

## Fun

by

*Wild Wind*

Orange light bathed Priderock as the sun set, casting the caves and delves in the rocks into shadow. Askari made his way along Priderock, keeping his head down as he slunk past the cave where many of the lionesses were gathered in small groups, talking and laughing as the day ended. His green eyes didn't linger on them long as he moved down the slope towards tonight's kill. He lifted his head as he approached the carcass, the faint sound of buzzing coming from the flies. He crouched down and dug his claws into the kill, dragging it out from the overhang it was hidden under. Once in full view, he sat down, examining the kill before him. They'd brought down a hefty male zebra, and despite his age, his flesh was bountiful-much of it was still left, even after the pride had eaten their fair share.

Askari looked at it critically before deciding to settle with a leg. He lay down, pulling it closer with his front paws. He dug his teeth in, closing his eyes slightly to better enjoy the delicious taste. When he had been separated from his pride, food was so scarce to come by. Many days he had thought he would surely starve to death before he found them again. That is, until Alba had found him at the border and taken him in. He could remember how hostile the lioness had been, but now she was much nicer to him, and talked to him more than anyone, even his former escort, Moyo. She and her cub seemed an odd pair, but he supposed perhaps that was normal behavior between mothers and cubs in this pride. In his pride, lionesses tended to never have many relations with their children. He remembered his own mother, who had barely stayed with him and his siblings, and he felt a small pang of jealousy as he thought of how warmly Alba treated Nyimak.

He became lost in his thoughts of how different the two prides were, but was soon brought out of his reverie by a voice in the distance. "Hey Askari!" He swiveled his ears towards the sound, and turned his head to look, swallowing the meat he had been chewing. His eyes fell upon Alba who was sitting near the entrance of a cave, smiling. He cocked an eyebrow at her in curiosity as he sat up,

wondering whether she had been calling a greeting or asking him to come over. He looked to her side to see an orange lioness laying down and looked at her with wide eyes of shock. Alba motioned at him with her tail, and he took it as a symbol that he should approach.

He rose to his paws and padded over, having to abandon his meal as he padded up the slope towards them. As he approached, the other lioness looked to him and offered him a kind smile as she held two small cubs in her front paws. Once he was close enough, Alba rose to her paws and approached him, bumping her head against his shoulder in greeting. He cocked an eyebrow at her, and raised the leg of that shoulder and moved away, feeling uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why she had done that, as he wasn't used to this kind of behavior, but said nothing as he placed his leg down again. She stared back at him with a wide smile, undeterred by his movements. "You remember Hiari, right?" she asked, moving back slightly to give him more room.

The orange lioness, Hiari gave her friend a look of confusion. Askari turned his gaze to the lioness before slowly nodding. He looked back to Alba. "I believe I've seen her before, yes, but I don't believe we've formally spoken," he began, addressing Hiari now as he looked to her. He dipped his head in greeting, and spoke. "I am Corporal Askari, but you may call me Askari," he added, lifting his head once more to look Hiari in the eyes. The orange lioness sent him a warm smile, her deep green eyes glowing in the setting sunlight as she lowered her head to coo at her small cubs. "And these are my nieces," Alba added proudly as she nodded to the small cubs in Hiari's care.

Askari looked down with an emotionless face as he studied them. In his pride, it was rare for other members of the pride to really pay attention to cubs and to see them, especially ones so young. He guessed they weren't even able to walk yet. It made his heart warm with a new sensation he didn't know. He swallowed, then spoke again. "Congratulations. They look healthy," he said, raising his head slightly to look at Hiari before his eyes wandered once more to Alba. Meanwhile, the cubs stirred with movement in Hiari's paws at the sound of voices. The brown female rubbed at her face with her paws and blinked, her blue eyes looking at all the adults gathered around them. Alerted by her sister's movements, the other cub yawned widely. She blinked several times before her green gaze landed on Askari. She squealed in some apparent delight at the battle-scarred male and stretched her chubby legs towards him, smiling.

Askari pricked his ears at the small sound and looked to its source, seeing the small orange cub

reaching towards him. He tilted his head slightly to the side as he stared at her, perplexed at her sudden excitement. Noticing his expression, Alba gave a laugh. "I think she likes you," she huffed in amusement as Hiari bent her head down to affectionately nuzzle the two cubs. Askari looked to Alba at her words. "I can't imagine why," he responded, giving his tail a flick. After waiting and getting no response to her request, the small cub's lip trembled and she let out a cry of sadness, catching the Corporal's attention as his head whipped back to her, eyes wide at the sudden loud noise. He flattened his ears against the high pitched disturbance, the cub's sister taking notice of her sister's distress as well. The brown cub pawed at her sister, and Hiari purred, rumbling her chest to soothe the small cub.

The orange cub quit her fussing, but held a frown on her face after being denied affection from the large male. Askari considered the cubs for a moment. He hadn't been around cubs since he'd been one himself, and so he was completely unaware of their behaviors. He wondered if this was normal for a moment before he looked to Alba, wondering if she knew the reasoning behind the cub's noise. Alba shrugged in response to him as her blue gaze once again wandered to the cubs. "I told you she likes you," she said matter of factly. Askari snorted in response, and followed her gaze to the cubs. He didn't know how cubs worked, and frankly, he wasn't sure he'd be able to find out. He licked his lips as he remembered the meal he had been having, and he turned to Alba. "Did you need anything else, ma'am?" he asked, eager to get back to his meal.

