"ENOUGH!" roared Abel. To Ashiki he demanded, "I want them GONE, do you hear me?! Exiled, killed, whatever you want to do! Just get them out of my sight, and make sure they never come back!"

"Abel, listen to me-!" began Simba, but Ashiki stopped him.

"Seems like the King wants you gone," he snarled, unsheathing his long claws. "I'd do just that."

"Where's Defir? I'll speak with him-"

"You're not speaking to my father!" shouted Abel. "Go! Send them away!"

Ashiki pressed closer to Simba, Nala, and Adanna, glaring down at them. "We can do it the easy way, or the hard way. Which will it be, exile or death?"

While Nala and Adanna shuddered under Ashiki's intense gaze, Simba attempted to stand up to him. "This is madness," he said to Abel.

Abel scoffed, turning his head from them. "Ashiki, why are they still here? Did I not say get rid of them?"

"Well?" prodded Ashiki.

"Simba, don't..." whispered Nala.

After a long staring contest with the gray lion, Simba finally turned his head away, sighing in defeat. "Exile. And don't worry, we'll escort ourselves out-"

"Oh no you're not," growled Ashiki. "I'll personally see you out. Nunka, you will come with me."

A smaller gray lion emerged from the crowd behind Ashiki, his brown mane indicating no resemblance to Ashiki's. "Okay," he said, a bit of hesitance in his voice.

Ashiki and Nunka bullied the trio off the Rock, while Abel stood by to watch them, a satisfied



smirk on his face. You did good, said Zuri. They were going to be trouble anyways.

"Abel, what's happened?" inquired Tojo, as he trotted up to his great-nephew. "Why is Simba leaving?"

He did not turn to face his relative as he spoke. "Simba has betrayed us," Abel said simply. "This is their punishment for it."

Tojo turned his head to Kula, who acknowledged with a shrug.

Abel's eyes stayed on the dark forms of his loyal subjects leading his traitorous family into the wilderness until the black swallowed them whole, and he could no longer spot them. A gust of wind rushed past him. Abel leaned comfortably back, smiling to himself.

Ah, yes, now my reign can finally begin.

Adanna took one last look at the great Rock in the distance behind them. They were left on the outskirts of the Pridelands, and were not without having had Ashiki's threats tossed in their faces. Even though Simba dared to fight the lion underneath his breath, he did not speak loudly the words that would've cost his life.

"Where will we go?" inquired Nala.

Simba pondered the thought. "We'll go to the Outlands, they're the closest. Ekene might be willing to offer us a place while we think of what we have to do. Adanna? Is this all right with you, or will you run off?"

The brown lioness flinched at her grandfather's words. She knew better than to expect her family to be so welcoming to her. "Grandpa, I'm sorry."

"Let's just go to the Outlands, shall we? It's getting darker, and if we leave now, we can make it there before dawn."

Adanna turned back to Pride Rock, the place of her birth. The place of her mother's death. She thought she saw something in the distance. "I'll be along," she said. "You go on ahead without me. I promise I won't run away," she quickly added.

Though Simba wanted to argue with her, Nala nudged her mate along. The pair trailed off, leaving Adanna awaiting the secret guest who was approaching her. With their proximity becoming less and less, Adanna was able to recognize who this someone was - her cubhood friend, Sanaa.

"Oh Adanna, thank Mohatu you haven't left yet!" she said in a hushed whisper, staring expectantly at her friend. "Duka and I heard everything. We couldn't believe that you returned to us!"

Though she was happy to see her friend in good health, dark memories began to circulate within Adanna. Memories from now, and memories from then. "Well, saying returned now might be a bit of a stretch..."

"So it's true then. He banished you?"

"And Simba and Nala."

"You know, I never liked him from the beginning." Sanaa cast her friend a soft smile. "When you left, Duka and I were devastated. I went looking for you, but I never found you. Where did you go?"

"Another time, perhaps. What're you doing out here, Sanaa? Shouldn't you be back in the dens?"

"I was until I heard what was going on outside! I wanted to catch you before you left completely! It wasn't right what Abel did to you, or to his grandparents for that matter!"

