

What Could Have Been - Prologue

by

Dracarys

The pride heard the roar before they discovered who it belonged to.

Queen Kiara was sunning herself on the promontory when she heard it, ringing loud and clear throughout the Pridelands. At first, she thought nothing of it, only shrugged it off as a rogue's warning call to alert the pride they were entering the territory. Such things were not unheard of; in fact, they were welcomed. A rogue who signalled the pride of his arrival usually meant he was someone to be trusted. So, with this in mind, Kiara shook herself and lowered her head to her paws, closing her eyes with a dismissive frown. That was until she heard the worried murmurs from the lionesses.

They were flocking together warily, looking at each other askance. They all seemed to be wanting to approach Kiara, though they maintained reluctance for some bizarre reason. Opening a single eye, Kiara looked back to stare at her pridesisters until one of them swallowed hard and began to pad up to her, frowning, eyes ablaze with worry.

- "My Queen, the sisters all fear the lion who made that call."

- "It's nothing to worry about, Kapienga" Kiara assured her immediately, waving a paw dismissively.

- "Go about your businesses. Isn't there a hunting party that needs sending out?"

- "They're too afraid to go, Your Grace," the lioness said, almost hesitantly.

- "And why would that be?" Kiara asked slowly, biting back her exasperation. They're just making things difficult. How will my people accept me as a good Queen if I can't demand their obedience?

Kapienga lowered her gaze.

- "They say there have been birds all throughout the day, bringing news of a dangerous newcomer. They say he plans to march upon the pride with an army and usurp your throne, Your Grace."

This is ridiculous.

- "Kapienga, the birds will always be troublemakers. I promise you, this is just some rogue seeking safe passage through the land." She allowed a small smile.

- "No doubt Kovu or my father will have stumbled across him during their patrols. He is no threat to us, whoever he may be."

Kapienga smiled, though Kiara noticed it was a tight and perhaps forced motion.

- "Thank you, Your Grace. I will tell the sisters."

Kiara watched her go, sauntering back to the other females gathered at the mouth of the cave. Though it was obvious that they relaxed as soon as they heard what their pridesister had to say, some were still evidently rattled about the whole idea. Gods have mercy, must I do everything myself? With a sigh, Kiara got to her feet and trotted over to her subjects.

With an abrupt ahem, the Queen soon had them all silent. She knew some of them didn't take her seriously; her poor hunting skills and former childish ways had earned the disrespect of a fair few, but she wasn't going to let that deter her now.

- "I understand many of you still have doubts about the safety of this anonymous rogue." She let the statement sink in before continuing.

- "That is why I am taking it upon myself to investigate." This brought on some sighs of relief from her subjects.

- "If there are any who would like to join me, you are welcome to come along."

- "I'll go with you, Kiara," a husky voice from the depths of the cave called out. The Queen waited a moment for the speaker to reveal herself, and then smiled as she found herself looking into the blue eyes of Vitani, her unwitting sister, through their mother Nala. The two had never been close, as Vitani was taken by Zira on the account of her being a child of Scar, but they had been quick to accept the news of their relation when Nala informed them, upon the unification of their prides.

- "Thank you, Vitani," Kiara murmured, careful not to let her relief show too much.

- "I really appreciate this."

- "Don't mention it," the older lioness assured her, a half-smile creeping up her face.

- "I've been aching for the opportunity to see the Pridelands properly."

- "You haven't done so before?" This somewhat startled the Queen, and she pinned back her ears even as the two were making their way down the Stone Steps, onto the brush below.

- "No," Vitani admitted.

- "I never had a chance as a cub, what with training and Mother's - I mean Zira's - strict regime on borders and free time. Even now, I don't get time to myself. I'm the representative for Zira's pride now, and it's up to me to help solidify things between your people and mine in case anything gets dangerous."

- "I see." Kiara nodded slowly.

- "But enough about that," Vitani growled abruptly.

- "Any idea where Kovu or your father might be? They'd be best to talk to about that call."

- "Last I heard," Kiara began slowly, biting her lip as she tried to recall,

- "Kovu was headed to the gorge to assess reports of a new pride being established in the area."

When Vitani looked at her askance, she rolled her eyes.

- "The birds, again. We rely on them for the news yet half of what they tell us is lies to get us all riled up."

- "Well, regardless, the gorge seems a good place to start," Vitani murmured, gesturing to the general direction.

- "Come on, I'll race ya."

