Chapter 5: State Lines

“How is he, Pumyra? Will he be able to cope with the journey?”

The young puma gives me a grave expression as she looks up from the young lion lying on the bed in the sleeping compartment in the Feliner – his face is flushed with fever and he’s shivering violently. I can see that Pumyra has stripped his clothes off in order to aid his body with cooling down, and only now do I see the extent of the damage to his fur and the wounds he sustained while reclaiming the Sword of Omens and Claw Shield.

“He’s very sick, Cheetara. He’s got a high fever, way higher than the temperature of his clan should be even with where they originate from. However, his condition is steady so he should be fine for the journey.” she replies softly as she looks back down at our stricken leader. I don’t think I have ever seen him so ill apart from when he was just a newborn cub. I have to admit, seeing him like this terrifies me because I know that he’s hurting. Being unwell is probably the worst feeling in the world and whenever he was sick in the past, he’d come to me first, even while we were on Third Earth. It’s obvious that his mental age didn’t match his body back then, but nowadays it’s hard to tell unless he lapses.

“Not great news but in the end, it’s better than something more negative.” I say as I take one last glimpse at the sleeping lion, then walk out of the door. As I enter the flight deck, I see Panthro standing with Tygra as they check over the systems. There are components and parts of the control panel strewn everywhere and the pair are meticulously checking every single part of the system. I can see some internal damage and shorn wires, but surely just some soldering will fix that?

“How is everything going?”

“Well, minimal damage has been done aside from the sliced wires and slight damage to some internal systems but that’s nothing that we can’t fix. It’s a completely different story for the afterburners though because the solar charge is drained completely – it’s going to take us at least three hours to charge it up to a suitable level where we will be able to break free of the planet’s gravitational pull. The Thundrillium left in the tank is enough for the journey, but without those afterburners, we’re not going anywhere. Anyway, enough of that for now, how’s Lion-O?”

“He isn’t doing very well as he is pretty sick, but Pumyra said that he should be good for the flight.”

“Poor kid, that’s got to be rough. He does tend to get very unwell whenever he catches any kind of virus but then again, that’s always been the case with him. Especially when he was a newborn cub.”

I return to the sleeping compartment and see that he’s still asleep, but appears to be breathing a lot easier than he had been before. I carefully sit down on the bed beside him and watch as he sleeps like a cub. Carefully brushing a stray lock of his rich scarlet-red mane from his face, I can’t help but smile. We’ve been together for the best part of a year, maybe more now and I feel some sort of joy in knowing that I can love him the way I have wanted to ever since he passed the Trial of Speed. I’ve known about how he feels towards me for a very long time now.

A weak groan and slight movement tell me that he’s waking up, and it’s immediately followed by a coughing fit as he struggles to sit up. I help him before handing him a bottle of water, and the second my hand touches his back, I realise just how hot he is.

“Hey, how are we feeling now? You look like death warmed over.”

“I feel like it…ugh…my head…”

It’s all he manages before falling victim to another alarming coughing fit and I can tell from the tears in his eyes that he’s very much distressed and in a lot of pain. I rub his back and try to soothe him as best as I can, and he leans against me as he wheezes.

“Why…are you here? Don’t want…to make you…sick.”

“I need to make sure that you’re okay, I know how bad you can get when you get ill.”

He chuckles weakly before taking another sip of his water, but the wheezing is very alarming to me. Did something happen to him while we were incarcerated in Castle Plun-Darr to make him so seriously unwell? Pumyra enters then and she looks relieved to see that our young leader is awake, but very concerned at the sound of his coughing. She places an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose before giving him a shot of what I can only assume is antibiotics.

“We’re going to be here for a couple of hours before we can safely depart and I want you to rest up as much as you can, Lion-O. You’re very sick and sleep is something that I can tell you haven’t had enough of recently.”