Adanna's nostrils flared. She kept aware of their surroundings, hoping to herself that Ashiki wasn't going to show his ugly face any time soon.

Sanaa went on. "I can't believe he's King now! After Kiara's death, I just couldn't... mhm, besides that though, I'm just glad that you're okay."

"Maybe not for much longer. Abel's insane, Sanaa."

"I know, Adanna. I knew for a while."

Suddenly, Adanna was staring at her old friend in a new light. "Sanaa, can you do a favor for me?"

Sanaa seemed just as surprised to have heard that slip from Adanna's mouth, just as much as the brown lioness was surprised to have said it. "Of course!"

"Keep an eye out on him, Abel. If he does anything bad, I'll be around."

Sanaa cocked her head to the side. "We're spying on him?"

Adanna nodded her head. "I think this... thing, or whatever, it's just beginning. I don't think he's going to stop at us, Sanaa. He might hurt someone else next. Can you do that for me, please? I want to know what's going on over here."

"Of course, Adanna. Duka and I have your back."

The brown lioness gave her friend a grateful smile, took a step forward as though to engage her in a nuzzle, but then decided not to at the last second. There were still things she needed to work on. "I'll see you soon," she said to Sanaa, and slowly she slipped into the night, leaving her oldest friend waiting helplessly in the dark.

The next morning, in the Riverlands...

When Ekene had returned from his visit to the Shadowland pride, he explained everything to Khari in front of both their prides - that the Shadowland pride never scheduled for an attack, and that it was Ikuta's exiled brother that was performing the acts under the Shadowland name. He also mentioned that the Shadowlands were more than happy to help out any pride who needed their help.

Even though that had been a day ago, and Ekene had led his pride back across the river, Khari was still troubled by the act itself. She had met Ikuta when the leaders met, and thought that the female was mysterious. If she had launched an attack, it wouldn't have seemed unlikely. But the way Ekene spoke of his meeting with Ikuta, of her promises, it shaped Khari's outlook on the situation. So she exiled her brother, and never thought to warn the prides in advance?

Khari would trust Ekene's word, but she would remain suspicious about Ikuta's

offers. However, she did decide to pass on the word to the Savannah pride, and sent Sauda and Reno out to relay the message. They had returned bearing the same suspicious outlook on the whole situation, but nonetheless were relieved that a full-scale pride war was not imminent.

Now that the dawn brought forth a new day, Khari found herself busy with her usual duties - after all, she was still pride leader. She had the perimeters of their territory checked, she had her hunters go out to find food, and she found time to spend with her family. Laying on the green grass, facing away from her daughter Kagiso and her mate Nzuri, Khari found herself ecstatic to hear the good news.

"We're having another cub!" Nzuri was quick to tell Khari, his face blossoming with a glowing radiance. Beside him, Kagiso was blushing and facing away, looking both pleased and a little embarrassed.

"Congratulations you two," Khari responded, unable to hold back the large smile threatening to rise to her face. Her daughter had already given her three beautiful grand-cubs, and one more addition to the family was absolutely wonderful. "How has everyone else felt about it?"

"Khatiti and Tatu were really excited about having another cub to play with. But Yejide..." Nzuri's face darkened, and the good mood the news had sprung vanished immediately. "Khari, we're really worried about Yejide. She's acting more distant than usual."

Kagiso nodded her head in approval of her mate's words.

"You're spending some time with Khatiti. Why not try and help Yejide out too?"

Khari considered what the pair were asking of her. Already she was devoting her time to helping her pride out, while teaching Khatiti the makings of a pride leader... to also take on Yejide as her responsibility was asking for a lot more.

If only Bour could help her out...

But he wouldn't. And she wished he would.

So instead she forced a tired smile to her face and said, "I'll try what I can. But maybe get her more involved? Maybe take her hunting perhaps?"

"Maybe we can... We're just scared about her, is all," Nzuri admitted.

"Don't worry, we can see what we can do for her." Khari leaned in and licked her daughter's nose. "Everything will be just fine."

