Kieran King in:

THE MISSING YEARS:
THE JEWEL OF AFRICA

[REC]

ABOUT SEVEN YEARS AGO
LAGOS, NIGERIA

I always told myself that this was temporary. Like any minute now I'd be brought back to the world of wrestling and the trajectory that my early twenties had started on—XWF World Champion at 20; Universal Champion at 21—would pick up where it left off.

The truth was, nobody from that world was calling, but people from this new one were. After seven years or so, that just became my new normal.

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"Okay! Okay!" I pleaded. Jimmy Raspin, upon whose dime I was brought here, was pointing fingers and I had been around that loose cannon long enough to know that when he started pointing fingers, sharp metal things tended to be next.

I jammed myself in the middle of Jimmy and his adversaries.

"You're tryin' to fuck on me!" he spat. Those fingers kept wagging at the men behind me.

I almost laughed as I gently pushed him back. **"Nobody is trying to fuck on anybody."** Those were words I never imagined that I would say, but here we were. I looked back over my shoulder. **"Right?"**

Behind me, a representative of the Kang crime family nodded. **"We would never fuck on, or with you, I assure you."**

"These bastards couldn't even bring their papi with them!" Jimmy screeched. **"I didn't fly all this way to this third world shithole to speak to fuckin' underlings and goons! Seok should be here!"**

The Kang representative was calm and measured in his response. **"As we said already, Mr. Seok sends his sincerest apologies but alas, he has a family emergency."**

“Boo-fuckin’-hoo!” Jimmy said, mock-crying.

I pushed him back further still.

“Jimmy...” I said, quietly. **“If Seok was trying to screw you over, these guys would just freely admit it.”** I jabbed him with a finger of my own. **“If you snatched your panties out of your ass for half a second, you would recognise that.”** My other hand clasped his shoulder, and I stooped a little to make sure we were perfectly eye-to-eye. **“These guys are just trying not to air their boss's dirty laundry. Seok’s fucking mum is dying, dude! So how about you pull your head out of your ass, get one of your people to send Seok some flowers, and work with me here.”**

I could feel him still seething. But at least he shut the hell up.

“Now fellas...” I said, spinning back to face the Kangs. **“Jimmy’s laid out the intel. Psuedo-mystical totem; worth a metric fuck-ton of money; buyer already at the ready. He needs men. You have them. You get forty-five percent of any cashfall; he takes fifty. I take the other five. What do you say?”**

Their spokesman stroked his chin. **“He doesn't come,”** he said, nodding in Jimmy’s direction.

I immediately held up a hand to keep my hooligan friend at bay.

“Jimmy is the one with the local contact,” I reminded them. **If Jimmy doesn't come, they might not talk to any of us.”**

“You do the talking,” they suggested, stubbornly.

I sighed.

Just like with Jimmy, I took a step inwards and spoke softly to the Kang rep. **“Need I remind you that you're here representing your whole family? What the hell are you thinking? You know damn well that Seok is super into this mystical mumbo jumbo. And if he was here, would he really stand there and disrespect Jimmy fucking Raspin? Pull your head in, man!”**

The Kangs glanced at each other. Then their spokesman said **“We get fifty percent. We have more men to pay.”**

I looked back at Jimmy.

“Fine,” he said.

They sealed the deal with a handshake.

Unfortunately, my work on this job wasn't done.

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER
IGBO-OLOKUN, NIGERIA

Heading inland in Nigeria, I rode with Jimmy. We were accompanied by his driver and one other.

The Kangs arrived separately, but they were true to their word. Filing out onto the dusty street like clowns from cars, they brought a small army with them.

We didn't need them to fight though. We needed them to *dig*.

Jimmy stood with a local woman. **“Shuri,”** she introduced herself.

“Like in Black Panther,” I said, with a big dumb grin on my face. In my defence, that movie had only been out a couple of months at this point so it was still at the height of its cultural relevance.

Shuri watched me with little in the way of reaction. Her eyes stayed put until I broke my own gaze away.

“We've got about a six mile trek,” Jimmy said to all of us. **“The path is a bit overgrown but the hills aren't too bad. And that fuckhole sun should be dropping soon, which might also help.”** He turned to our guide, and gestured towards a gap between two shrub-like trees that seemed to serve as markers guarding the entrance into the thicket that lay beyond. **“After you.”**

Shuri turned and set off.

