

Nia's Pride

Nia was stalking her prey on the hot, Botswana grasslands. Her eyes zipped across the savanna, searching for easy prey. Nia's eyes narrowed as she saw a herd of zebras. An old mare had wandered away. *Perfect*. She caught the attention of her friend, Imani. Nia jerked her head towards the mare. She nodded.

Nia silently padded forward without a sound. The tall grass hid her from sight and the glare of the sun hid her better. She was almost within striking distance. Nia bunched up her muscles and got her paws ready. She sprang.

As the wind rushing past her brushed back her fur, Nia let loose a snarl. The mare jerked her head up, braying in fear. Nia landed on the mare's back, sinking her teeth into the warm flesh. Out of the corner of her eye, Nia saw Imani slide under the mare, her teeth latching onto its leg. The mare kicked out, narrowly missing the lioness. Imani jumped away from the zebra. She leaped on the mare's back behind Nia.

Nia and Imani clawed at the zebra, keeping their teeth latched on. Suddenly the mare lurched upward, throwing Nia off. She crashed to the ground roughly. Nia tasted blood in her mouth.

Nia sprang to her paws, dashing over to help Imani. She dove in front of the zebra, her teeth catching onto the underside of the neck. The mare kicked out with its front legs, almost catching Nia in the stomach. Nia tugged down harder. The mare collapsed onto its side, breathing heavily. Imani quickly silenced it by slicing its neck.

The two lionesses dragged the zebra back to the pride. One of their friends, Sada, came to help.

“You need help?” she asked. Nia nodded. Sada grabbed a leg in her mouth, tugging it along. As the trio reached the pride, two cubs bounced up to them, pestering them with questions.

“You caught a zebra?” Ramiro asked, looking up at Nia. “Teach me, teach me!”

“No, teach *me*.” Rayna said.

“Hey, Nia’s going to teach me, not *you*.”

“Male lions don’t even hunt. We lionesses do that.”

“Well, males could be the leader of the pride. If *I* were king, I would let all the males hunt.”

“Come cubs, don’t bother them.” their mother called. Ramiro and Rayna padded over to their mother. Rain, their mother, seized Rayna’s scruff, lifting her off the ground. The lionesses padded away, followed by Ramiro. Ramiro walked beside his mother. Then he leaped at Rayna, pretending to roar. But the young lioness batted her brother away with her paw.

Nia turned around, the zebra lying on the ground. Picking it back up, Nia and her friends dragged it to the King’s rock.

Nia and her friends dropped the zebra beside the rock. “Well, I’m going to sleep for a while.” Imani clarified. The lioness turned around and headed over to the lioness den.

“Me too.” said Sada, “But I’m not sleeping.” Sada padded away, following Imani. Nia could guess what Sada was doing.

Nia watched her friends walk away. She decided to sleep while she could before meal time started.

Curled in her den, Nia was dreaming. She was drinking from a river, it's water cool and white. Mist rose from the river bank. A noise came from the water. Like a gentle hum. Nia raised her head up from the water, confused. She looked behind her as she heard a stick crack. When she looked back at the water, it had changed. Instead of being white, it had become a dirty brown color. The mist was thicker, like fog. Nia couldn't see well.

A low growl came from the fog. It seemed to come from everywhere. Nia lowered her head. Another growl let loose. Nia felt a chill run down her spine. Turning her head to the right, she saw a leopard, as dark as night. Her green eyes shone like the moon.

A chirping sound came from Nia's left. Whipping her head around, she saw a cheetah emerge from the fog. His eyes were two different colors. One blue, one green. The spots on his coat seemed to be melted together.

A snarl came from the fog again. Looking in front of her, Nia saw a white tiger padding towards her. His eyes were a golden color, with wide, black centers. His fur was a silky white, making the black stripes pop out. He opened his jaws, letting out a roar. His jaws were red, his teeth dripping with crimson red blood.

Someone shook her. Nia woke from her dream. Hovering above her was a male lion. Daiki.

Sitting up, Nia yawned, her jaws stretching wide. For a moment, she forgot about her nightmare. Then it all came back to her like a flood. The snarling black leopard. The melted spots on the cheetah and his two different eyes. The dripping red jaws on the tiger.

Nia shuddered and shook her head to clear it. It felt all too real. She could *taste* the water. The mist had smelled damp, just like it should.

“Come on.” said Daiki, “Cael just had his share. It’s the lionesses and cubs turn.” “And mine.” he added.

“I’m coming. Don’t worry.” she replied, rising to her paws. “I had the worst dream *ever*. Really.”

“I... I wasn’t worrying.” Daiki stammered. “I, uh.... oh, never mind.” He gave his chest fur a few embarrassed licks. He stepped out of the lioness den. Glancing back at Nia, he gestured for her to follow. Nia padded after him, smirking with amusement.

Cael stood above the lions and lionesses, the sun behind him. His mane shone golden and his pelt glowed. Cael’s milky gray eyes flashed with pride.

Nia and Daiki walked over to the meal. The other lionesses were feasting. An old lioness named Chinedu, looked up as they came. “Not a lot left.” she croaked. Her voice sounded like someone eating crocodile scales.

“That’s fine.” Daiki said.

“Well, I thought you would come sometime.” She rasped. Now her voice sounded like a lioness scraping her claws across wood. Nia flattened her ears and winced.

The old lioness returned to eating her share. Nia and Daiki stepped around her and padded to the other side. Nia crouched down next to Sada and Imani. Sada was chewing on a leg bone of the zebra. Imani was picking her teeth with a claw.

“Hi.” Nia said, unsure what to say.

“Hi.” Sada responded.

“Do you want to, uh....”

Sada glanced at Nia. “Yeah?”

“Uh, never mind.” Nia looked down at her share. She pawed it half-heartedly. “I’m not so hungry.” she said. She climbed to her paws and padded away.

Nia rested in her den, head on her paws. She watched the sunset. The orange ball of flame sank down. Blue, purple, and pink skies swirled around the sun.

She thought about her dream. *Strange*, she thought. All the cats in the dream, were weird looking. The leopard was black. The cheetah’s eyes were different and his pelt had melted spots. The tiger had golden-brown eyes, not blue. Nia, herself, was a white lioness.

Maybe it wasn’t, *just*, a dream. Maybe it was more.