

Vicious Circle - Prologue

by

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Prologue

New Dawn

The council had never met under such dire circumstances, and it showed. The light of the full moon illuminating their backs, silver sheens gracing their bedraggled manes, the six lion monarchs of the united prides stood bristling in the hollow, six pairs of eyes glinting with malice and disdain at one another in spite of the promise of peace that the meeting heralded. Though claws remained sheathed, and no snarls were present on any faces, the implicit still stood; if it were not deemed the most heinous of crimes to shed blood on a truce-eve, there would not be six lions standing here but six disembodied throats, discarded and drowning in crusted blood. But they all knew better, and so they stood watching one another intently, living fervently by the law but still daring someone - anyone - to break it.

Such an array of pelts and lineages were here this night. The smaller, lither male of the north boasted a thinner, paler coat, whilst the southern queen hulked in her tawny swath of fur. Crimson eyes blazed out from the face of the representative of the western pride, and blue countered it with an icy chill, courtesy of the east. The wanderer king, a lion in motley if there ever had been one, remained seemingly placid, too small to be able to best his peers in combat but intelligent enough to sense a fight when it was brewing. His people came in many coats and many shapes, and he was a poor hint as to their like, but he was perhaps the least aggressive of the attendees, and the most cunning. He knew the reason for which they waited here so impatiently, and he understood it better than the others. He was one of the major players in this war, his lionesses the masters of guerrilla combat, of stealing away prey from the enemy, of laying traps and

elaborate ambushes. It was he that was to blame for the war, but until now, none had been able to bring him to justice.

He wouldn't need to wait long, either. Already there were signs of movement in the thick brush beyond, left in shroud by a thick curtain of tall bushes. Green eyes twinkled in the gloom, and a thickset shape lumbered out from the shadows and into illumination under the mournful eye of the moon. A lion, neither big nor small, pale nor flush, practically mundane but for the regal red of his sweeping mane, sat down heavily on his haunches and scanned the others, all of whom dropped their forelegs to prostrate themselves before His Royal Majesty, High King of the United Pridelands, Ahadi Ndonga, their dearest friend and, simultaneously, their worst enemy.

- "You needn't waste moonlight with the pleasantries," the high king murmured, his voice a deep and deathly calm song, weaving through the pointed blades of silence and dulling them all with ease.

- "We have matters of import to discuss, and I mean to end this petty war once and for all."

- "Such was the intention of us all, Your Majesty," crooned the elderly ruler of the western Kavu pride, whose age-silvered goatee and sharp, shallow cheekbones gave his face a deft, pointed look.

- "Though my lionesses have not fought in this terrible conflict, we are not shy to its brutalities, and so we are eager to see it ended." He gave a much exaggerated shudder, and Ahadi fought not to roll his eyes.

- "Perhaps," came the smooth purr of the northern king,

- "it is time to see justice served for the perpetrators, the upstarts and rebels, no?" He ran his tongue across his paw, then half-heartedly smoothed down the silken flow of his own mane, a vast expanse that shone paler even than the sandy-cream of his pelt.

- "Rebels that sit so calmly amongst us now?"

- "Such as yourself, Mnafiki?" Ahadi's gentle remark was no louder than a murmur, though it stunned the entire council into awed silence at their high king's lack of expression, of reaction to the traitors in his midst. They each cast one another the briefest of glances beneath their leader's burning gaze, then fell still as he lifted his chin.

- "I have eyes in the darkest of reaches, my fickle king of the north. Eyes that can see your treachery as if it were the zenith of day."

Mnafiki seemed to be strangled, sounds escaping from his agape jaw but invoking no comprehension in his peers. The pale king dropped into a quaking crouch, keeping his throat low and obstructed but his eyes high, just beneath the eyes of his superior.

- "High King, I beg the scantest mercy of your royal excellency, not for myself but for my family."

- "Your family?" Ahadi now showed the faintest of interest; the green of his eyes seemed to shine even brighter, were it possible, than before.

