

Waiting to be King

By Carol Ottley-Mitchell

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In the Ashanti kingdom in Ghana, West Africa, it is believed that the Asantehene's (king's) bare feet must never touch the ground. If they do disaster will befall the kingdom and the king will be overthrown.



Once upon a time, in the West African country of Ghana, there lived a woman named Afia. Afia was a powerful woman among the Ashanti people. She was the daughter of a king, a princess indeed. Her brother was the current king and she was the Queen Mother. This meant that she had the power to choose the next king when her brother died.

She had two sons, Kofi and Kwesi. In Ghana, children are often named for the day on which they were born. Kofi was the name given to boys born on a Friday and Kwesi was the name for a boy born on Sunday.

Kofi was two years older than his little brother but he was the mischievous and playful one. Who pulled the clothes off of the line? Kofi. Who hid the teacher's chalk to stop her from giving a pop quiz? Kofi. Whenever there was mischief, Kofi was sure to be behind it.

His mother was very frustrated. "You could be king one day," she said, "you must stop this mischief. Even when they change your name, people will still remember the things you have done." In the Ashanti kingdom, when a man becomes king he is given a new name to mark the end of his previous life.

One day Kofi found a chicken's egg on the compound. He could tell that it was just about to hatch. He placed it in the kitchen among the other eggs that the cook had ready for breakfast. When the cook picked up Kofi's egg, the baby chick inside began to struggle to crack its shell. The egg shook in the cook's hand. She screamed and dropped it. Thankfully the baby chick was not hurt, but the same cannot be said for the cook who burned her hand slightly on the pot of boiling water that she had prepared for the eggs. Kofi's mother spent the whole afternoon convincing her not to quit the job.

"KOFI!" Afia called her son. "That's it. If you cannot respect others I cannot choose you as king." She dropped her voice and continued. "Today your uncle is healthy and strong, but one day, sadly, he will die. It will be left

to me to choose a new king. The Ashanti people want a king who is wise and good, patient and strong. I have two sons. Who do you think I will choose?"

Kofi was angry. It would be the biggest insult if his younger brother was chosen to be king over him. He would have to leave the city, he could never hold his head high again. He ran to his room and threw himself on to his bed, vowing never to play another trick again.

A few years passed and Kofi kept his promise. He enjoyed thinking of funny tricks to play, but he kept his ideas to himself. Finally the day came when his mother sat the two boys down.

"It is time that I start preparing you to become king." She said. "I have decided to work with you both and whoever shows himself more worthy to be leader shall be named king."

And so the training began. Kofi was intent on regaining his mother's trust, but it seemed that everything he did his brother did just as well. He was proud of his brother but it made him angry that he could not surpass him.

One day his mother made a strange request.

"From this day on, your bare feet must never touch the ground," she said.

"You must wear your sandals at all time except in bed and in the bath."

"Why, mother?" the boys asked.

"If the bare feet of the Asantehene touch the ground," she replied, "disaster will befall our kingdom and the king will no longer reign."

Kofi's eyes lit up. He knew now how he would best his brother. He would play a trick on Kwesi that would force him to place his bare feet on the ground. Then, he was sure, his mother would choose him as the real king.



Illustration 1: Photo of Jewelled Sandals of an Asantehene by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher

It proved quite difficult to fool Kwesi. He was very careful. Once Kofi hid his sandals at night hoping that he would get out of bed in the morning and forget to put them on. But Kwesi sat on the edge of his bed and called for his mother, who quickly brought him another pair of sandals. No one could figure out how the sandals had disappeared but Afia looked at Kofi suspiciously.

Kofi knew he would have to be careful and so, came up with a more elaborate plot. One day when they were having waakye and gravy for supper, he slipped into the kitchen, took a cup from the cupboard and scooped some of the gravy. Next, while his brother had his bath, he sneaked in and smeared a little of the gravy over the straps of his brother's sandals. Finally, he went down to the dining room early, carrying their puppy with him. He sat at his spot on the table, holding the squirming puppy on his lap beneath the table. His mother came in shortly after him and was very surprised to find Kofi already at the table.

“You must be very hungry today,” she said, “I usually have to call you many times before you come to dinner.”

“Yes, mother,” Kofi replied, “I can't wait to eat!”

“What are you holding under the table?” asked Afia.

“Nothing, mother,” Kofi replied, struggling to hold the puppy still.

Afia was distracted from questioning Kofi further as the rest of the family entered the room and sat at the dining table. Kwesi sat across the table from Kofi. He always took off his sandals at dinner and crossed his legs under himself. Kofi stretched out his legs and slid the puppy along his legs as close to the ground as he could. He wanted the puppy to land as close as possible to Kwesi's feet. Kofi was hoping that the smell of the food on his brother's sandals would attract the puppy and he would steal at least one of the sandals without Kwesi's knowledge.

It was a sound plan. The puppy was immediately attracted to the smell of meat. He started gnawing at the leather, but instead of bringing it over to Kofi's feet as he hoped, the puppy decided to take the sandal outside. He ran down the length of the table, running over the feet of Kofi's mother, Afia.