"I keep telling you to call me by my name," She responded, rolling her eyes at him. She shook her head to say 'no' as she rose and began to pad down the rock path. Askari wrinkled his nose slightly as he rose to his paws and turned to head back to his meal. He couldn't understand why they disliked titles so much. In his pride, nearly everyone had a title, even himself despite being a lower rank. In his pride, it was necessary to refer to others around him by their titles, such as 'General' and 'Lead Huntress'. When they couldn't use ones like that, they used 'sir' or 'ma'am'. He shrugged it off, figuring it to be just another difference between the prides. Another reminder that he needed to find his pride. He found himself back at the zebra and sat down to tuck into his meal once more.

Alba had decided to come and get something to eat, and smiled as she caught sight of Askari. She sat down next to him and began to eat as well. Askari noticed movement from the corner of his eye, and looked over to catch sight of Alba's pelt. His tail swished as it moved to wrap around his paws as he took another bite, not saying anything as he didn't feel the need to. She bent to

take a bite, then looked at him curiously from her blue eyes. She swallowed, then spoke. "Can I ask your opinion on something?" she asked, turning her body to face him. He stopped chewing for a moment and looked over to her slightly. He finished chewing and swallowed. "You may," he responded, unsure what she was about to ask as he turned towards her.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable or anything but...when you were living with your old pride...did you ever think of cubs," she asked, quickly turning back to her meal. She glanced at him every now and then to gauge his reaction. His eyes widened in surprise at the sudden serious question, and he scrambled to keep himself composed. He was confused as to why she had asked a question, but then again, he often found her confusing. He chalked it up to just having seen Hiari and her cubs, so he shrugged as he responded. "I did but I'd rather not have. My mate was rather...unsavory." His lip curled and his mouth tasted bitter as he thought of Kusaidia. He had never wanted anything to do with the cruel lioness, and remembered how dread had filled his belly when it was announced at his mateship ceremony that she was his, and he hers.

He cleared his throat, trying to dispel his disgust as he turned back to the meal, appetite gone. "Every lion in my pride was expected to have cubs, so it's only natural to think about them," he added, his voice sounding void of emotion. After the mateship ceremony, he knew that he now had a responsibility to produce cubs with Kusaidia, and any time he'd thought about it, his stomach would turn in knots and his limbs felt heavy as stone. When he had been separated, his only thoughts had really been to return to his pride, and he hadn't really thought of the orange lioness again. It was only since he had been here that he'd really had time to think about things, and one of them was all the lions he had left behind, Kusaidia included. He found it to be enlightening, and that not having Kusaidia by his side was the only positive thing that came out of his displacement. Still, as much as he hated the mate he had been given, he had a duty to his pride, and was going to fulfill it, even if it meant suffering with her.

"I see," she responded slowly, as if thinking over his answer. She bent her head to take another bite, and as she raised it, she turned her head to look at him. He eyed her cautiously, then asked, "Why do you ask?" His muscles tightened slightly. Her question unnerved him, forced him to think about his past, something he didn't like telling others about. He figured he wouldn't get a straightforward answer-she had a peculiar way of asking questions, then giving almost no reason for asking them. In his pride, not giving a good answer would've been disrespectful, but he figured he couldn't point that out when he was taking refuge in her pride. They seemed not to value respect as much as his pride, which he found rather strange and downright wrong, but he figured he

shouldn't tell them how to run their pride.

Her voice snapped him out of his reverie. "Oh, no reason. I just wanted to know," she said airily, looking at her paws. He got the answer he figured, and so was ready to get up and leave, now that his appetite was gone. He braced his legs to stand when she let loose a sigh, catching his attention. He looked over to her, and his green eyes met her blue ones in the gathering dusk. "Well...let's just say that ever since Hiari and Maembe had Auri and Wakuu...well I've started noticing that Nyimak is getting older and pretty soon she won't need me." He thought over her words carefully, and gave a grunt in agreement as his head moved to look off into the distance in thought. He supposed Nyimak was rather large, but he couldn't be sure. Cubs were overall a mystery to him, so he couldn't exactly judge. He began to speak slowly. "I see. How old is she now?" he asked, turning his head back to her, showing she had his attention.

"A little older than my nephews. She'll be old enough to learn to hunt soon, then she'll be ready for her first solo hunt," she replied, giving a somewhat defeated sigh at the thought, her head and ears drooping slightly as she looked at her paws, dreading the day she'd see her little girl grow up. He grunted in response to her words and actions, and turned his head away. His worn green eyes looked off into the distance, watching the trees become dark shapes in the distance. By the way she was acting, he could tell she was distressed at the thought, though he couldn't see why. Growing was natural and bound to happen. He supposed he couldn't fully sympathize with her, seeing as he had grown up in a different environment where making close bonds was rare. Even though he wasn't used to comforting others, he decided to at least try.

"It's natural. Cubs grow and there's no changing it," he finally said, voice not particularly warm, more as if he were stating a fact. And to him, it was true. In his pride, growing was as natural as fighting and death. He couldn't share her sentiment. From what he could gather, in her pride, relatives interacted with one another very often, and to him it seemed that they coddled their young compared to his pride. He knew he couldn't empathize with her, but he figured he could at least somewhat make her feel better. It felt strange, to want to make sure she felt good. He'd never really wanted to brighten someone's day, to go out of his way for someone else's feelings. The only time he'd ever done that was with Dahl...he quickly cut off that thought, feeling a pang in his heart as he remembered his love. He needed to focus on the present, not the past, no matter how much he wished he could go back and relive those times with her.