The lion just grunts and lays back down with a pained wheeze, and I join Pumyra in the corridor outside of the sleeping compartment. She doesn’t look all too happy with how bad our Lord’s illness is and I know her worries when she explains what is going on.

“He has pneumonia and I have reason to believe that he had water in his lungs recently with how inflamed his trachea is and I suspect he may have mild to moderate asthma. He’s going to be on antibiotics for a couple of weeks and I’m going to have to try to keep him on bed rest with how bad it is.”

“Oh, Gods of Thundera…He had pneumonia a few winters ago and it nearly killed him…”

“Which is why I am very worried about him now. I need you to stay with him for the flight because although I’m going to be there, he won’t settle unless you are.”

“That’s perfectly understood.”

…

4 Hours Later

“Ok, the afterburners have recharged to their full capacity and the hyperdrive unit is ready to go. This is it; we’re going home.”

I look up as I hear the low hum of the engines powering up, slowly changing to a roar as they reach their maximum capacity. My stomach lurches and feels like it’s being left behind as we pick up speed, gravity trying to pull me down as we climb in the early morning sky. I gaze out of the small window, seeing the ground gradually getting further and further away as we rise.

“1,000 feet and climbing. We should be back on New Thundera by this time tonight. First radio contact will be in T minus eight hours.”

“I…can’t wait to get…back home…”

I look down at Lion-O as he lays on his side. His entire body is slick with sweat and his skin beneath his fur is almost as pale as the sheets he’s laying on. I dip the rag Pumyra gave me in the cool water before gently pressing it against his forehead. He objects with a weak, squeaky growl, and the effort makes him start coughing again.

“I know that you don’t like it but it’s bringing your temperature down slightly.”

…

“Entering New Thundera’s atmosphere in 5...4...3...2...1...”

What looks like flames spreads across the reinforced window as we hit the atmosphere, the craft juddering slightly before stabilising. The golden light that shines in through the window is beautiful; it makes the fields and lakes below look like pools of precious metals. Cat’s Lair majestically stands in the light of the setting sun, along with the city and the outlying settlements – the entire thing is a sight for sore eyes. Finally, we’re home.

“Feliner to Pride 1, does anybody copy?”

“Pride 1 receiving you loud and clear, Panthro. What happened to you all? You’ve been gone for months!”

“We will tell you when we get back, León-A. But during the meantime, lock us onto the landing pad, we’re coming in.”

“Right away, sir! León-A out!”

I look down at Lion-O as the engines of the Feliner begin to power down, and notice that the lion looks very, very rough. Space travel has never really been something he’s coped well with, which is understandable because not everyone’s body can cope with the stress of travelling via hyperdrive. He closes his eyes and huddles down into the covers, seemingly fighting the nausea back. He looks completely miserable which is very understandable given just how sick he is. The wound on his face looks very sore and I can only imagine how much his arm must hurt with how severe it was.

…

“Easy, easy…We’ve got you but just go slowly, ok?”

Lion-O groans weakly as I help him sit down on the bed, a task which was far more difficult than I had been expecting due to just how disoriented he is. In the light, I can see just how badly his fur was cut off as it’s patchy and, in some places, I can see the thick undercoat. Heaving a heavy sigh, I glance back up at him and notice that he is visibly very uncomfortable but I’ve always known that he hates being in the infirmary. The lion gazes down at his bandaged arm and touches the wound on his cheek, and that’s when I notice the tears that trickle down his face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Grasping his hand in mine, I place a hand on his face and gently wipe the tears away.

“It hurts…My arm…”

I turn back, giving Pumyra a worried expression over my shoulder which she matches as she comes to check him. He tenses as she unwraps the bandage, revealing the wound which is tinged red around the edges and looks very angry.

“That’s exactly what I was worried about…That’s going to require some serious antibiotics and surgery to clean out.”