Leaving the pair to their own devices, Khari decided she would inquire her pupil about her sister's behavior. Even in passing conversations, Khatiti would praise her sisters, and if Yejide was acting up, then Khatiti would know the reason why.

She found her conversing with Sauda. But as Khari started towards them, Reno leapt in front of her, blocking her way.

"Hey, can I see you for a minute?" he asked her.

Khari frowned - she really needed to see to Yejide - but if Reno had something important to ask of her, then who was she to deny him? She nodded, and allowed herself to be distracted from her true intent for the present moment.

Reno led them a ways from the pride, out of earshot with no one around, and as soon as he was happy about the distance, he turned to her and sighed. "Khari, I need some help with something. It's about Sauda."

"Oh?" Khari sat down, prepared to listen to him talk. "Is something wrong?" She knew about the history of her sister's relationship with Reno - and as far as she knew, there was no longer a relationship between the pair. They were still friends who had wanted to find their family, but had no luck doing so, but as far as being in love went, well that was the past.

"Lately I've been thinking... about me and Sauda. I kinda miss it - being in love."

Not quite following him, Khari asked, "Okay... So are you and Sauda getting back together?"

A surprised look crossed Reno's face. "Oh no, we're not. But... there is someone else."

"Oh, good for you then! Someone in the pride, hopefully?"

"Yes." A tinge of pink began to glow on Reno's cheeks. "And I want to tell her, but it's Sauda I'm worried about."

"Sauda?"

"We're not mates anymore, but is it betraying her if I chase another? It's funny, I never used to care about this kind of stuff when I traveled with Ikeena... but now..."

Khari thought about how her sister would react. When she had pulled her aside to ask how she had been, Sauda had mentioned her and Reno's past, and she seemed absolutely certain that their love for one another was completely fizzled out. She couldn't see her sister becoming angry with Reno over something that was long gone. After all, she had no right to say what her former mate could and could not do now.

"Sauda's going to be fine," Khari said with carefulness. "You don't need to worry about her. Actually, it's you I'm more worried about." As Reno raised his eyes to meet hers, she continued, "You do what you got to do. And if Sauda has a problem, she can talk to me about it." Khari smiled. "I think you should pursue this female you're interested in."

Reno smiled. "Thanks Khari."

"No problem. I hope that that answers your question."

"It does, and, Khari, I was wondering if-

"Khari! Khari!" With thick clouds behind them, Khatiti and her twin Tatu raced over to them, panic on their faces.

Her face creasing with worry, Khari ran to meet them, Reno not too far behind her. "What is it, Khatiti? What's going on?"

"It's Y...Yejide," her pupil and granddaughter panted. "She's disappeared! And we don't know where she went!"

Crossing the river had been easy - after all, she was raised a Riverland lioness. She was used to the currents, and how reckless they could be on some days, and smooth on others. No, the river was the easiest part.

It was getting through Outland territory without being detected that had been difficult.



Yejide knew that Ekene was her great-uncle, but beyond that she knew very little about him, other than he was the leader of the Outlands. It didn't bother her that she knew so little of her family tree - on the contrary, it was better that way. Less emotional attachment meant that escaping her fertile lands had been the easy part.

She tried not to keep along the river for too long - she was sure someone in her home pride already knew of her escape. But she didn't wander directly through the Outlands either - someone might've thought she would be an intruder, and perhaps kill her. Yejide thought herself a decent fighter, but she was one lioness against an entire pride who was banding together. Yeah, there would be no chance.

Fortunately, it never came to that. She passed through the lands at a brisk pace, and once she saw the distinguishable crest of Pride Rock beyond the horizon, her heart began to race. She knew, deep down, she shouldn't have done this, seeking out the enemy. But hearing of the gray lion intrigued her, excited her even. And Yejide needed that, needed that adrenaline rush, needed that satisfaction from life. She wasn't going to ask Ekene for help, but maybe someone in the Pridelands knew about the whereabouts of the gray lion.

Who was going to care that she was gone anyways? Her parents had two other daughters, and another cub on the way. She wasn't going to be missed, no way.

She needed to do this.