Alba finally responded, snapping him out of his thoughts. "I guess that's true. My mother was a little older than myself when she had my brothers," she said, pricking her ears as she lifted her head, blue eyes moving over to him. When she mentioned her brothers, he could recall a time when she had referenced Moyo as her brother. He was still getting somewhat familiar with all the names and relations of the pride, however tried not to focus on it too much. In his pride, they rarely focused on relations unless they were of importance, such as the General's children. Others had always known Askari to be General Lengo and Lead Huntress Kamili's son, and as such had high hopes for him with their blood coursing through his veins. If his parents had been regular hunters or officers, no one would really keep tabs on it. So many things here were more...personal he realized than in his own.

He finally directed his attention back to the conversation, and grunted to show his agreement with her. He found there were no other words to give to her, however seeing that she seemed to be in a dejected state, decided to stay by her side to show silent support, as it was the polite thing to do. Besides, he felt, if anything, a small acquaintanceship towards her, and felt it necessary to accompany her at least somewhat. She quickly perked up to attention as if she had remembered something. "Oh! I just thought of something. There's a little grotto not too far from here that my mom found by accident that her and father used to go to. Would you like to come with me?" she asked excitedly, looking to him with bright, shining blue eyes despite the dimness of night.

He looked over to her, surprised at her sudden question and eager friendliness as he cocked a brow at her. "You want me to go with you?" he responded. He had found Alba to be the most peculiar lion of all in this place, with her strange shifts of mood. He remembered the first time he had met her, when she had been very aggressive towards him, and how quickly it had shifted afterwards, and he cited when she had asked him to accompany her on a walk by the border. He had refused then, as he had been confined to the den without his escort, and she seemed to want nothing of her brother around. But now, he was free to roam as he pleased, and the idea of exploring more of the territory was intriguing. But he also wanted to get to know Alba more, perhaps to put at ease any worries he had when talking to her, to try and soothe all the confusion he often had around her.

"Yeah, why not?" she asked, cocking her head to the side in confusion. He gulped for a moment before he spoke, his green eyes moving away from her blatant confusion. "Well, I didn't mean to come off as rude, Miss Alba. It's just we don't really know each other that well, I figured you would rather ask someone else," he responded, shuffling his paws slightly. He couldn't

understand why she was so confused by his question. Did she really not see that they hardly knew one another? He had been with the pride for only two months, and in that time he hadn't really spent much time with Alba, given that the first month had been spent with his escort and the second month he had slowly been getting to know the pride members and their territory. He guessed that perhaps she viewed him as a friend already, given her friendly personality, and that could be cause for her confusion.

She cocked an eyebrow at him in confusion and curiosity. "And? So what, it doesn't make that much of a difference anyway," she responded, shaking her head at him dismissively. He paused to think for a moment before he gave a small sigh, turning his green eyes back to Alba. "Well...I suppose I can come with you if you're fine with it," he finally said, pricking his ears towards her. A small part of him still felt uncomfortable going with her. It just felt like something a friend would do with a friend, and frankly he didn't quite see her as a friend just yet. He wasn't quick to make friends, and so tended to keep to himself. The only two friends he'd ever had were Mapinduzi and Issa, and that had taken over a year of them working together for him to consider them friends. His heart clenched as he remembered his dear friends, and for a brief moment, he wondered what happened to them. He had thought of it before, of course, but it didn't make it any less painful.

He shook his head briefly, trying to get back his train of thought. He supposed that even though he was uncomfortable with it, he'd still go, to see how much he could learn about both her and the terrain. But, judging from his past experiences with Alba, he would probably end up more confused than before when it came to her. She gave a smile as she stood up. "Good. I will meet you back here tonight then," she said, tail giving a swish of finality as she turned to go. He frowned in confusion, then turned his body slightly as she began to walk away. "But it is almost night now. Wouldn't it be easier to wait here until full night has fallen rather than wasting time treading back and forth?" he asked, tail giving a flick behind him. The sun had finished setting and dusk had settled in its place, the small beacons of stars beginning to appear above them. He couldn't understand why they didn't just go now when it was nearly night. Another thing to add to her list of peculiarities. Did she just lose track of time often? He pushed back thoughts as he waited for her response, bracing his legs to stand and leave with her.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. "That's what I meant," she responded, her voice and eyes betraying nothing but calm as she licked her lips free of the meat from her food. He frowned at her reaction, eyes narrowed in confusion. He tilted his head to the side, trying to

come up with some conceivable and reasonable explanation for her response, his mouth opening as a question began to form. But, he shook his head, quickly writing off his question. Judging by what he knew of her, he wouldn't likely get a straight answer. He rose to his paws, tail raising in an arch over his back as he turned around, and padded forward to stand at her shoulder, Alba's head following him as he went. Once he stopped, his head turned to her and they made eye contact for a moment before he nodded towards the large expanse of land before them. "Lead the way."