“I don’t want to…”

“You need to, Lion-O. If it isn’t treated, you’ll continue to get sicker and sicker and we can’t have that. You’ll be perfectly fine and we won’t even need to put you under fully, just under local anaesthetic but you are going to need intravenous fluids and antibiotics.”

“That’s…fine…”

The young lion turns away but still grimaces when the lines are put into the back of his hand, wincing slightly as I gently rub his leg to help calm him. A medical aide brings over a set of sterilised tools and places then on the side, and the puma takes one of them and presses it against the lion’s arm.

“Can you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“Good, that means the anaesthetic is starting to work. We’ll give it another five minutes for it to set in fully.”

I look at my partner as I gently place a hand on his cheek.

“I’ll be back shortly, I’m going to go and grab you some things from your room for you, okay?”

“Alright…”

I exit the room and leave the infirmary before continuing towards the Royal Suite. The Guard stood outside opens the door, and I enter, marvelling at the spacious living area with high ceilings and a large velveteen sofa covered with thick white Chirra fur skins. The antique mahogany coffee table is highly polished but covered with weeks, if not many months’ worth of requests for meetings and audiences. I knew that Lion-O had a busy schedule but all of that responsibility on the shoulders of a person who is still legally classed as a kitten?

A knock on the door brings me to my senses, and I turn to see what’s going on as the Guardsman opens the door.

“Lady Cheetara? The Clan Elders wish to speak with His Majesty, The Lord of the Thundercats.”

“I will speak with them for now,” I reply as I step out of the room, seeing the Elders stood before me, “Good evening, gentlemen. I have noticed that you have given multiple requests for an audience with Lord Lion-O but for the current moment, I’m afraid that he is not attending any meetings right now and would prefer for you to respect his privacy for the time being.”

“The matter is important, Cheetara, as it concerns his future. Privacy can wait.”

“Insubordination like that will get you stripped of your title, Elder Az’takvis. Please respect his wishes.”

“He is required to learn soon, as he must wed before his twentieth birthday as per tradition.”

~~(Border)~~

A Week Later

“You’re definitely a lot better than you were when we got back to New Thundera.”

“Trust me, Pumyra; I feel a hell of a lot better now.”

She chuckles as I sit up in the bed, bored pretty much to tears over having been in the infirmary for a full week, recovering from the horrible viruses introduced to my body by being thrown into the pools of Castle Plun-Darr to drown. My chest is still slightly sore but Pumyra warned me that it would happen with how inflamed my lungs were and how severely I was coughing. As an added bonus, the wounds on my arm and face have healed well, although I am going to be left with permanent scars in their wake.

“The tests are all clear so you’re ready to be discharged but you need to make sure that you continue taking those antibiotic pills until the prescription runs out.”

“Understood. I just can’t wait to get out of here, I miss my own bed…”

“And being able to spend time with Cheetara?”

I feel my cheeks flaming with embarrassment at this comment but the puma is far from wrong. It’s true, I have missed the cheetah like crazy and it just seems like she’s been avoiding me for some reason ever since we returned to New Thundera and I don’t know why. I know one thing, and that’s that her lack of presence has hurt me. She seems to always be doing the monitoring station or be off on a mission while I’m awake and I really miss her.

I sign my discharge paperwork and make my way to the Control Room, hoping to catch the cheetah before returning to the Suite. I walk in and, sure enough, she’s sat at the monitor running scans on the airspace and grounds of the sectors surrounding the city. She’s very distracted, so I take this to my advantage.

“Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so busy!”

She practically jumps out of her skin, giving a strangled cry of shock and I immediately feel insane guilt at having scared her like that. Once she’s had a chance to calm down, she looks up at me and hugs me but it doesn’t feel as warm as usual.

“Finally, you’re better…”

“Thankfully. Pumyra let me sign the discharge papers and told me that as long as I continue to take my prescription of the antibiotic then I’ll be perfectly fine. How much longer do you have of your shift left? I want you to come to the Suite with me.”