The closer she came to the lands, the faster her heart raced. And as soon as the pads of her paws felt the fertile grass of the Pridelands, it was like her heart nearly exploded with joy. She was here! She made it all the way from the Riverlands!

But it only took a couple of steps into the land for her to bump into trouble. And trouble was right now taking the form of a slender gray lion.

Yejide was confused. This can't be the gray lion everyone was getting all upset over,

she thought. He looks like a pushover!

The gray lion seemed just as surprised to see her. "Um, who are you?"

Oh yeah, this definitely could not be the lion.

But before she could respond, another voice cut across them. "Nunka! What're you doing?"

Compared to Nunka's soft-laced voice, this one was accented with anger and a gruff edge. When the owner of the voice appeared from where he had been hidden, Yejide knew she had found the gray lion she was seeking.

Ashiki shifted his gaze from Nunka to Yejide, his nose twitched. "An intruder?" he carefully asked Nunka. The gray lion shrugged.

Yejide stepped forward, unable to hold back a growing smile on her face. "I came here to-" She never got to finish her sentence.

Ashiki tackled her onto her backside, jaw wide open and ready to attack. Yejide struggled underneath his weight, clawing and yowling in pain when his teeth caught the flesh of her ear, ripping away part of it. Yejide struck out her paw, hitting Ashiki fully in the face, but he retaliated with his own attack, only this time his claws were ready to kill. His claw dug into her face and moved downward. Yejide screamed, feeling the burning sensation to her face and the wetness of what was clearly blood.

This lion was going to kill her!

"Ashiki, stop!" pleaded Nunka. "She didn't do anything!"

"I agree with him. It would be better to cease now, Ashiki."

As suddenly as he had launched himself at her, Ashiki was quick to back off of Yejide, who now had her paws covering her face to prevent further harm. When she no longer felt his weight on her, Yejide carefully peered up and saw who her savior was. She felt her cheeks burn.

The small lion turned to Ashiki, an indifferent look on his face. "Well? Explain yourself, Ashiki."

Ashiki scowled, but nonetheless said, "She was trespassing. Just taking care of business."

"Interesting..." The lion turned to her, his eyes piercing hers. "Well? What do you want here?"

Swallowing her fear and mustering courage, Yejide rolled onto her paws and met her savior eye-to-eye. "I want to join your pride," she said. "I'm a good fighter."

"Not good enough, it seems," the lion responded, starting to turn away. "Go home."

"Abel, shouldn't we teach her a lesson?" growled Ashiki.

"Why bother? She's learned-

"I'm not going anywhere, Abel," Yejide said, more loudly this time. The lion paused, but did not look back. "I want to join your pride."

Ashiki moved in front of her, his nose barely within reach of hers. "We don't need you here. Go home or else."

Yejide refused to move from her place, despite her trembling legs betraying that she was growing fearful of the gray lion. "No. Abel, please, I want to join."

Abel's head finally turned to her, his expression unreadable. "No. Ashiki, escort our guest out."

Yejide could not believe his refusal. The ache in her heart grew tremendously, and she didn't wait for Ashiki to make another threat to her face. She turned and fled the lands as fast as her paws could carry her.

It was only a day later when another uninvited guest appeared on Prideland territory. Ashiki went to exterminate their guest, but Abel made sure that this time he followed the gray lion before more harm could be done. He was growing sick of these pests thinking that they could happily wander onto his territory, and not think anything of it. He had been merciful to Yejide, despite Zuri's protests that he shouldn't have, but this time he was more than willing to allow Ashiki to handle their guest his own way.

When he first heard the news from a scout, Abel had assumed it was Yejide again, which only infuriated him more. But as he and Ashiki approached their unmoving guest, it was clear that his warning had scared Yejide off completely. It was an orange lioness who greeted them, her gaze unyielding.

Abel hated that.

"Are you Abel?" the lioness asked of him as they got closer.

Ashiki leapt forward, not to attack the lioness, but to intimidate her. "How dare you be so bold!" he roared.

Abel shoved him aside, his gaze toxic. "Enough Ashiki, or I'll have your tongue ripped out. Yes, I am King Abel."