- "Elaborate."

Puzzled, the northern lion struggled for words, before gasping out,

- "My mate, sire, a lioness of the Kavu royal family. And my two cubs: my eldest, my son Mito, and Sarafina, who is just born."

- "A daughter?"

- "Yes, my liege."

There was a long, drawn out and aching pause, and then the pale muzzle of the high king split in a small smile.

- "How convenient. She will be most welcome in my court, I promise you."

Mnafiki's eyes grew wide and his face contorted into a silent cry.

- "Sire, I don't understand you."

- "I think you do." The king's voice was cold, merciless.

- "Your daughter will be taken by my lionesses as a ward, and will be married into the royal family or otherwise used as a royal emissary or messenger. Now do you understand the great kindness I am bestowing upon you?"

Mnafiki looked as though he might object, but the king of the east, an ebon-pelted, icy-eyed giant of a lion, gave a low rumble in his throat.

- "Better he should take your daughter than gut your mate and son, and leave your kingdom heirless." He didn't meet the gaze of any lion, just looked down ruefully and quieted. He knew better now than to cross the king when he demanded atonement for his subordinates' sins.

- "You will hand her over to me before the half-moon or suffer the consequences." Evidently finished with the affair, Ahadi turned his gaze from Mnafiki, who remained low and silent, to the king of the Outer Valley, the domain of whom was some distance from the cluster of territories that belonged to the rest of the united prides.

- "Majuto?"

King Majuto of the Valley wore dull grey to his pelt, and his pride's characteristic marking was seen in the darker dorsal stripe that tapered to a point in the centre of his brow, and reached the small of his back. His eyes gleamed bright red in the black, eyes that showed nothing but triumph. Here was a lion with complete immunity, for having no hand in the tragedies that befell his less content neighbours, and he knew it.

- "My liege, as ever it is an honour to serve. Your Magnificence is aware that I am not to blame for these rebellions, and I only hope you remember my loyalty and spare me from sacrifice - though I would be happy to provide anything within my hold."

High King Ahadi pondered his subject's honeyed words, and as much as he found great difficulty trusting and allying with such a simpering suck-up, he groaned inwardly and swallowed his

convictions.

- "I would ask merely a favour of you Majuto."

- "Anything, my liege." The relief was evident in the dark lion's stance, though the alertness was not all dispersed.

- "I might make an example of you to the others, Majuto." Ahadi studied him intently, watching the slight change in expression as the other lion tried to think of what such a demand might entail.

- "If that is my high king's wish, then it shall be so." Majuto's tone was uncertain, wary, but it still grasped at confidence.

- "Your daughter Neema, as I understand it, is a flourishing young lioness who has just succeeded in her First Hunt Ritual, am I correct?" Ahadi's tone invoked a grim sense of anticipation in his subordinates; would he expect such a tribute from all of the lesser kings?

- "Neema is a fine child, my only cub," Majuto professed.

- "Born into this world just as her mother parted from it, and raised with the keenest knowledge and sharpest of abilities. Not a great beauty, for she resembles not her mother but me, though her heart is good and kind."

- "Perfect." Ahadi examined a claw idly before yawning wide.

- "Present her to me before the half moon or you will be presented with her head."

Majuto looked as though he'd been cuffed in the face.

- "My liege? Most honoured high king? Why could you possibly want her? What have I done or not done to deserve such exploitation?"

Ahadi released a small sigh.

- "You are astounded, King Majuto, and so I shall allow your insolence to be forgotten. I told you I am to make an example of you, and so I shall, and all the others must follow in that example. You are to surrender a highly valued member of your family to me or be punished."

- "But whatever for?"

- "I had your loyalty during the rebellion, Majuto," Ahadi affirmed, nodding some.

- "Now that it is over I must make sure you remain loyal. How am I to do that if I do not possess some leverage over your fidelity?"

Majuto fumed, eyes now narrowed to bloody slits.