“I still have a couple of hours yet. You go ahead and I’ll join you once I’ve finished.”

…

I sit myself down on the sofa, my body sinking into the comfortable plush cushions as I give a sigh of content. It dips again slightly as Cheetara sits beside me, head resting against my chest as she daintily sips at her cup of coffee. I smile, purring gently as I nuzzle the top of her head with my chin before

picking up my own cup and taking a sip. It's comforting moments like this that I treasure most when I have time for myself outside of my duties and the fights against our foes, and something about them is just so calming. I sigh happily, taking in the scent of my mate's fur – delicate and floral with notes of honey, just like how I remember the meadows of Old Thundera. However, something is very different today because the cheetah is very, very tense which is unlike her. Something must be bothering her, but what exactly?

"Lion-O, there are some things that you need to start considering…"

I gaze down into her eyes – those gorgeous amber eyes that remind me of the purest molten gold. Placing her cup down on the table before us, she adjusts her position to be able to look up at me as I take a sip of my peppermint tea.

"Such as?"

"Well, this isn't going to be an easy conversation for either of us but you turn twenty next November and the Elders are going to start pressuring you to find a lioness to take as your mate soon."

"Take a lioness as a mate? How can they suggest that? I alr-"

The sudden presence of a finger on my lips stops me mid-sentence as the cheetah sits up properly, fingers weaving together as she sits away from me slightly; I immediately miss the warmth when the area she was laying against goes cold.

"Lion-O, the Elders may be allowing you to court me at the moment but for the time being you are still a kitten…"

"'Tara…"

"Please, let me finish."

My shoulders droop as I take a deep breath in, steeling myself for what she has to say. She seems uneasy so I place a hand on her leg in way of comfort and yet when I see the faint trickle of tears streaming down her cheek, I move to hug her and she stiffens up slightly.

"Lion-O…"

I release her upon hearing the pained tone in her voice as she tries to keep her composure.

"Every Lord of the Thundercats and King of Thundera is traditionally betrothed at birth, and you will be expected to marry the one whom you are betrothed to unless you are already in an established relationship, and for you it's Princess Laila of the Alskari line. It is also tradition for you to marry your betrothed before you turn twenty."

"I don't care about tradition, Cheetara. I want to marry you! I love you so much it hurts! I've never even met this Laila."

My voice cracks as the realisation of the situation. This can't be happening to me! The cheetah gently wipes the tears from my cheek with her thumb, and I can't help but place my hand over hers.

"…Please…'Tara…"

I can see the look on her face and I know that she's hurting inside. Her lips briefly press against mine in a light kiss, and I can't stop the tears as the cheetah gets up.

"I'm sorry Lion-O…It's tradition for the Royal Family to be purebred Barbary. The Elders would never grant you permission to wed me. But you know that I'll always be there for you whenever you need me."

“There has to be another way, I’ll talk to the High Council if I need to…”

“Listen, it was the Clan Elder and High Council member Az’takvis who informed me of this; it isn’t my decision and they have the right to make decisions on your behalf until you turn twenty-one.”

I can’t see through the cascade of tears streaming down my cheeks at this point – it feels as though my heart has been torn from my chest and trampled into the dust.

“But…’Tara, we’ve slept together, surely that’s enough for us to be recognised as a pair? Our scents are on each other.”

“We may have slept in the same bed but we haven’t mated, Lion-O. That’s the only way to confirm a bond between the two people. Please, you just have to give Princess Laila Alskari a chance.”

“This is why you’ve been avoiding me, isn’t it?”

“No, I haven’t been avoiding you at all. It’s just…I’ve struggled to accept that news and I was trying to figure out how to tell you. The Elders are in the Council Chamber-”

She doesn’t get the chance to finish before I get to my feet and hastily make my way to the Council Chamber, pushing the door open and walking inside to see the Clan Elders waiting for me.

“Will somebody please explain to me what the hell is going on here? I refuse to marry somebody whom I have never met before.”