The lioness smiled at him. "My name is Ishonda. I heard word about you."

Oh no, not another one. Abel turned to Ashiki. "Get rid of her however you see fit."

Ashiki licked his maw.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," sang Ishonda as Abel began to turn his back on her. "I came here to join your pride."

"Not interested. Ashiki, kill her if you have to. The next time another one of these lionesses show up, just kill them. No questions asked."

"I've killed before," the lioness said suddenly. "You'll need me."

This interested Abel. "You have, hmm?" he asked.

Ishonda brushed past Ashiki to meet the smaller lion's gaze. "You'll need me," she repeated, letting her words ooze from her lying tongue.

Abel allowed the thought to settle in his mind. Yejide didn't make a case for herself, on

why he would need her, but Ishonda boldly declared that she has killed another. Zuri, what do you think?

The ghost of the lioness in his head did not immediately respond to his question. But when she did, she seemed considerate in her answer. I think... we'll need allies. To prove our power. She could be useful for us, Abel.

She's said she's killed.

She's willing to kill, Abel. We'll need her.

Abel gazed into Ishonda's eyes, and saw the look of a killer. Of one who would do as she was told. He liked that. "Who did you kill?" he inquired her.

With the same smile on her face that she had when she first saw him, she stated, "My family."

Oh yes, we'll need her, Zuri said.

That would be it then. There was no further need to debate. "Ashiki," Abel said, his eyes not leaving Ishonda's, "escort our guest back to Pride Rock."

Ashiki's nose twitched. "King?"

Abel ignored Ashiki's questioning gaze. "Welcome to my lands, Ishonda."

And that began what Abel could only call a floodgate, a reaction of sorts. Others began to pour into his lands, asking favors of him. Several days since Ishonda's arrival, a brown lioness

named Katura stumbled into his lands, asking him to train her, so that she may seek revenge on another lion pride that had killed her mother. Abel had no patience for her request, and would've sent her on her way had Zuri not stopped him.

"We'll need her, the lioness crooned into his ear and heart. So Abel allowed her to stay, and she in turn would serve under him, no questions asked.

Then a pale lion by the name of Zareb came along. Once again, Zuri urged Abel to begrudgingly accept the lion into their ranks.

Ashiki was as displeased about the new arrivals as Abel was, and the two often paired up to voice their concerns. Mawusi, his father's guardian, was now beginning to voice his own opinion on matters as well, whether Abel asked for him to or not.

And then, Yejide returned to them one day. It had been a couple of weeks since her humiliation at the hands of Ashiki, but when she faced off against him once again, she was not alone.

Ashiki had informed Abel of Yejide's return, and when Abel went to see her, he found her standing over a dark gray lion roughly about her size, with a tawny brown female standing not far from them, petrified.

"What is this?" he demanded as he approached. His eyes went immediately to Yejide, who looked up with the same determined expression she held when they first met.

"I found these spies trespassing on your lands," said Yejide, pressing her paw deeper against the gray lion's throat. "I thought you would appreciate the effort."

Abel's whiskers twitched as he tried to recall who was on duty at this hour. It was Nunka and another, maybe Zareb? Are those two complete idiots? he cursed at himself.

Ishonda and Ashiki were at Abel's side at once, examining the scene before them. "Impressive," muttered Ishonda, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

"Hmph," was all Ashiki said.

Yejide only had eyes for Abel, however. "Now you have to let me join your pride," she insisted, no hint of a plea in her voice. She had a different approach this time - she was commanding him!

Perhaps he could consider her...

I would, said Zuri.

Abel approached them, growling at Yejide to move. She did so without hesitation, and the presence where her paw had been, his now stayed. The gray lion gagged underneath the weight of his paw.

"Do you know whose territory you've stepped in?" he snarled.

The gray lion shook his head, his expression mimicking Abel's. "No, but if you don't move your damn paw-

"Abrafo, shush!" hissed the tawny lioness.

"We were only passing through," growled Abrafo.



Abel threw his head back and laughed. "Passing through? Hah! Spying is more like it! As if I'd let you walk away from here." Zuri, what do you think?