- "An outrage, Ahadi. This is how you reward your honoured servants? I will not stand for this."

Ahadi looked almost regretful as his verdant gaze washed over the valley's king for a few moments.

- "No, perhaps not."

And then he was a blur of tawny fur and gleaming white fangs, too quick for the other lion to even react. The drawback to living in the sweltering heat of the valley meant that Majuto's mane was significantly receded, and it proved an advantage for Ahadi, whose own mane was thick and heavy, and fiercely guarded his throat. The same could not be said for Majuto, who tried in vain to wriggle away from his leader's outstretched paws, though Ahadi was too quick. The pair of lions reared up onto their hind paws, Ahadi's forelegs grasping Majuto's ribcage and squeezing with unrelenting grip. The darker lion slashed and flailed at his adversary's face and eyes, and managed to coax an ugly gash above one of those cold green eyes before Ahadi's maw was at his throat.

A crunch, and a strangled wheeze were the heralds of the demise of King Majuto, whose sightless red eyes now seemed lustreless in favour of the growing pool beneath his chin.

The council, sickened and subdued, tore their eyes from the body of their former fellow, and said nothing as Ahadi caught his breath and wiped the blood from his mouth and brow. His gash continued to bleed, but it seemed not to bother the high king, who sat calmly next to the body of his former friend.

- "Any others who wish to challenge me?"

When the only reply was silence, the high king smiled wanly.

- "How pleasing." Now he turned his gaze to the ageing king of the Kavu pride, who scraped at survival in the harsh drylands in the west.

- "King Kubali of the drylands, will you accept my terms more... cordially than poor Majuto here?"

Kubali allowed himself a fleeting glance at the lifeless remnant of Majuto before meeting his king's gaze with hesitant certainty.

- "More cordial than Majuto is wetter than the desert, Your Grace. Name a member of my rather extended family and they will be yours, provided you can promise the safety of the rest of my progeny."

Ahadi's look of agreement was one laced with regard, with acknowledgement of the diplomatic strength that Kubali possessed.

- "Have you a very young daughter within your family, just a cub or younger? I plan to bring forth many sons, and these sons will require mates of the noblest blood."

- "No daughters of the age you desire," Kubali replied, wincing,

- "though my grandson, my kingdom's crown prince, sired a single son on his mate just a week past. When he is able, he will be offered with no qualms to Your Excellence."

Ahadi nodded again.

- "Perfect. Can the same be uttered of King Ubishi?"

Ubishi was the king of the east, and just as he had been submissive in his advice to Mnafiki, he was submissive in his reply to his high king.

- "You already took my mate and only son. I have nothing more to give to you."

Ahadi seemed thinly amused.

- "That is true. I suppose I have wounded you too sorely for you to dream of defying me again."

Now his gaze fell to the queen of the south, the only lioness present in the council, and the youngest of them, being barely out of adolescence. Already wise to the situation, she didn't need a prompt to make her offer.

- "I have no family as yet but my young sister, who I will sadly but willingly give to you, high king."

- "See?" Ahadi looked to the others.

- "Perhaps it is a blessing that we possess a female ruler among us, someone who can rule and be ruled without argument or defiance." He cast a look towards the young queen that spoke neither of appreciation nor of recognition, but of a mocking disregard, and, poorly concealed beneath, a slight but disturbing hunger.

But now it was time for the king of the wanderers, who sat in the centre of the five rulers and fixed his amber glare on his high king, for whom he held a passionate loathing. Kiongozi, rebel-king of the wandering pride, would bow to none, and would fight all who presumed to force him.

- "My king, I believe it is my turn to be, as our most beloved Majuto put it, exploited."

- "Your band of pathetic weaklings can offer little and less to me, King Kion'," Ahadi chuckled, deep in his throat.

- "Though I admit, yours it the most irritating of cases."

Kiongozi said nothing.

- "I remember that as adolescents, you and your dear brother Kisa were my adamant and beloved protectors - the leader of my protectors, if you will." Ahadi's smile was almost sad, nearly longing, but at the same time razor-edged and cruel.