Jimmy smacked my back. **“C’mon,”** he said, following Shuri. His other men fell in behind me as we made our way into the lowland forest leaving the Kang Family to bring up the rear, hauling the shovels and other equipment that we needed.

A short while into the hike, the designated leader of the Kangs slipped up next to me.

“This woman... she knows where we're going?” he asked.

Laser sharp, Shuri shouted back from the front of our travelling party. **“This is Yorubaland. I am Yoruba.”**

That didn’t register for the Kang jopok.

“For Christ's sake,” Jimmy interjected. **“Read a fuckin’ book will ya? Yoruba are the traditional people of a big chunk of western Nigeria, spreadin’ into Benin and Togo.”**

You wouldn't expect it when you looked at him, or heard him speak, or just interacted with him in any way at all, but Jimmy was exceptionally well read. I had seen his library myself.

The Kang Family member didn't push the issue further.

“I'm pretty sure the Yoruba were part of the inspiration for Black Panther...” I said under my breath as we pressed further into the forest.

The journey itself took about three hours over the terrain. The sun dropped and as visibility decreased I could sense those around me becoming skittish. They stared out into the undergrowth around us as if they expected something to stare back.

Not Shuri though.

Steadfast, she moved forward. *Ever forward.*

“Just up here,” she eventually said, leading us out into what would have once been a clearing.

Within it, structures of wood and earth were in the process of being claimed back by the forest. In some spots along the perimeter, where a wall clearly once stood, nature had already won the battle.

“We can’t see,” one of the Kangs said.

Around the space were various fittings that I took to be torches or lanterns or some other sort of fire-holder. I looked at Shuri. **“May we?”**

She agreed.

“Jimmy, give me your lighter.” I used it to set alight the nearest torch and tossed it to the Kang Family member who raised the issue. **“Don't light anything that's too close to some of this regrowth.”**

He nodded and set to work.

“What is this place?” I turned back to Shuri and Jimmy. Steadily, a warm orange glow crept blanketed us.

“Some sorta temple,” Jimmy answered.

Crouched in the centre of a ring of buildings, Shuri elaborated further. **“In your tongue, the word is ‘nexus’, I believe. This site is the location of a barrier between Ayé and Ọrun.”**

I looked to Jimmy for answers. This time, even he was stumped.

Shuri noticed our silence. She looked at us—me in particular—and added: **“This world... and the next.”**

“If we're about to dig down and find some underground Necropolis, I'm calling this a full rip off on the Black Panther stuff!” I was only half-kidding.

“That wasn't in the movie,” Jimmy said.

“For Christ's sake, read a book!” I grinned at Jimmy, having slung his own words back at him. **“In your defence, this is the mediocre ‘King of the Underworld’ Black Panther run that I'm talking about. Not even the new Ta-Nehisi Coates shit.”**

“Nerd,” he said.

“The movie made me want to learn more!” I pleaded, not that it really mattered.

“You need not worry,” Shuri told me. **“The dead are not buried here.”**

Jimmy surveyed our surroundings. **“But we do need to find what is. Where do we dig?”**

I glared at Shuri. **“If you say underneath some sort of heart-shaped herb, I'm going to scream.”**

“No,” she said. Dusting the ground with her foot, she kicked away leaves and debris, revealing a large stone tablet underneath.

We crowded around, the others in the group joining us too. Whatever marking was once etched into the stone face was no longer visible, but I had my suspicions about the colour and species of what it might once have shown.

“So like... we just dig straight down?” I asked.

Shuri nodded.

I snapped my fingers at one of the nearby Koreans and pointed at a shovel behind him. I then used it to lever the tablet out of position.

Underneath, the soil was softer and discoloured compared to the ground around it.

I shoved the tool into the ground. Soon enough, other shovels joined me. It took us most of the night. Surprisingly, even Jimmy pitched in. The only person who didn't was Shuri, who—for hours on end—watched on as we toiled away.

I think it was Jimmy's other man whose shovel first hit a solid surface. We must have been about ten feet deep at this point, and everybody found a second wind and scrambled to uncover what he had found.