"Alright, then let's head out," she said, her tail arching over her back. She looked over her shoulder as the rocky slope faded into grass, and her eyes caught a glimpse of a gray cub at the entrance of a cave. The small cub blinked once, then turned and disappeared into the shadows of the cave as they padded on. Alba turned her attention back to the path ahead and took the lead, excitement tingling in her paws as they went towards the grotto. Askari followed behind at a small distance, allowing her to lead him. He kept his eyes on her form, not wanting to lose her in the surrounding darkness. The moon hadn't quite risen yet, so it was hard to make out anything particular in the landscape. This, however, went unnoticed by Alba as she confidently padded onward. Crickets chirped in the dusk, creating a strange melody around them as they went.

The silence seemed to drone on, and Alba felt innately uncomfortable with the long silence, as she was used to the constant noise of her family and friends. She turned her head slightly to catch Askari in her view before she faced forward again. "My mom used to bring me and my brother to this grotto when we were cubs. I always loved going," she began, hoping to catch his attention and spark conversation. Askari raised his head slightly and pricked his ears at her sudden words. He was perplexed for a moment before he figured she probably wasn't used to silence. She was, in fact, a very talkative, friendly person, so it only made sense. He figured it'd be rude to ignore her, and so hummed in acknowledgement. A moment later, he spoke. "What's a grotto?" he asked, pricking his ears towards her in curiosity. He hadn't heard of any near his own home, and he had no idea if he'd come across one on his travels, so he felt clueless about this whole matter.

The side of Alba's mouth moved slightly, and she shrugged, looking over her shoulder to him. "To be honest, I don't know either. My mom just uses that word a lot to describe it," she replied. They locked eyes and he frowned, confused at her answer. "And you never thought to ask what it meant?" he asked, confused. Why would she use a word if she didn't know the meaning? This would only just cause more confusion, so he couldn't see why she'd use it. "No, not really. I always assumed it had no meaning," she added, looking over her shoulder again

as she continued to lead the way. He stared at her in utter bewilderment, his mind drawing a blank as he opened his mouth to say something. Unable to come up with a coherent thought, he scoffed and looked away, shaking his head slightly. There was only one thing he was sure of in this moment: Alba was the strangest lioness he'd ever met. How could there be a word with no meaning? He breathed a heavy sigh as he bit his lip in concentration. He knew she was intelligent, most definitely, but her actions seemed to tell otherwise.

She gave an amused smile at his response. "You're thinking I'm weird, huh?" she asked, her voice without offense in it as she looked over him once more before looking back ahead to search for the grotto once more. He pricked his ears at her words, and looked at her from the corner of his eyes as she spoke again absentmindedly. "It's okay. I think a lot of people think of me as strange." His eyes fell to the ground, shame burning his pelt as he realized how rude he must have seemed, how disrespectful his actions were. "My apologies that I made it so obvious. It was a very rude thing of me, and I should not think such thoughts about you," he responded, ears flattening against his mane. If he had acted like that with any of his pridemembers, especially the older ones, he would've been given a harsh punishment for sure. Just because he was in a different pride didn't mean he should have to lose his manners, and he felt a small cold shock of horror at the thought. If anything, his mannerisms and cultural traditions were the only things he had left of his pride. And while he may not find them again, he still needed to hold true to their traditions, no matter what.

Her smile grew at his words, remembering other times when lions and lionesses had given her strange glances. "It's okay, I'm used to it," she said. He didn't reply, his head bowed. He had made the conversation uncomfortable, he knew it, and so he'd decided not to say anything in case he somehow made the situation worse. After a few moments of traveling in silence, Alba stopped to look around, her ears pricked. "We're here," she announced, tail raising happily. He stopped behind her then lifted his head finally. His eyes darted around the darkness, but he couldn't make out anything out of the ordinary in the darkness. The moon had risen a bit more, but it was shadowed in the distance by trees, so the surrounding area was still dark. Confused, he began to feel anxious, as he wondered whether this was a trap. Alba had seemed like a nice lioness, but she acted so strange sometimes, he didn't know what she would do. But, he decided to try and keep his cool until he was sure she didn't mean harm. "Where is it?"

Alba padded along a rock wall towards a small collection of vines overhanging a hidden entrance.

She pushed them aside and held them back, looking expectantly at Askari over her shoulder. "Are you coming or what?" she asked, her voice teasing as her blue eyes glinted mischievously in the darkness. He padded after her and paused before the dark entrance warily. He narrowed his eyes towards her, still unsure of her intentions. In response, she rolled her eyes at him playfully, then motioned with a paw. Flexing his shoulder muscles, he entered the opening slowly, testing his paws every step along the way in the darkness. He knew Alba tended to be unpredictable. What if this was a trick? He needed to stay alert, and so pricked his ears to pick up on any noise in the darkness before him. She followed after him, the vines swishing back into place, blotting out what little light they had. She brushed past him, making him jump slightly at her contact. "I remember my parents found this place a long time ago," she said, smiling to herself as she padded further in.

Her bubbly voice echoed around the cave, causing him to pause briefly for a moment. He continued to feel on edge, and found himself straining his senses to try and pick up what he could. He could hear the rushing of water, and it made his blood go cold, reminding himself that he couldn't swim. What was she planning to do? Anxious about everything, he kept himself near the wall, making sure that his fur and whiskers brushed it so it could guide him. The air felt damp and cold, and his paws splashed in a puddle, causing him to shudder. "May I ask what we're here for?" he said, pinning his ears against his head as his own voice echoed back to him. This whole place was very nerve wracking, and he wasn't willing to explore it in total darkness with an unpredictable lioness.

