

Pride

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'Sunny'

Everybody I have ever met has told me I am a leader.

Well, not everybody. But all the lions who didn't say it with their mouth totally said it with their eyes. And it's all true!

I also think I am a leader. A really good one. If only I had someone to lead...

In case it wasn't obvious, I am a lion. I am female and do not have a beautiful mane, but I have always admired my father and how he led our pride with such courage. It hurts my heart that I might never lead a pride like his.

I am only two years old. I do not yet have a mate or cubs or a home myself.

My mother says I am always welcome back to her pride, but I want to have my own pride, for I am a leader at heart, at least according to her.

My name is Sunbeam. I do not much identify with my name, so I prefer Sunny. Two days ago, I left my home under the Acacia to start a new family. I have not yet found a big tree to my liking, or another lion. The only other lion I've seen since I left my mother was a grumpy one who told me to beat it because it was his tree.

I loved my old tree. I loved hunting with my siblings. But I felt I had to move on.

At least I've put my hunting skills to good use! I've already caught a gazelle, which lasted me for my whole trip so far. A good-sized pride could eat that same gazelle in two minutes...

Days go by. I sleep under trees that cast little shade over my hulking shape. I begin to miss my mother and my siblings. I feel sad... But I am *Sunny*: The fierce warrior! Stronger than my littermates! Tougher and faster than any lion my age! Could I be lonely?

Another gazelle gallops by, disturbing me from my thoughts. But I'm not hungry, just tired. The tree I lie under has no leaves at all, and I am too hot to sleep. The cry of a bird rings through the air, but I don't want to eat anything. I think I am homesick.

I lay under the tree for hours, letting sadness rush through my head like a river. I mean to keep laying there for longer, but I am sidetracked because of my demanding stomach. I stalk a zebra through the tall grass. I strike it and eat it on the spot, satisfying the deafening rumbles coming from my midsection. Then I sleep for the rest of the day.

It is late evening when I wake, feeling refreshed and strong in every muscle. I really needed that. I rise from my makeshift tree and prowl through the grass surrounding me. I am padding through the weeds when suddenly, I hear a wail. It is not a wail you'd hear coming from prey being hunted. It sounds like a lion!

I hear it again. Perhaps it is one of my kin! I sprint toward the noise, running as fast as I can. I arrive at a tall patch of grass, the wail coming from within. I push my way through the

blades. What I see isn't my kin. It is two young lions being circled by a much older one. He is roaring threats at the two little ones, claws unsheathed.

One of the little lions, a male, is bravely standing in front of the female.

"Stop, Magnolius," says the young male, his voice wavering. "Don't say that. Don't hurt my sister!"

The female hisses at the old lion, apparently called Magnolius. "Quit picking on us!" she calls. She is covered in cuts.

"Make me," growls Magnolius. He reaches out and scratches the female lion. She lets out a bloodcurdling wail. "You are on my territory," Magnolius roars. "You must leave now, before I let my pride attack you!"

The two lions tuck their tails between their legs and run off into the dark Savanna. Magnolius grins. He hasn't seen me. He proudly prances off, likely to his kin to celebrate a victory.

I turn away, and I run in the direction of the lion siblings. The female was badly injured. My mother had long ago taught me how to treat a scratch like that. I might be able to help!

I run as fast as I can, following the scent trail of the lions. Soon enough, I find them curled up in a hollow under a tree. The male stands guard, while the female licks her wounds.

The male sees me and trots over. "It's not a good time," he says. "Featherpelt and I are recovering from a battle."

“That is why I’m here,” I tell him. “I can help treat your sis- Featherpelt’s scratches. Will you let me see her... um...”

“I’m Thorn,” he tells me. “And yes. But if you hurt her in any way, I have the right to drive you out.”

I nod. What choice do I have? I walk over to her and inspect her scratches. There are five. I plaster all the cuts with spiderwebs.

“Thank you,” says Featherpelt. She slowly picks herself up and stretches gratefully.

“What brings you here to the Outermost Savanna?” I inquire. “You two look quite young. Younger than me.”

“Our mother was killed by Housefolk,” says Thorn. “Other prides invaded our territory. Featherpelt was hurt! We are old enough to be our own pride, but neither of us want to lead one. We’re- um- we’re too scared. But no one will take us, not even our kin!”

“Hey! I’m looking for a pride! I’ve always wanted to lead one,” I say.

Featherpelt looks up at me, eyes shining. She flicks her tail in excitement.

“You guys can help me find one!” I exclaim, sure that they will be ecstatic to help me.

Thorn and Featherpelt sigh, but don’t say anything. They share a brother- sister glance that I know from the days with my kin. It means to agree. I can anticipate the response.