I looked up to where Shuri was perched. **“Is there a door or hatch or something?”**

“There was, once upon a time.”

“Get the hammer,” Jimmy said.

I took Shuri's silence as agreement, and sent one of the Kangs off to grab a sledgehammer. When he finally got it in hand, Jimmy raised the hammer over head and shattered the stone below.

MOMENTS LATER
UNDERNEATH THE GROUND

I was the last to drop into the abyss.

I was also the only one smart enough to grab a torch first.

"This way," Shuri said. She didn't particularly care about light as she pushed into the darkness.

The others urged me to go next and they followed behind like moths to the flame.

I wish I could say these ancient passages were adorned in wondrous afro-futurist art illuminated by some sort of sci-fi blue light, but all there was were a few markings scratched into cold, grey stone; and the dried mud under our feet. Not exactly Wakanda.

The cavern sloped down into the depths of the earth. The dropoff probably wasn't as steep as it felt, but it continued for a while and by the time we reached a fork in the road the opening that we had entered within was akin to a glowworm off in the distance.

"Which way?" I asked, being the first to arrive behind Shuri.

In spite of her stoicism, Shuri's silence gave away to me that she actually hadn't been down here before.

Jimmy took charge instead.

"Split up," he said. **"For all we know it all joins up down the line anyway."**

And so we did.

Shuri came along with me and Jimmy's crew. A few Kang footsoldiers followed along just to balance the numbers out.

We wound through the subterranean passageways. Shuri was right: there were no dead here. Nor was there fire and brimstone, or whatever the landscape of the Yoruba version of hell looked like—if there was such a thing. Maybe I should've expected a giant mystical baobab tree or something.

But there was just stone. Cold damp stone.

Our particular tunnel came to a dead end at a wall about twenty feet ahead. Between us and there, the ground lowered down into an eerily still pool of water.

"This is it," Shuri whispered. Her eyes flared.

"This?" Jimmy scoffed. **"This is goddamn dysentery waiting to happen."**

"Fucking giardia," I agreed.

"I don't particularly fancy shitting myself down here," he continued.

Shuri didn't find our commentary amusing. I'm not wholly sure whether we were intending on it being construed that way. **"What you fancy does not change the fact that your prize is down there,"** she said, staring out at the water.

We all paused.

I held my torch out to the water. The way the fire reflected back made me wonder if hellfire was down here after all.

"How deep is it?" Jimmy's extra man asked.

"As deep as it needs to be," Shuri non-answered.

I waved the torch around a little. **"If it's more than nine or ten feet, then this little flame won't do a thing. It'll be dark as hell down there."**

"Shit..." Jimmy looked down into the watery abyss. **"If it's more than nine or ten feet, I don't think I'd even be able to make it."**

"I can," his extra man said proudly. Before we knew it, he was pulling his jacket over his head.

"Are you sure?" Jimmy asked.

"Ancient mystical artefact, right?" he grinned. **"I'm sure I'll know it when I see it."**

The man strode into the water, and then dove under.

We waited.

As we did, I remembered seeing David Blaine about a decade prior hold his breath for something like seventeen minutes. That's about how long it felt like we waited.

I glanced at Jimmy's watch.

In truth, it had only been six minutes before we figured our man hadn't succeeded.

"Anyone else?" Jimmy asked cynically.

Confidently, one of the Kang members took their shot.

At least he resurfaced.

His friends helped him back to dry ground around only two and a half minutes in.

"We need some sort of rope or something to pull whoever goes down back up," I suggested.

The Kangs had come prepared, but with a dead body already somewhere down there, nobody was willing to volunteer.

Through the dark, I felt Shuri's eyes staring at me.

I flipped her unspoken suggestion around. **"You do it,"** I said.

"You want your prize, do you not?" she replied.

"Kieran..." Jimmy's voice dropped lower than usual. **"Can you do it?"**

It was odd to hear Jimmy ask something of me with such sincerity.

Grumbling, I passed him my torch and began tying the Kangs' rope around my waist.

I marched into the water.

It dropped off as soon as it hit waist height.

I dove down from there. The rope billowed behind me as the light from the flame vanished.