"It's a surprise! You'll see when we get there," she called, excitement bubbling in her chest as she was unaware of his anxiety. Askari's shoulders tensed further at this statement, becoming very wary of her mysteriousness about this place. He began to hang back, padding much slower than her to put some distance between them, but he continued to follow, trying to keep his eyes on her figure. Soon, he could see her silhouette against a shaft of light coming from the roof. Light was a good thing, though it did little to soothe his worries. "We're here," she said, tail curled over her back as she stopped in the light. Askari stopped walking, keeping in the shadows. He was reluctant to take his eyes off of her, in fear she attempted something when he looked away. Finally, he tore his eyes away from her, looking at the illuminated scenery in confusion. He caught sight of rocks and water, but couldn't understand why she'd brought him here. It was just rocks and water, nothing special. He looked back to her, still tense and unsure.

Alba sat down and looked over her shoulder to Askari, and noticed how far back he was. "Are you going to stand over there, or are you coming over here?" she asked, curling her tail around her

paws. Her voice echoed around them, and Askari suppressed a shudder at how eerie this place was. Warily, he began to pad towards her, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He came to the ring of light, and though he came into the light, he stayed near the edge, ready to escape if he needed to. He moved his eyes briefly once more, trying to seem casual in case he tipped her off about his anxiety. He quickly looked back to her, and cleared his throat, flinching slightly at the loud noise. "May I ask what we're here for?" He knew pleasantries should be out the window, but he stuck strictly to his code, and so tried to keep himself polite in case she didn't have bad intentions.

Alba rolled her eyes at him, clearly annoyed as she gave a lash of her tail. "I don't bite, I'm not going to hurt you," she said, ears flattening slightly at the idea that he thought she would harm him. He noticed her annoyance, but didn't want to stand down in fear that he might accept too quickly. "No offense to you, honestly. But I don't feel comfortable enough to be that close in a strange, secluded environment," he responded, keeping his voice taunt and void of emotion in case something set her off. He could somewhat understand her annoyance, but at the same time, she had to see where he was coming from. His wariness had kept him alive, both when he was a rogue and when he was with his pride. It was just a basic survival skill. Her strange behaviors in the time he had known her already set him on edge, and the constant dripping of the water from the roof and into the pool reminded him of his inability to swim.

"Alright, have it your way," she responded, trying to keep her voice from trembling, slightly hurt at the notion that Askari didn't trust her and thought she would hurt him. She turned away from him, saying, "You're missing a lovely view." She kept herself from looking at him as she focused her blue eyes on the ground. Not knowing she was hurt, he sat down and curled his tail around his paws in silence, not finding anything to say. His eyes roamed the large cavern, but he kept Alba in the corner of his eye. He knew she had said he could trust her, but he always had to be on alert. He couldn't find any feasible reason for her having brought him here just to sight see. He never understood the point, and found no joy in looking at things and wasting his time when he could be productive. Why would anyone just want to stare at something for long periods of time?

With a pang of sadness, he remembered Dahlia, and how much he'd loved looking at her brownish pelt. He could've stared at her for hours if it'd been allowed. He supposed if this is how others felt about landscapes, he understood. But still, he found it hard to find this place appealing. Looking at the pool of water, he shuddered at the idea of how deep it might go, and what secrets it might be hiding. The shadows looming around them could hide anything, and they wouldn't even know it, keeping him alert. Alba lowered her face towards the water below, and

gently splashed some water up to her face to cool her down. As she lifted her head, feeling better, she called out to him. "Hey, if you don't mind me asking, what was your pride's king like?"

Askari pricked his ears, surprised at her sudden question that didn't pertain to their previous discussion. He took a moment to gather himself and find a good answer. "King Kufyeka was a strong king, no doubt about it. He enforced our rules with a strict, iron fist, and for the better," he finally said, tail swishing as he recalled past memories of the king. Not too many lions knew what the king was truly like. He only conversed with the General, the Lead Hunter or Huntress, and the Healer, but even then it was strictly business. He didn't know of the king having a mate or cubs, so it was safe to assume nobody really knew what he was like. The only times he'd really seen the king was at meetings held to discuss war plans, and at the occasional public meeting held among the pride for duties. He'd overlook certain ceremonies as well, but Askari could scarcely remember what he looked like, much less what he sounded like. He only knew that if rules were disobeyed, it was certain you'd be dragged to the king, and everybody knew it was bad news.

Her voice broke him out of his reverie, and he pricked his ears in response. "Oh, I see," she said, looking back to him. A small smile grew on her face as she hoped she could start a conversation and get him to trust her more. Askari gave a grunt to show he heard her, not finding it necessary to speak. He'd always been more quiet than most lions, as he felt talking unnecessarily would just waste time. His friends always used to poke fun at him about his quiet nature, and he gave a smile as he reminisced the old days with his two friends, Issa and Mapinduzi. But now, that was all gone, lost in the storm. His smile fell, and his green eyes looked to the ground in sadness and regret. If only he'd stayed calm in the storm, managed to fight through the pain and follow his pride. If only he'd kept himself beside someone. If only. And now, because of his reckless nature and stupidity, he may never see his pride again. Never see his friends again. His tail curled around him forlornly as he became lost in his mind of guilt. He knew he could do nothing about it now, but it didn't stop it from hurting.