You're right, Abel. They seek to destroy you. They're messengers, from a lion pride I know of.

Killing them sounds appealing...

Too swift. Keep them as prisoners. Make them suffer.

Abel smiled, liking the idea of that. His eyes turned to the tawny lioness, who was now getting a threatening look from Yejide. "You, your name again?" he demanded of Yejide.

The lioness blinked once. "Yejide."

"Yejide. Step away from her, now."

And so Yejide did so.

Without moving off of Abrafo, Abel began addressing the tawny lioness. "Your name!"

The lioness wanted to appear brave, but she was failing miserably. "It's Sarafina," she muttered.

"Well, Sarafina, how would you like to see red on your brother's handsome coat?"

Sarafina's gaze shot up at him. "No, don't!"

"Oh, and why not?" Abel's claws unsheathed, and they began pressing threateningly into Abrafo's mane. "It might be a bit fun to watch, wouldn't you agree?"

"We didn't do anything-"

"Silence! Now I'll ask you again - would you like to see red?"

"No."

"Then I'll tell you what, I'll let you both live." Abel could feel the sharp intake of breaths from Ishonda and Ashiki. "But in return I require your service."

Sarafina seemed puzzled by his declaration. "Service?"

"That's right. You will serve my every whim and command. Whatever I ask of you, you shall do for me, is that understood? If not, I'm sure either Ishonda or Ashiki behind me here would be more than happy to tear your dear Abrafo's limbs one by one."

"Sarafina, don't!" cried Abrafo.

Sarafina, her ears laid back, her eyes looking as though they might water with tears, finally dipped her head at Abel, sighing. "Fine, I'll do whatever you ask."

"No-!"

Abel's grin grew wider. "Excellent. Now then, Ashiki, escort our friend Abrafo here to

the dens below the Rock."

Ashiki moved in Abel's line of sight, a deep frown on his face. "But my family..."

"They'll be moved up to the large den on the Rock," replied Abel. "I want this prisoner securely watched at all hours. I don't care who has to do it, as long as it gets gone, okay? You're in charge of that."

Ashiki rapidly blinked, trying to comprehend what Abel was saying. "Uh, yes, of course King Abel."

"And me?" spoke up Yejide, her eyes narrowed.

Abel almost wanted to inwardly groan. But on the other hand, she did bring him some prisoners, spies who wanted to get rid of him... He had to be at least a little grateful to her for that.

"Fine, Yejide. You shall join and serve under my name and rule."

Delight rushed into Yejide's eyes. "Of course, King Abel." She gave him a respectable bow.

Abel smirked at the motion.

Later that night...

It was a night without stars, as Abel took his place upon the perch of the Rock. Behind him, everyone was asleep in the dens. Below, it was Ishonda and Yejide who were keeping watch over Abrafo. He had had sharp words with Nunka and Zareb over their level of competency, but while Ashiki interrupted to defend Nunka, no one came to Zareb's rescue. It was amusing to watch the young lion squirm under his gaze.

Today had been a busy day. He had his own collective circle, whom he was now beginning to refer to (in his mind at least) as his apostles. He had power, and no one was questioning him.

But something still stuck to him. Something that Zuri had mentioned earlier.

"Zuri?" he spoke quietly.

Hmm? The lioness had been proud of his actions today, and was glad that he was proving his strength to rule by making all others bow before him and serve.

"You mentioned earlier of a lion pride who sent the spies."

Ahh, yes.

"Can you tell me about them?"

Oh, my handsome king, they're a terrible pride of lions and lionesses who mistreated me.

"Mistreated you?"

When I was alive. You see, they were the reason I died.

Abel's nose twitched, his claws unsheathed. "I'll kill them all for you. Again and again."

He could hear the smile in Zuri's voice as she crooned, My love, I would be forever grateful if you could.

So she told him about the pride, who they were, where they lived, and how effectively they needed to be killed. Abel absorbed her words carefully, already planning out the level of assault when he finally went to sleep. That night he dreamt of a gray lion with a red mane, a lion who had caused Zuri's suffering and death.