Ten feet.

Eleven.

Twelve.

I wasn't sure how deep I went, but I held my breath like I was twenty-one years old again—in my prime, with the XWF Universal Championship around my waist.

The water was pitch black.

Until suddenly, it wasn't.

There before me, a glowing blue totem burst to light at the bottom of the flooded chasm.

At the same time, I was startled. The corpse of my colleague floated past me, and I scrambled away from the horror in his eyes.

Struggling against my breath and the pressure on my sinuses and ears, I hurled myself towards the totem. *Of course it was a goddamn panther.* Fucking derivative bullshit.

Reaching out, I clipped it with my fingers. In slow motion it dislodged from its pedestal and I stretched as far as I could.

Just as my hands wrapped around the totem, a fantastical tunnel opened beneath me.

Through it, I saw a *city*, flush with brilliance I could never fully encapsulate with words.

I floated in nothingness, staring at everything.

And then, I was violently yanked upwards.

The city faded away.

The light from the torch gradually warmed me.
And I was pulled out, sputtering, onto dry land.

The totem clanked against the ground. Its blue luminescence radiated strictly from its eyes, but was enough to engulf the whole room.

Shuri's mouth was agape. **"That is..."** She couldn't even finish her sentence as she stared in wonder at what I had retrieved.

Seeing the look on my face, she scrambled towards me.

"What did you see?" she asked. I half expected her to start shaking me, given how slow I was to respond. **"Did you see it? Did you see Ọrun?"**

"A city..." I stammered.

Shuri collapsed backwards, almost falling into the water. **"I misjudged your Ori, Mr. King,"** she said, whatever that means. Her eyes glanced over her shoulder to the mysterious depths behind her.

Meanwhile, Jimmy wrapped up the panther totem and stuffed it into a duffel bag.

"We got our prize," he said. **"Let's get out of here."**

When we reached the surface, I tried to tell Jimmy about what I saw. Unfortunately, he was more intent on getting the artefact we had recovered to his buyer, and brushed me off.

The Kangs who had split off from us resurfaced not long after—a full company, as opposed to us who had lost a man.

Their spokesman overheard me trying to plead with Jimmy to listen. He pulled me aside, and said to me: **"Talk to Seok."**

A few weeks later, I did.

TODAY

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

"I think my... experiences... were a big part of why I was nudged towards TRIAD last year. And really, that's when everything started shifting for me.

I never admitted this at the time, but I entered TRIAD for a job that paid very handsomely. One that required me to win the TRIAD and hand it over to them.

I failed at that.

But I found something else in the process.

Now... I'm not here to brag about something that happened a year ago outside of the XWF ring—though I will quietly take the time to remind everyone that when I won the TRIAD Wit Trials, it was at the expense of XWF Legends like Doc D'Ville and Shawn Warstein. And I'd also like to remind everyone that when Thaddeus Duke tried to win the Bravery Trials, he *didn't*. And when people like SEB and ALIAS tried to win the Strength Trials, they *couldn't*.

That's all relevant info—especially on the back of cutting SEB back down to size last Warfare.

Because while I was outwitting some of the biggest names in this industry, I remembered who the fuck I am.

I didn't just remember it though! I *felt* it! It coursed through my veins before the electricity of the Wit piece was even secure in my crown. And simultaneous to the Wit Trials, that feeling drove me to win the XWF crown the first time around!

THAT was when I stopped becoming Kieran King: the caricature of a once great man. Instead I took my rightful place as Kieran King: THE GREATEST WRESTLER ALIVE. Rest assured, fam, I unequivocally understand the gravity of such a statement and yet I stand by it nonetheless. NOBODY has proven me wrong.

Now let's pan out. Who else was riding high at that same time last year? How about Isaiah King—fresh off his first Universal Title reign and having newly demoted himself from King to Prince.

King vs. King was a cunt hair away from happening back then.

But *somebody* dropped the ball. And it wasn't me.

See... motherfuckers seem to forget that I didn't buy my crowns on Etsy. I stepped up to the plate and hit homer after homer agasint supposed top guys until my regency was undeniable.