- "I didn't know then that you two damnable brothers would attempt to steal everything out from under my nose. My kingdom, my people, my betrothed and my love."

Though Ahadi's voice was calm, Kiongozi knew the hostile implicit that he harboured within, and tried to swallow down his anxiety.

- "My king, you had no claim to half those things I supposedly stole from you. You're a liar and a beast, and nothing you can say or do can urge me to relent in my rebellion against your rule."

- "Perhaps not, Kion'," the high king sighed.

- "So I will not ask you to. I do, however, wish to know what happened to my sweet Huzunia."

Another stunned silence reigned, and Kiongozi narrowed his eyes slowly. His pelt bristled, and Ahadi watched as his foreclaws dug into the blood-spattered earth below.

- "My Huzunia wasted away some time ago. A sickness of the heart, I fear. Could not eat, nor drink, and sleep evaded her. She died carrying my unborn children." His words came hastily, and rushed, as though premeditated but not rehearsed.

And there was where the king turned truly cold.

- "You see, Kiongozi," Ahadi spat, rising to full height and abandoning the smile in favour of an ugly snarl.

- "Huzunia would tell me otherwise. Kawaida!"

From the bushes, came a tall and thickly-built lioness - obviously Kawaida - dragging with her a writhing form left in shadow by her captor. Kawaida managed to haul the fighting creature by the scruff of the neck to Ahadi's paws, then released her and took a few meek steps back, cowering from the wrath of her king and pride leader. Ahadi let out another long sigh, then looked down at the shape - the lioness - beneath him.

- "Huzinia... why did it have to be this way?"

The lioness was small, and though her fur was sleek and well-groomed, her blue eyes held a feral sharpness to them and she looked up at the high king with scorn and defiant fear, the kind of fear held by a cornered rat with which it makes its final stand. She was a plain-looking thing, her fur of a generic tawny hue, but the softness of jaw, and the rarely-seen darker rims to her ears gave her a gentle and somewhat precious stigma.

- "High King," Huzina growled in mock regard,

- "I would say it's an honour to be here, but it's never an honourable ordeal when you're put on trial and sentenced to death for a crime you didn't commit."

Ahadi roared into the still air, eyes blazing.

- "You committed the crime, you harlot! You led me on, strung me along and had me believing I could forsake everything, my crown, my land and my home, for you, the lioness I loved!" He raised a paw, claws unsheathed, above Huzinia's head, almost ready to bring it down in a grievous arc.

- "And then you ran off with Kion'."

From beyond, Kiongozi was preparing to leap for his king, preparing to risk all to save his mate, but just as he pushed off with his hind legs, Ubishi barrelled into him and knocked him on his side, and Mnafiki pressed his face down into the dirt, claws piercing the skin around his brow and cheeks, and sneered.

- "You caused us our suffering. Now earn some of your own."

As Kiongozi's defeated wail lifted into the sky, Huzina whipped round and gasped as she saw her mate's predicament. She too prepared to leap, but Kawaida jumped onto her back and forced her to the ground, sharp canines maintaining hold on an ear.

- "Kion!" Huzinia cried out.
- "Don't fight them! There's no point, they have our daughters."

Kiongozi growled deep and low, and looked Ahadi in the eye once more.

- "You monster! How have you become so cruel? How have you changed so since we were young?"

Ahadi chuckled, watching with an amused expression as Huzunia struggled to off-balance Kawaida, who remained overpowering in the scuffle.

- "You annoyed me when you tried to hide Huzunia from me. Did you really think I'd fall for such a base trick as your pretence at her death?"

Kiongozi snarled, lips peeling back from razor fangs.

- "I had to try. I couldn't let you have her, or our girls."

- "But I got them anyway." Ahadi's eyes sparkled, and he quickly pressed his paw to his face and brushed something away from his cheek.

- "And now I have to serve my vengeance. Kawaida, hold her."