Thorn looks at me. “Okay. Sure. I guess so.” His voice agrees with me, but his green eyes say otherwise as Featherpelt nods. “Yes. We will come.”

Thorn has agreed, but something seems off. This doesn't seem like something he and Featherpelt actually want.

"Are you sure?" I inquire. I don't want to force my new friends into anything.

"Yeah," agrees Featherpelt. "We can't live out here for much longer."

We run. For perhaps weeks, we search the Savanna. I slowly become less worried about the two siblings. They seem like they enjoy searching for a pride with me...

I am wandering aimlessly, thinking thoughts like these, when I see lions in the distance. I recognize potential pride material and edge closer. I hide, eavesdropping.

"Argh," I hear a female lion say to another, "It's so hard getting by without him. I want him back!"

What?! Is this pride's leader gone? Maybe they're destined to be my pack!

Thorn and I run through the brambles, Featherpelt close behind.

I approach the female that spoke earlier. I ask her if I could lead the pride. She looks down at me grumpily, but then another lion comes over and nods.

"Of course," he says in a gruff voice. "I'm Flame. You look like a good leader."

I grin. "Thank you so much!" I purr.

I hear a growl from behind me, but when I spin around, Thorn and Featherpelt stand there, just watching. It may be my imagination, but Thorn's teeth look clenched...I wonder

why he doesn't say anything. If he dislikes this new lion, why not say something? The new lion *is* pretty charming. Once I'm settled into the pride, maybe he can be my mate!

A few days later, I push through the long grass. Thorn is by my side. I am coming back from an unsuccessful hunt, returning to my new pride. I reach their tree, but I am not greeted by Flame.

Instead, Flame is being yelled at by a large male.

"I can't believe you let that- that *stray* lead my pride! Even for one day! Going on a hunting trip is no excuse for a *new leader!*" he screams.

"Don't worry, Papa," says Flame. "I was just messing with her. I was planning to drive her out tomorrow!"

I can't believe my ears. The 'leaderless pride' has a leader! Upset, I run away. I did not hear it when the "real leader" said to Flame, "It's okay, we'll kill her tonight. She can't be a leader! She's female!"

But Thorn did.

'Thorn'

I run after Sunny as fast as I can, but she is faster. I am out of shape, while she is strong. Soon, Sunny brings me back to the camp. I hide in the tall grass when Sunny looks over her shoulder. She creeps into an empty den and lays down to sleep.

Sunny must not have heard it when father and son plotted to kill her at night. That means... It's up to me.

But I'm not a hero at all! I didn't stand up for my sister, so she is injured. I didn't stand up for my mother, so now *she* is *dead* because of *me!* I couldn't protect my family. Why should it be different for her?

I am awake all night, guarding. I want to protect Sunny from the evil lions populating this pride. As soon as I hear rustling, I wake Sunny.

"Come with me," I stage-whisper. "Featherpelt and I are getting out of here and bringing you."

"What?" exclaims Sunny. "But- I could earn their trust!"

"Not if you're dead," I say. "These lions are not your pride. Their leader is planning to kill you tonight, so I'm getting you out before that."

Sunny doesn't argue. She follows, but as we leave the camp, she gets ahead and shows the way. Like a leader.

'Sunny'

My head spins with the betrayal of the other lions. I run across the Savanna, Thorn and Featherpelt behind me. I hear thundering pawsteps behind us, and turn to glimpse the pride of lions I tried to lead, pursuing us at great speeds, led by Flame's father.

We see a river. Based on the scent markers, it is the end of this pride's territory. I don't hesitate to leap in.

Featherpelt follows with Thorn, but when Thorn reaches the other side, Featherpelt is still struggling in the water. I grab her scruff and we swim across the river.

There is a beautiful tree on the other side of the river.

"That tree's been unclaimed for ages," says Thorn. "But it looks like it would suit us perfectly."

Thorn's words surprise me, but I turn back to face Flame's father.

"If you stay there, we'll stay away," he growls. "But don't come back across the river."

He retreats, leading his pride back to camp.

I look at Thorn. He looks at me. His eyes are hopeful, like he is waiting for something.

I think I know what it is! Thorn wants to be part of *my* pride!

"Yes," I say. "You can be my pride."

Thorn smiles. "Finally," he says. "But- Sunny. I have a question."

"Yeah?"

He turns the colour of tomatoes. Aww!

“Will you be my mate?” he asks shyly. Thorn wants to be my mate! That’s so sweet!

Nevertheless, I hesitate to think.

“...Yes,” I say. “That would be nice.”

I miss those days. I was so strong! But today I am still strong- in a way. My pride is the strongest in the Savanna! We have nearly fifty lions.

Thorn has passed on. Soon, death will come for me, too. But I will live on as a legend passed through my family as it grows bigger and stronger.

I was foolish when I was young, but I still found my happy ending.