When they reached the gorge, both lionesses were panting with exhaustion, yet they both wore wide grins on their faces. The two had run non-stop from the Rock to the gorge, and neither had shown any signs of letting up. Though Vitani held the lead for most of the journey, Kiara was quick to take advantage of her quickness to tire, and at the last stretch, had but on a burst of speed and so had won the race. Vitani was looking at her with accusation in her eyes, though the expression held no real malice, and for that, Kiara was grateful.

The two slowed to a brisk walk and came to travel beside one another, and Kiara appreciated the notion. The gorge was home to a number of horrors; it was the final resting place of Mufasa, her grandfather, and Nuka and Zira, Vitani's adoptive brother and mother. Though the bodies were long gone, Kiara still got chills down her spine should she even look at it.

They exchanged a glance as they assessed the emptiness of the place. There were pawprints here, and after a quick sniff at them Vitani affirmed they were Kovu's, but there was no sign that he had been here recently. A shudder of nervousness overcame the Queen and she was ready to ask to leave, when they heard a roar and the sound of rapid paw-steps on the stones.

From nowhere, a shape came barrelling towards them, and Vitani was quick to leap in front of her Queen.

- "Kiara, behind me. I'm the stronger fighter." Kiara had no objections to the idea, none whatsoever. She was nothing of a warrior herself.

- "Tani! Kiara! Get out of here!" The voice was Kovu's, to Kiara's immense relief, and though Vitani cried out to her not to, she shouldered past her sister and trotted over the shape coming towards her.

- "Kovu! What's wrong?" Kiara tilted her head as her mate and Consort came skidding to a halt before her, panting with exhaustion.

- "Kovu, has something happened?"

- "The call you heard," Kovu gushed, fighting to get his words out past his frantic breaths,

- "I found the lion it belonged to."

- "Who is it? A rogue? A pride-leader? Who?" Kiara was eager to get some answers.

Kovu said nothing, only gave his mate a look of fear and worry.

- "Kiara, you need to get out of here. We're all in great danger."

- "Kovu?" Vitani was stepping forwards, and for the first time, there was worry in her azure eyes.
- "What's going on?"

A growl reverberated around the gorge's stone walls, and Kiara pressed up against her mate for comfort. He answered her by stepping slightly in front of her, and Vitani came to stand at her side. They all waited for something to happen.

And then, a shape stepped out of the shadows. It was a male lion, larger than Kovu was, and older by the looks of his mane. He walked with a slight limp to his gait, and as he got closer, Kiara could make out some of his features. He was a dusty gold colour, with a hard look to his dark green eyes. He wore no smile on his face, but nor was he snarling. He came close enough for the Queen to see him in full, then he stopped. And then he laughed.

It was a laugh without mirth, and the smile that accompanied it was cold. He split his muzzle in a wide grin.

- "You are the Queen."

For a moment, Kiara dared not reply, then she found her voice and her courage, and she stepped past her mate to glare at the male lion, hackles raised and claws ready to strike.

- "Yes, I am the Queen, and if you pose any threat to me or my companions, I will have you gutted."

- "Such a violent one," the male lion said softly, shaking his head.

- "I would have expected greater things from you, Kiara."

- "H-how do you know me?" She tilted her head.

- "You're not from here, you can't have heard of me."

- "No, no one told me your name," the male agreed.

- "Then answer me; how do you know me?" Kiara was shaking now, and it was evident in her voice.

He paused, then he took another step forwards, inclining his head as he did so.

- "It would be hard not to." His grin became wider, and he narrowed his eyes with such malice that a shiver went down the Queen's spine.

- "Sister."

- "S-sister?" Kiara's blood ran cold as realisation washed over her.

- "Kopa."

- "Yes. I'm surprised it took you so long."

The Queen stared, mouth agape.

- "But you... you died..."

- "No. The Pridelands assumed I died." He was spitting his words now, and his claws slowly became unsheathed.

- "They turned their backs on me after I was attacked. They didn't search for me. They barely grieved for me."

No, that's not true. Mother wept for an eternity. Kiara said nothing, afraid of incurring this lion's wrath. The three of them would never be able to combat him.

- "Well now, I'm coming home!" Kopa crowed, a mad gleam coming to his eye.

- "My ordeals didn't kill me, they made me stronger. Strong enough to claim my throne, the throne you stole from me!" He pointed a clawed toe at his sister.

- "No, Kopa, please --"

- "That's right, Kiara, I'm back." His grin was gone now.

- "And I'll see the Pridelands burn before I give up what is rightfully mine."