Feeling opening up would make him more comfortable and trusting, she rose to her paws. "You know, I kind of like you. You're not like most of my pride brothers and sisters," she said, padding towards him. His head whipped up suddenly at her words, and as they processed, his cheeks warmed and he found himself flustered as he tried to make sense of her words. How could she like him? Perhaps she was just really affectionate and open with others? She flopped onto her side in front of him, then rolled onto her back towards him. She reached up with her paws, and gently pawed at his mane. He stood abruptly and backed up, feeling uncomfortable with the close

contact. "That's um...Nice I-I suppose," he responded, smoothing his mane with a paw. He tried to regain his composure as he stared at her. He wasn't used to physical contact whatsoever. It made him feel vulnerable and just overall uncomfortable, and to do it with someone he barely knew? It just doubled the unbearable feeling. He didn't mean to be rude, truly, but he was caught off guard by her sudden words out of no where, and how quick she was to be physical with him.

Alba truly was a strange lioness. Did she just do this with everyone? And why say she liked him out of no where like that? What did she mean by that? The questions made his head reel, and he had a hard time trying to make sense of anything that had just happened. Meanwhile, Alba stared at him, blue eyes wide in confusion as she froze, paws in the air. She slowly rolled onto her stomach, and said, "Um, okay then." She rose to her paws, then looked at him, giving a mischievous grin as an idea popped into her head. She reared onto her back legs, and wrapped her paws around his neck in a friendly, playful manner, keeping her claws sheathed to show she meant no harm. Askari stumbled backwards for a moment in confusion, a yelp leaving his lips as his paws slipped slightly on the wet ground. Almost on instinct, his front paws quickly grabbed her sides, and using his weight as leverage, twisted her around until he pinned her on her back, his paws on her chest. He huffed, remembering the move well from his training days before he noticed her claws were sheathed, and he furrowed his brows in confusion. "What're you doing?" He couldn't understand why she had done that. It was typically an aggressive move, but there was no hint of anger or fierceness in her face or attitude.

Alba stared back at him, his confusion mirrored on her face. "I was trying to wrestle with you," she responded, surprised at his reaction. He frowned further, trying to figure out what she meant as his tail swished behind him. Deciding she was fine, he backed up off of her, and allowed her space to stand. "Like training?" he asked. If she wanted to train, she just should've asked him, and he would be fine with that. Besides, there were better places to practice moves than a dark, damp cave. "If you had wished for training, I would have agreed." As Alba rose to her paws, she said, "No, not like training." She was confused at his answer. His frown deepened, perplexed. "Then why wrestle?" he asked in response. Why would she want to wrestle when it wasn't for training? It would only waste time and energy otherwise. "Cause it's fun?" she responded, feeling a little miffed. She let out a small puff of annoyance at his sense of fun, but tried not to let it show.

He pricked his ears, and his head tilted slightly to the side in confusion as he sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws. "Why would we wrestle for fun? Is this common in your pride?" he asked.

Perhaps playing like cubs, even as adults, was common here. He hadn't seen any lions or lionesses doing that here, but he supposed he hadn't seen much since he was more focused on things other than the lions and lionesses. "Cause it's fun," she repeated, beginning to believe he was playing dumb with her. Why did he question fun? In response, he flattened his ears in annoyance, and tugged his tail tighter around his paws, keeping his temper under control at her answers. "But don't you and your pridemates have other duties to be attending to?" His voice was not angry, and seemingly carried no emotion. Was the pride really like this? It had seemed like a very orderly place, but did they just gallivant whenever they felt like? His own pride kept everyone busy with work, as a battle was always looming over them. There was never time to stop and waste time, and the idea alone seemed very foolish to him when anything could happen if you put your guard down. How could a pride be as carefree as this one and still work efficiently? Didn't they ever worry about enemies sneaking up on them when they were distracted by lollygagging? This just seemed to spell a recipe for disaster.

She rose to her paws, surprised at his answer as she realized he was completely serious. "We do, but that doesn't mean we don't have fun," she said, padding towards him slowly so she wouldn't set him off again. Askari still couldn't understand. Why would they waste energy when enemies could be anywhere, just waiting to attack? "How do you keep your pride in order when you mess around like this?" he responded, nothing she said making sense. Energy was a precious resource, and had to be used only when needed. If you wasted energy, it wouldn't be there when you needed it. How could they get anything done? Her words made him snap attention back to her. "Well, we make time for fun. There is a time to work, and a time to have fun," she said, stopping in front of him. She sat down and raised a paw, beginning to groom her face. Askari looked down his snout at her with how close she was, but didn't move.

He wrinkled his nose, not sure how that system would work. Wouldn't they stop working hard if they were only focused on fun? How could they be focused on their work when they had time to play? And how could they waste time playing such games when everyday was a fight for survival? Questions swam around in his head, but he kept his mouth shut, knowing that whatever she answered wouldn't make much sense to him anyhow. "You know, you remind me of my dad. From what my mom used to tell me, he used to be such a stick in the mud," she said, though her tone was friendly rather than offensive. She rose to her paws as she spoke, and his eyes followed her movements as she moved past his shoulder. "Come on, I'm going to teach you how to have fun," she added, giving him a grin as she paused beside him before she trotted out, Askari having to turn his head to follow her.