They all look up at me in shock in reaction to my sudden outburst, watching me as I sit down in my seat with a slight growl. I eye them all, the growl continuing in my chest as Elder Az’takvis clears his throat before getting to his feet. I scowl darkly at the asiatic lion, remembering the times in the past in which he had been incredibly rude and degrading towards myself and my partner.

“Your Majesty, there is something which is to be addressed today as you are of age to meet your betrothed. The relationship between yourself and Cheetara is unacceptable as cross-species breeding within the Royal Family is strictly forbidden as you need to keep your lineage to be purebred lion.”

“*To hell with tradition*! I have been planning to propose to my partner during the coming festive season and I’m not going to let this destroy my plan. Elders Lysander and Chancer both approve of the relationship between myself and her, I just can’t understand why you don’t.”

“That’s *enough*!”

I shrink back in shock at Az’takvis’ enraged outburst, feeling insignificant in the room despite my status as I feel my stomach drop. He must be very mad to yell at me like that, and I see the anger in his eyes. The eye contact lasts for several agonising minutes before the older lion continues.

“You are still a kitten, Lion-O, so it’s not expected of you to understand these ancient laws and traditions but they are to be upheld in all circumstances and you do not have the authority to withdraw them from practice. You will meet Princess Laila Alskari within the next few days to give you time to get acquainted and a wedding announcement will be expected of you in the coming months, followed by the announcement of a cub within the next year.”

…

I can’t bring myself to look at the lioness sat beside me, quickly moving my hand away when she goes to touch me. I fight against the tears threatening to spill as I glance down at the glass of champagne in

my hand. I don't even like the stuff but I'm expected to celebrate my betrothal with joy at having found a suitable mate, when all I want to do is run and hide like a scared little cub. Laila is not what I had expected but I still have no feelings for her.

The lioness is easily at least six years older than me, an age gap bigger than mine and Cheetara's and it makes me so uncomfortable. I'm not even twenty summers old yet but I'm still expected to marry and mate with this woman who I've never met – a young lion in his final year of being a teen expected to marry an adult woman in her mid twenties. Her hand roughly grasps mine, dragging back when I try to pull away from her. I glance at her in discomfort, and see the look on her face as I gulp.

"Stop behaving like a spoiled little cub! You are the King and my daughter is your intended, and you are to accept it!"

The tears start to freely flow down my cheeks when Prince Luthor Alskari hisses in my ear, scolding me heavily for not wanting any interaction from his daughter. I just sit there, sobbing silently and hoping that one of my friends notices my plight.

"Prince Luthor, may I ask you to back away from the King and for yourself and your daughter to leave him alone and give him space? Can't you see that he is noticeably extremely upset and uncomfortable?"

Luthor growls at Chancer, and the cheetah High Elder bristles slightly as he scowls in return at the slightly larger lion Prince.

"Why, so he can go running back to that niece of yours? You know that those two aren't permitted to wed as Elder Az'takvis will never allow them to."

"His Majesty King Lion-O was at his happiest when he was with Cheetara; the poor kitten is absolutely miserable with your daughter and need I remind you of the fact that she is almost ten years older than him?"

"You have no say in traditional affairs of the Barbary lions, Chancer. This betrothal was arranged when the boy was born and it cannot be broken…"

I get up from the table, excusing myself and hastily heading for the exit as I feel numerous pairs of eyes staring at me, the multitude of voices murmuring in shock.

"Lion-O Vaenaz T'savir K'al'iviryix, get back here this instant! That is an order!"

I completely ignore Luthor's yelling and hastily make my way up the grand staircase to the main floor where the suites are, not stopping until I'm outside of the Royal Suite. I nod my thanks to the guards as they open the doors for me, and once I'm inside, I peel off the uncomfortable smart clothes that I had been forced to wear for the event. Throwing the shirt to the floor, I make my way to the top of the stairs towards the bedrooms; only when I'm sat on my bed in the master room do I finally release the flood of emotions that are overwhelming me, and I cry brokenly as I curl up on my side. The bedding still smells of her and it's a small comfort, but I don't understand how they expect me to break off a relationship that has been going for a long time now.