Huzunia was expressionless until the end, when Ahadi kissed her brow and whispered something in her ear. At that point, her face twisted, and tears ran over her cheeks in rivulets, later meeting with the floods of hot blood streaming from her throat. Ahadi cradled her for a scant few moments, before tenderly laying her lolling head on her paws, which burned colder than Ahadi's heart.

- "Kawaida," the king murmured, husky and mirthless,
- "bring the cubs."

The tawny lioness was gone a minute before she and a few other pridesisters came into the council clearing bearing two small cubs, both female, both barely more than newborns. Ahadi regarded them with a longing, searching look, then turned back to Kiongozi, whose face had become a mask of wretched grief and despair.

- "Sarabi and Naanda, sire," Kawaida announced, gesturing towards the two cubs.

- "Kion'," Ahadi growled,

- "choose."

- "What?" Kiongozi's voice was just as lifeless as his mate.

- "Choose the daughter that stays with you." Ahadi growled again.

- "Choose, so that I can marry the other one to her son, and raise her on the stories that her own father chose her sister over her, doomed her to her sorry fate, and wove the pieces into place that would leave her motherless."

It was such a long silence, and it hurt both males so much. Finally, Kiongozi dropped his head, utterly lost.

- "Naanda. Give Naanda to me."

- "Which one is this... Naanda?"

- "The pale one. The one with the blue eyes. Give her to me."

Ahadi did as he was bid, taking the squealing child to his old friend himself. Placing her gently within Kiongozi's forelegs, he briefly touched noses with the other lion.

- "Take her, take your pride, and go in peace."

Kiongozi didn't seem to have heard him, but he cradled his single remaining child to him and wept bitterly, angrily, but did not make any more movement.

Ahadi watched them for a time, then looked at King Kubali. The elderly lion looked at him with a somewhat fearful expression, but remained silent as Ahadi opened his mouth to speak.

- "King Kubali, escort King Kiongozi and his daughter back to his pridesisters." The other lion nodded, and hurriedly made his way over to the weeping lion.

Ubishi and Mnafiki were dismissed just as tersely, but it was clear to whom they must owe their allegiance. King Ahadi was, like it or no, superior over them, be it in strength or any other factor. Evil he might be, cruel he was for a certainty, but there was no way they could fight him. How could you fight a lion so lost within himself, you weren't sure if it was he or his ghost you were trying to overcome?

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Uru's mate was covered in blood when he returned home. The lioness watched him with fearful red eyes as he and his retinue climbed the stone steps up to the promontory, and she had to remind herself with regret that this was the lion she had been in love with for all of his life, the father of her child and the lion for whose return she had waited many, many months.

The flame-coloured cub at her paws shared her disposition, though he was too young to know why he feared the high king. Barely a babe when Ahadi had left to quell the rebellion, Prince Taka was still sporting his cub spots, but his eyes were wide open, and he fought to see past the obstructions to find his father who Uru knew he wouldn't recognise.

The high queen studied each of the returning parties as they climbed to the promontory. Kawaidi, captain of the lionesses, and her force, each bowed to her as they approached, then dispersed into the cave behind. Following them were a few others who were not of a fighting force, but females Uru knew to be wet-nurses, and between them they bore a bespotted infant who writhed and squealed, but would not be freed. They too disappeared into the cave, leaving just Ahadi standing before her. High King Ahadi of the Ndona Pridelands and its vassal neighbours was a terrible sight, though she loved him still.

- "My king," Uru greeted, near breathless,

- "it is a blessing that you have returned to us unharmed." She caught sight of the scabbed-over gash on his brow.

- "Mostly unharmed, that is."

Ahadi grunted in dismissal, then lowered his gaze to the orange cub who still sat, unblinking, at his mother's paws.

- "How has my son fared?"

- "Our son," Uru began fondly,

- "has been learning fast about the history of our kingdom, and your esteemed father, may he rest in peace."