He thought to himself for a moment about whether he should follow or not. A drop of water fell and hit his forehead, and he decided as he shook his mane out. He rose to his paws, and padded quickly after her to escape the darkness and water, and emerged into the pale moonlight as he brushed past the screen of vines. He felt himself relax greatly as he could now see his surroundings, and scanned the nearby area to see Alba walking off. He trotted to catch up, and as he approached her, slowed to walk beside her. He still couldn't see the purpose of fun. His goal was to find his pride as fast as possible, not to run around for no reason when his pridemates could need him. But, he couldn't really do much now. Besides, it was dangerous to go off alone at night, as he felt he hadn't regained his full strength, so he figured following Alba was better than wandering blindly and hoping to make his way back to Priderock without fighting. But he still doubted that fun was a good thing for him. He couldn't allow himself to become lazy. He had to always be on alert and focused so when he left to find his pride, he'd be of use to them.

Alba smiled to herself as she looked at him from the corner of her eyes before looking ahead again, an action that Askari missed as he looked absentmindedly around the landscape, not sure where they were going, or what she was planning, though this time he felt more confident than before. She thought to herself for a moment, then suddenly broke into a run, causing Askari to stop in surprise as she ran ahead of him. She looked over her shoulder as she ran, and called, "You're going to have to catch me!" He cocked an eyebrow in confusion as she raced away, causing the grass to rustle in her pawsteps. He was unsure what to do for a moment before he sighed, resigning to chase after her, though his pace was less enthusiastic as he did. How was running fun? This would only drain them of precious energy that could be used elsewhere. He shook his head to himself as he ran, but continued after her, unsure of what else he was supposed to do. She clearly was just trying to be nice, but he couldn't see how this would be useful or fun.

Alba looked over her shoulder to see Askari was following, but not at a pace that she agreed with. She huffed, and it turned into a smirk as she devised a plan. She faced forward again, and ducked into a field of tall grass, deciding that he'd have to find her when he got here. Askari continued, and saw as she disappeared ahead over the crest of the hill. He rolled his eyes, but continued, and stopped at the top of the hill where she had disappeared, crickets chirping in the night air. Panting, he looked around but found no sign of her. He looked for possible places she could've gone, and almost immediately spotted the tall grass. He snorted in annoyance as he realized she had probably gone in there. He paused for a moment to catch his breath before he sighed, lowering his head to the ground to follow her scent. He soon immersed himself into the tall grass as he followed her trail, and groaned inwardly. How was this fun? It only annoyed him further.

Alba pricked her ears at the sound of him approaching, and snickered quietly to herself as she realized he had followed her in. She wove through the grass, silent as she avoided going too fast so as not to announce her presence. Askari couldn't hear her, and continued following her trail as he tried to stifle his annoyance. He shouldn't be mad at her-she was only trying to be nice. But, he didn't find any part of this fun. He paused as he stopped at a small delve where her scent had collected, and he guessed she had paused here before heading on. He felt the ground with a paw, and noticed it was still warm. She couldn't be far off. His tail gave a flick, and he huffed to himself as he trudged onward, nose to the ground as he picked up her trail and began to follow. As she slunk through the grass, she decided to make things a bit more exciting. She noticed a small pile of rocks ahead and padded towards it. She knocked it over with a paw to cause some noise, and she quickly crept away to continue leading him on. Askari pricked his ears at the noise, and quickly followed it. He stopped when he found the pile of rocks that caused it, then huffed, frowning in annoyance at this chase.

His tail flicked behind him in contempt, stirring the long grass as it did. He was growing tired of her games. How did she see this as fun? If anything it was frustrating. He forced his anger back down, not wanting to snap at her when he next saw her, and rushed on, sniffing furiously to try and follow her trail, now going at a faster rate to finish this thing. Alba laughed silently to herself, and another plan formed in her mind. Smirking to herself, she looped around in a wide half circle until she was confident she was behind him. She could see his silhouette ahead of her, as he was unaware of her attack and still following the trail. She tensed her muscles then leaped forward, slamming into him as she tried to pin him down. Askari gave a startled gasp at the sudden impact, and his mind immediately switched to attack mode as he felt he was being attacked. His look of shock quickly turned into one of anger as he whirled around, claws unsheathing as he seamlessly dug his claws into his attacker's sides, and using his momentum, turned the tables so he could pin them. He dug his claws into their chest, vaguely registering that it was a lioness as it lacked a mane. He snarled, bringing his nose close as his fur bristled and teeth were bared to bite. But then, he froze.

The pelt was familiar, and as he took in more of her features, his anger melted into confusion as she stared back at him with clear blue eyes. "Alba?" he asked, backing up as he sheathed his claws, allowing her to stand. He had genuinely thought someone was attacking him. He didn't think it would be Alba. Alba stared at him blankly as she slowly sat up and rose to her paws, and then, almost out of nowhere, she burst into laughter, unable to contain it any longer. Askari stared at her with wide, confused eyes, and took a step back. Was she mad? He couldn't understand what

was so funny. Perhaps she really was crazy. His ears flattened against his head, and he felt unnerved at her laughter. He'd been about to tear her throat out, why was she laughing. If he hadn't realized it was her, he likely would have killed her. Didn't she realize this? He found himself again questioning her sanity, and whether he should leave without her. It's probably easier and safer. He'd heard of lions gone mad, and he didn't want to experience it first hand.