"*It's okay, I'll talk to him.*"

I hear the quiet voice, and the door to the suite opening.

"Lion-O? Are you okay?"

I only look up when the cheetah comes into the room, and embarrassment overwhelms me at the knowledge that she's seeing me crying like a pathetic little cub. I desperately knuckle my eyes to try and stop the tears but I can't, and the bed dips as she sits down at my side. The sensation of her hand rubbing my back is very comforting and I feel myself finally starting to relax and calm down.

“There we go, that’s better…”

She sighs deeply.

“I don’t agree with this situation; seeing your reaction to Laila’s touch was enough to tell me that you are extremely uncomfortable with the thought of being in a relationship with her. But I know that it’s tradition and that we don’t have any choice.”

“I want to be with you…” I almost choke on my words as I speak into my pillow, not wanting her to see me crying anymore.

“I know that you do and the High Elders are speaking to Prince Luthor and the Lion Clan Elders to see if they can do anything about it.”

I sit up properly in the centre of the bed and pull the cheetah into my lap, nuzzling her mane with my cheek. She tenses slightly but eventually relaxes, and I gently tilt her head back before my lips brush hers, just long enough to feel the warmth of her skin and the soft floral notes of her scent. This is it, I know for sure that she’s my person.

“I need you. You are the one with whom I want to spend the rest of my life. I treasure you and every waking moment that I get to spend with you and you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You make everything feel possible and I know that, as long as I have you in my life, everything will be okay in the end. You *are* my everything and I want you to be my lifemate, the woman who I raise a family with…”

The cheetah lets out a sigh before purring softly as I nuzzle her throat with my nose, holding her close to me. The dress that she’s wearing is absolutely gorgeous, and I trail my claws up her arms to the straps holding the material up, confused by the thoughts and emotions clouding my mind as I pull them down, revealing the lavender purple bra that she’s wearing beneath.

“Lion-O. Lion-O, stop.”

I immediately cease my actions and look at her, my cheeks flushing bright red as she quickly gets up and fixes the garment back into place. I avoid eye contact for several moments as I struggle for the words to say.

“I-I’m so sorry ‘Tara, I don’t know what came over me…”

“No it’s okay, if anything, I probably encouraged you with how I was acting…I should leave before I…”

“No…Cheetara, please don’t leave.”

My hand closes around her wrist, holding her in place as she turns to look at me.

“I’m so sorry Lion-O. I love you so very much that it drives me insane some days but we both need to be ready for the possibility of not being able to break those ancient traditions…Princess Laila and her Father are looking for you.”

I can’t help but groan upon hearing this, but I know that I have to get this over and done with. Hopefully they’ll get the message that I’m not interested and leave me alone.

…

I stare up at the ceiling in discomfort, having wormed my way as close to the edge of the bed as I can but the arms wrapped around my torso are alien to me – they are not the golden-hued arms of my beloved cheetah, but those of a lioness whom I have only just met today. Her body is pressed firmly against my back and I can hear her soft purring in my ear, but all I want to do is escape. I can't stand to be here with a woman who is a complete stranger with who I have been forced to share my private chambers.

I sit up, only just managing to break the lioness's grasp on me but with sheer luck alone, Laila stays asleep. I rake my claws through my thick mane, letting out a tired grumble that slowly becomes a low, frustrated growl as I rub my face with my palm. I'm so damn exhausted but thanks to having to bed with Laila, I feel far too uncomfortable to actually fall asleep.