- "History?" Ahadi scoffed.

- "What's a dull story in comparison to a set of sharp claws? I take it Taka hasn't been learning

battle training."

Uru pouted, though she almost immediately bit her lip afterwards in regret of her childish behaviour.

- "You're the one who told me to teach Taka lore and history, and you took my captain away."

Ahadi sneered.

- "I forgot; you're so incapable at the art yourself that you can't teach a toddler how to swing his paws in self-defence. My mistake."

The queen felt a lump rise in her throat, though she swallowed it down. What had become of the tender, sweet lion she once knew?

- "I expect you'll tell me all about the new cub you've brought home."

- "Is that what you wish?"

- "It is."

Ahadi narrowed his eyes.

- "Sarabi is the daughter of King Kiongozi and..." He almost choked on the next portion of the sentence.

- "...Queen Huzunia, of the wandering pride."

Uru stiffened at the mention of Huzunia, her one-time rival for Ahadi's affections. She feared she had lost that battle.

- "And how has she come into our care?"

Ahadi seemed to shed all of his prior scorn, and fell into a hushed calmness.

- "Queen Huzunia is dead. Sentenced as such for her involvement in her husband's rebellion."

Uru relaxed some, but felt herself tense and she cast an unwitting glance at her son.

- "What about Kiongozi? And his brother, Kisa?"

- "Kiongozi has been permitted to live," Ahadi said, his words bitten off and harsh.

- "His brother... I have not seen him since I spotted him inside our borders. Never liked him myself. Such a greasy black mane, and those eyes, such a sickly shade of green." He curled his nose.

Uru bit her lip. She did not share his husband's distaste for Kisa's features, though she was a fool if she was going to say this aloud.

- "And Sarabi is a ward, I assume? To guard against future uprising?"

Ahadi nodded.

- "And a future queen, I have decided. She will be a fitting mate for our Taka."

How lovely of you to include me in the discussion, the queen thought, though she valued her life more than her snide remarks.

- "We shall see, high king." With a grimace, and a hasty look back over her shoulder, she then murmured,

- "I have news for you, my king."

- "Hmm?" Ahadi was probably only half-listening; the queen could see the way his eyes had glazed over, how his paws were shifting busily on the rock.

- "I'm with child again," Uru told him shortly, but proudly.

- "Just the one, says Majani, but due in a while. I pray to the gods for a son."

The king seemed more interested now, and the scorn in his eyes faded to mild appreciation.

- "How pleasing. I trust everything has gone well for you?"

Uru bit her lip, reluctant to tell him just how difficult her pregnancy had been.

- "Well, I've had my fair share of physical grief for it, and what with the death of your father, I've had to endure a lot of pressure."

Ahadi sighed, eyes cast downward. Uru knew that the former high king, Mohatu, and his queen Shari, were the only lions Ahadi still valued to this day. Ahadi hadn't been present during his father's death, though Uru knew that he was regretful for that, and ever would be. But now, the king looked back at her.

- "Let us hope the birthing goes well, at least."

And with that, he turned and stalked off towards the cave, leaving the queen to only hopelessly stare after him.

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Lightning flashed, thunder roared in the sky and the screams of the labouring queen had been the loudest of all. Ahadi had not been to visit her - he had not been permitted - but he did not have to see, nor smell the blood and foul humours, to know that it hadn't gone well at all. The child had come early, far too much so, and the mandrill shaman Majani had struggled to keep Queen Uru in a stable condition. The high king could only pray that his child had survived the ordeal.

Standing outside the birthing cave, mane left in pitiful disarray by the howling winds, the king took a deep breath. He didn't think he would like what he saw, but he knew it must be done. Something pricked at his heart, something icy and stinging, and he realised with a twinge of regret that it was fear; fear for his mate, for whom Ahadi just not realised he cared.

Taking a step inside the cave, the high king curled his nose up at the foul stench, then shook himself. He had seen many horrors in battle, inflicted many more, and tolerated perhaps the most daunting of sights and smells. He could do this. He could do this. He approached his mate, and could do nothing to staunch the wheezing cry that rushed up from his lungs.