In 2024, Mark Flynn couldn't get the job done

Current Anarchy Champion Michael Graves couldn't get the job done

Current UNIVERSAL CHAMPION Dolly Waters couldn't get the job done.

And yeah, Isaiah King couldn't get the fucking job done.

But I DID! Because I am a cut above Isaiah's bitch ass, and I always have been. It takes a special kind of mediocrity for us to have never fought and yet he's already got a fucking L to me. But that's what's interesting about the guy. The only thing special about the sonofabitch is just how uninspiring he is. Absolutely everything else about Isaiah King is a rehash of something that has been done better somewhere before:

Example number one: *Wakanda forever!*

Example number two: Sebastian's a TWO-time Universal Champion, and yet he at least managed some defences. Isaiah? ZERO.

Example number three: His whole 'King' shtick is a play on his surname, just like YA BOI. But in reality, he doesn't have an actual crown to back any of that shit up.

Because he *failed* to win one in March last year.

And then his own people refused to give him another.

There's a reason he was never King Adeyemi, right?

You can't blame his people though, can you? Why would they want to be ruled by an entitled piece of shit like Isaiah?

Meanwhile, I'm pretty good at defending my claim to the crown. Some might even say, the best.

And here I am, ready to defend it again.

It NEEDS to be defended from scumbags like Isaiah.

Because SEB was right about how Leap of Faith played out for me. I got what I intended. But it wasn't to be a pariah or a martyr or whatever the fuck else he thought. It was to expose the underbelly of this entire company. I never trusted Aurora and it turns out I was right. I've been

railing against everyone else as well, and it turns out I was right about you all too. SEB said he didn't come down to help because apparently he only moves if he's going to get a 'thank you' from it. I saw the footage though, and Isaiah was right there with SEB.

The only reason he didn't come down was because SEB said 'no'.

He's not a king, he's a follower.

He's the guy taking the fall when the sixty-ninth incarnation in the XWF of a group called 'The Exiles'—example number three of another unoriginal Isaiah King moment!—loses their tag team match.

But if SEB said that the lack of anyone coming to my aid was a referendum on me as a person... well what does it say about a guy who has to wait for his daddy to make decisions for him?

And what does that mean when that guy has to fight the person his daddy couldn't beat.

Don't forget, I asked for this fight. One King. Zero Revolutions. That's my motto and I'm sticking to it.

Because to me, everything that Isaiah listed about his Leap of Faith opponents: the false prophet, the pretender, the opportunist, the addict, the usurper... it's all reflected in him. Isaiah is all five of the trials that *he failed* to pass bundled up into one easy package for me.

He can be King of the Land. But he'll never be King of those ropes. He'll never be King of that mat. He'll never be King of the XWF.

It already has one.

He can have what's left of the pathetic fucking kingdom he tried to build for himself.

But he damn sure can't have MINE."

[STOP]

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As Kieran King stepped out of the recording studio that the XWF had set up in the Paycom Center, he made sure to stick to corridors where there were plenty of people around.

For a few weeks now, that had been his norm. Exposing the people he used to work for was a dangerous affair and so now there was barely a moment where he allowed himself to be alone, even while he was sleeping.

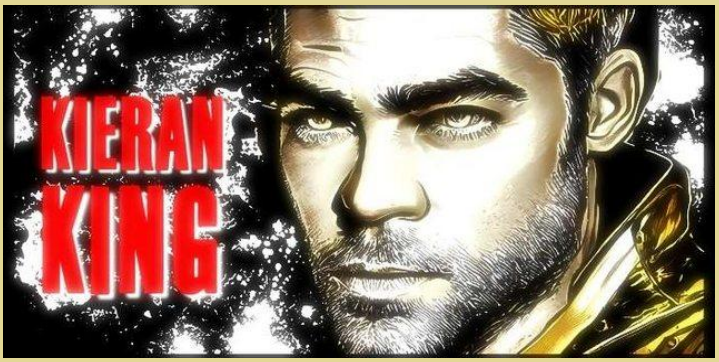
His phone vibrated—a new device to replace that which he threw out the window a couple of months ago when he first fled L.A.

There weren't a lot of numbers saved into the new contacts list. As such, the sender wasn't identified.

But the message was very clear:

`Change your bodyguards.`

He had been compromised.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