He watched as her laughing progressed, and her legs gave out. She rolled onto her back, still caught up in her fit of laughter, and he became more wary. She must really be insane. After a bit, she finally managed to regain her bearings, and steadied her breathing so she could speak. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, rolling onto her stomach. She rose to stay in a crouch, and Askari felt more intense. Why was she acting so strangely? Finally, he managed to respond. "Why're you laughing? I just attacked you," he retorted, giving her a strange look as his eyes darted up and down. She couldn't be crazy, could she? Her pride most certainly wouldn't keep a crazy lion. Then again, their pride was far different, and it seemed they coddled each member. Perhaps she really was crazy and no one decided to bother mentioning it.

"Did you have fun?" she asked, looking at him strangely in return as she stood. She didn't process that he nearly killed her, and instead seemed unfazed by his attack. He stared at her with his mouth open wide in shock, brow furrowed deeply in the moonlight, their shadows cast beneath them. "Should you really be concerned about that right now?" he responded, giving his tail a swish of agitation. Did she really not see it? He was beginning to doubt the greatness he had heard of the Pridelands. Did they not even consider death? In his pride, it was well known that death was the end. That's why they had to be cautious. He had nearly killed her, and she acted like it was nothing. Were they just stupidly brave? She sat down, and began to speak again.

"My brother is always saying things like that, but to be honest, I like to walk on the wild side of things," Alba said, smiling. Askari's ears flattened even further. She must be absolutely crazy. "I don't think you understand," he replied slowly. "I could've killed you." He put emphasis on 'killed', hoping she would understand. Was she really this blind? He may have just ended her life and she wouldn't even know it. It seemed like she didn't even care about her life. Was she suicidal? This thought briefly crossed his mind, but he pushed it aside. No, she seemed fine. She had a cub to look after and a family, so why commit suicide? But there was no other explanation. Maybe she was just so detached from the world that she didn't consider death as an option? If that was the case, he was ready to give up all hope in this pride.

"I'm trying not to make you feel bad," she said, walking towards him. He eyed her warily, but froze on the spot. She gently pushed her nose into his mane in a silent nuzzle, then pulled back quickly so as to not make him uncomfortable, a smile spreading across her face. He quickly moved away from her touch, eager to keep distance between them. He didn't understand anything she was doing. Did she really care? Or was she just coming up with things? Still, he couldn't figure it out. His chest felt heavy with confusion, and he wasn't sure what to do. He tried to come up with something to say to her, but only found bare, hot confusion swimming in his mind. Finally, he was able to come up with words. "There is no need to spare my feelings," he began, feeling ruffled. She should feel no need to protect him. He had been trained to contain emotions, and even though he felt bad, she should feel no need to coddle him. "How can you not be shocked that I nearly killed you? Do you not understand death?" he continued, finally voicing what he had been thinking. How could she be so calm and composed and overall just carefree about death? He was beginning to wonder whether he could trust her.

Alba answered his question with a nod as she padded over to sit next to him. "I'm not dumb," she responded, looking down over the hill they were on. She curled her tail around her paws, blue eyes trained on the distance. Askari eyed her for a moment before putting a bit of distance between them for comfort. Confusion and frustration was making him antsy, and he still couldn't make sense of her, wanting to go back to Priderock. "Then why laugh?" he retorted, tail swishing behind him in agitation. He was getting more and more confused and uncomfortable, and needed some time to rest his head. Alba's smile grew and she continued looking ahead. "I knew you wouldn't really hurt me," she responded calmly and confidently. Askari found himself even more perplexed, and was about to bite back a stinging retort when he thought better of it. No matter what he said, she never seemed to make sense. Feeling weary and exhausted with all of this, he huffed quietly to himself. He shook out his mane, though it did little to clear his thoughts. "Can we go back to Priderock?" he asked. He wasn't sure how much longer he wanted to be out here with her while she was still confusing, and he wanted some time to rest and gather his thoughts.

Askari looked to her as Alba's jaws stretched wide in a yawn and she slowly began nodding. She rose to her paws, saying, "Sure, I'm tired anyway." She began to descend the hill when she stopped and looked over her shoulder at him with a curious look. "You okay?" she asked, pricking her ears. He gave a curt nod as he followed after her. "Fine," he murmured shortly as he managed to pass her, the lioness's blue eyes following him. He didn't feel like talking right now, especially to Alba. He'd hoped to gain some clarity by spending time with her, but he

only found himself more perplexed. Right now, he just wanted to head back to the den he was staying in and rest his headache, hopefully giving him time to gather his thoughts. He didn't think he could handle much more of her erratic and eccentric behavior at the moment, and felt a strong need to be alone for a while. Crickets chirped as background noise as he padded on, looking down at the ground as he tried to clear his thoughts.

Alba followed after, and soon fell into the lead, and he allowed her to do so, as she knew the terrain better, and he didn't feel like thinking. Every once and a while, she glanced at him over her shoulder, but each time he didn't change. He kept his head down, eyes focused on the ground as he tried to soothe his aching mind. A few times she contemplated speaking, but thought better of it since it didn't seem he was in the mood. Soon, Priderock loomed ahead of them, illuminated in the moonlight, turning the massive rock silver. "Good night," she called, and received silence. She looked back at him once more before slinking back to her family cave to retire for the night. Askari gratefully walked back to the cave he had been kept in when he first arrived and lay down, glad to be back. He closed his eyes, and he struggled to drift into sleep. Finally, his mind drifted off into a restless sleep, ending this night.