The queen stirred at the sound, but did not wake. Ahadi looked down at her, at the darkened fur where her tears had come to rest, at the gouges in the dirt where her claws had gnashed and torn. The leaf bedding beneath her was tinted a sickly red, and the fur surrounding her haunches was matted and crusty. Ahadi shuddered, then gathered the courage to kiss his mate's forehead. Then, he heard the squeal, and looked down.

Cradled in his mate's arms was a beautiful, healthy (albeit small) golden cub.

The king nearly whooped for joy, but he feared waking his mate. He didn't need to fear, though, for he saw now, in the dark, her eyes were opened to slits, her body called to arms by maternal instinct. She curled her lips in a feeble snarl and drew the babe closer to her, but upon noticing her husband, she relented, and grew limp again. Ahadi merely cradled her cheek, to which she sighed.

- "Ah... Ahadi..." Her voice was a breathless wheeze, turned hard-edged by weariness and pain.
- "My... k-king... must tell you... something."

Ahadi grew silent, then looked at Uru.

- "Hush. It can wait; I have something I need to tell you." Before you succumb to your injuries, he added mentally, though he was not so cruel as to say it aloud.

Uru said nothing, only regarded him silently.

- "Uru, you've been there for me for all of my life, and just now have I realised that. Growing up, you've always been there, and I suppose as a cub, you were like a sister to me." He paused, pained.

- "And then you went away, left me for such a long time that I didn't think you were coming back. Father was adamant, he knew you would return, but I wasn't certain. I tried to fill the void your loss created by falling in love with another, and then you returned. I was grateful, I promise, I wanted you back so much, but I was faithful to Huzunia."

Uru made a small whining noise in her throat, which the king assumed meant,

- "Go on."

- "I wanted to see it through, to hurt her feelings as little as possible... but then she ran off with Kiongozi, my best friend, and it killed me. I didn't think I could love again, and I convinced myself of this to the point where I couldn't recognise my own love for you - even though it was there." He shook his head.

- "I've done so many bad things Uru, but I do love you still. I suppose I always will."

The queen was silent.

- "Huzunia's gone now, and now I know that you might leave us too, I realise that I need you, and that I've been cruel and awful. I want to make up for that, Uru. Let me make it up to you. Let us have a fresh start; I love you, Uru. I need you. Please?"

The queen looked up at him now, nothing but raw anguish in her eyes.

- "Ahadi... cub... not..."

- "Not what, Uru?" Ahadi tilted his head, a smile growing on his face. He felt liberated, freed by his honesty.

- "Tell me, darling."

- "Not... yours."

There was a silence before Ahadi registered her words.

- "What do you mean?"

- "Taka..." Uru gasped for air.

- "Taka... not yours."

- "Not mine?"

Uru shook her head.

A pause. Ahadi's voice was cold, hard-edged, nothing but a vessel of betrayal and loss.

- "Whose is he, Uru?"

The queen was silent.

The high king roared in her face, yielding a startled flinch and a small cry.

- "Tell me!"

- "K-kisa." Uru coughed, chest heaving.

- "He's Kisa's."

- "Kisa." The word was bitter on the king's tongue.

- "Kiongozi's brother?"

The queen nodded.

- "So..." Ahadi's unsheathed claws left a deep cleft in the rock beneath.

- "I have lost two of my lovers to that damned family, and a son as well."

Uru could say nothing, only shook her head in defeat.

Ahadi glared at her.

- "And to think I had just poured out the rest of my heart to you. Thank you, my most beloved queen, for breaking it." He sighed, then turned around.

- "It's time I forgot matters of the heart now. They have caused me naught but grief."

The king looked out to the sky, and snarled.

- "So be it then. I shall fashion for myself a broken kingdom fit for a broken king.

- "It is time for the reign of Ahadi to truly begin."