When the puppy's fur brushed her feet, Afia screamed and jumped up, almost upsetting the entire table. The puppy, still holding the sandal, was caught by the scruff of his neck as he tried to escape the dining room.

Afia took the sandal from the puppy's mouth, holding it gingerly between two of her fingers as the puppy had chewed at it quite a bit. She frowned and brought the shoe closer to her nose. Then she dropped it to the ground near Kwesi's feet and looked at Kofi squarely in the eyes.

"I wonder how that puppy got in here?" she said, "and why does Kwesi's shoe smell like the stew?"

Kofi shrugged, dropped his eyes and continued eating his dinner. All the while his mind was furiously working. Clearly, he needed an even better plan.

After dinner, he went to the garden to think. He discarded one idea after another and he was just about to give up and take a nap when he heard a loud scream.

"Get it away, get it away!" It was his brother's voice. Kofi ran to the other side of the compound. His brother was standing on a bench pointing to a rock and screaming, "a snake, a snake, get it away."

Kofi went over to where Kwesi was pointing and spotted the snake. He recognised it immediately as a harmless mole snake. He picked it up by the tail and held it up in front of his trembling brother.

"You need not worry about this one, my brother," Kofi assured him. Then a plan began to form in his head.

"This is a male mole snake. The really dangerous snakes are the females. You can tell them easily, the tips of their tails are bright red."

Kwesi came down slowly from the bench and looked carefully at the snake in his brother's hand.

Kofi immediately put his plan into motion. He pretended to take the snake away off of the compound but in reality, he put it into a small box. He bored holes to allow the snake to breathe and took the box into his room.

Kofi prepared pot of red dye and dipped the tail of the snake into it. The snake squirmed and try to get its tail away from the liquid, but Kofi held on determinedly. Soon the snake's tail had turned a bright shade of red.

Kofi placed the snake back into the box and hid it under his bed. Time moved very slowly until Kwesi finally decided that he was ready for bed.

The two boys shared a room. They had divided the room into two so that each had their own living space. The beds were in the middle of the room about five feet apart. The boys could touch the tips of their fingers together if they stretched out towards each other. Kofi lay in his bed without moving, waiting for Kwesi to fall asleep.

Soon he heard a soft snore from the other bed. He listened carefully. Kwesi was breathing calmly. Kofi crept out of bed and made his way over to Kwesi's bed. Carefully he lifted the blanket and slipped the snake under the covers. He tiptoed back to his bed and lay still again pretending to sleep. It was a full moon and a little light seeped through the curtains, so he was able to watch through half opened eyes. He saw Kwesi squirm a little in his sleep. Kofi covered his mouth to prevent a giggle as he pictured how Kwesi would jump out of bed on to his bare feet when he realised that he was sleeping with a snake.

Kwesi wriggled again and moved his hand sleepily to brush the snake away. His hand much have touched the snake's cold skin, because he sat upright with a start. He threw off the covers and looked down to see the brown snake with the bright red tail wriggling next to him in his bed.

Later on, Kofi and Kwesi would try to describe to others what happened next, but neither of them could do so convincingly. They both agree that Kwesi screamed and jumped at the same time. He rose into the air and moved sideways as if he was on a flying carpet. He sailed over on to Kofi's bed, never touching the ground and landed on top of his brother.

The scream brought the entire household running. Their mother was the first to arrive. She flung open the door to find Kwesi clinging to Kofi, still screaming and pointing at his bed. The snake had once again burrowed itself under the covers. Kofi was trying to calm and comfort his brother.

“I'm sorry, Kwesi, it was just a joke, it's not really poisonous,” he said over and over, holding Kwesi in his arms, “please calm down, calm down, please!”

Afia looked at the two brothers and said “I see that I have been wrong to pit you one against the other.” She held up two fingers.

“There are two old sayings. One,” she pointed to one of her fingers and said “‘If one man alone scrapes bark, it falls’. It means that cooperation leads to success.” She pointed to the second finger.

“The other is ‘When the kite is away, the hawk sits on its eggs.’ This means that in the king’s absence the throne is best guarded by his brother. When the time comes I will appoint you as the first joint kings of the Ashanti kingdom. You will represent different aspects of a ruler; Kwesi – calm and wise; Kofi innovative and imaginative; both of you kind with the best of their kingdom at heart.”

About the Author

Carol Ottley-Mitchell is the author of the Caribbean Adventure Series, a series about three children and a monkey who have exciting, magical adventures in the Caribbean. Visit www.CaribbeanAdventureSeries.com for more information.



Photo by [Jaxon Photography](#)

Born in Nevis, Carol has lived in several Caribbean countries. She spent a large part of her formative years in Trinidad, where one of her favorite pastimes was competing with her father to see who could compose the best humorous lyrics to existing songs. This was just the beginning of her interest in creative writing.

Carol began the CAS in 2008 with *Adventure at Brimstone Hill*. *Pirates at Port Royal* was released in 2009 and the third book, based in Trinidad is anticipated in April 2011.

Currently, Carol lives in Ghana with her husband and children.