I carefully rise to my feet, carefully making my way over from the bed to the door, and I manage to leave without making too much noise. I close the door to my bedroom behind me, being cautious to not accidentally kick anything as I make my way to the door of the suite. I turn the handle after unlocking, and I painstakingly open the door bit by bit, checking to make sure that the coast is clear and thankfully, there is absolutely no sign of the Guards that Prince Luthor stationed at the door. Muttering a silent quiet thanks to the ancients, I gingerly push the door open further before stepping out into the corridor. I start to make my way towards Cheetara's suite, until a voice from behind catches me off-guard.

"Your Majesty, is everything okay? What are you doing up and where are you going? It is almost one in the morning and you are supposed to be asleep."

I freeze upon hearing the voice and turn to look at the ThunderGuard soldier stood right in the blind spot of the door, and I realise just how bad the situation looks – I am trying to sneak out of my own suite in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs in the middle of the night. I feel my cheeks burning under my fur, embarrassed at having been caught by the older guard.

"I can't sleep so I'm going to go for a walk…"

"Dressed like that? Sire, that is hardly the type of clothing worn for a walk. Lady Cheetara is asleep as are the other Thundercats; a kitten like yourself should be asleep too."

"I'm not a kid anymore, Asila. I know that Father had you guarding me and Leo but I don't need it anymore, I'm almost a fully-grown cat."

Asila follows me without a word, keeping quiet as he always does which greatly annoys me. Eventually I reach Cheetara's suite when I feel the older lion's hand on my shoulder.

"Lion-O, my King, I promise that Princess Laila will not hear a word of this and I do not agree with the forced betrothal."

I nod my thanks before walking into the suite. The cheetah's scent is heavy in the air and it makes my heart leap as I take it in, mouth hung open ever-so-slightly. I make my way to the bedroom before carefully opening the door and walking inside, seeing that the bed is empty but the light of the en-suite bathroom is on.

I knock on the door and it opens. Cheetara looks surprised to see me as she looks up at me.

"Lion-O, what in Jaga's name are you doing here? You need to go back to your own suite before anybody finds you here!"

I stand there in the doorway, stubbornly refusing to leave as she slips past me, blushing deeply whilst fixing her nightgown back into place. This isn't like her, what's going on? She's never objected to my presence in her personal suite before.

"I can't, 'Tara. Laila tried to…tried to…" I take a shaky breath as I try to look anywhere but at her, knowing that seeing her beautiful face will make me break down but I finally manage to compose myself, albeit barely, before continuing, "She tried to mate with me and got mad when I told her no. She's rough, she's mad, and to make it all worse, she's in the throes of heat too so she's all over me. I just need to get away…It reminds me of…of my uncle…"

"I told you, you can't stay here and you need to go back. We can't be together Lion-O!"

"I don't care, I need you! You are the only woman who I love and I can't bear to imagine my life without you by my side. Without you, I have absolutely nothing…"

I can't go any further before I start to cry, and I can't tell if they are tears of rage or pain. Curse those elders for springing this upon us the way that they have. We live in modern times nowadays and so shouldn't those ancient laws be obsolete by this point?

"I won't say it again, Lion-O."

"I can't go back, 'Tara. I don't feel safe being there with Laila at all because she's just walking all over me to try and get what she wants from me. Not to mention the uncomfortable amount of attention that she's been giving me. I'm pretty sure that she tried to drug me!"

This makes Cheetara stop and look back at me in shock.

"What?"

"She was trying to make me drink this glass of wine and I almost did until I saw this strange crystalline residue in my glass."

"You didn't drink any of it, did you?"

"No. No, I didn't know what it was so I didn't want to risk it…Besides, I just don't really like wine…I also overheard her talking to her father about how they're going to have you shipped out to Third Earth on the next mission and have you stay there permanently…"

The cheetah pulls me down so that I'm sitting on the edge of the bed with her, my hands held in hers. The closeness of her body to mine sends such incredible sensations throughout my entire being, but I can't help feeling nothing but shame. How can I possibly feel that way towards her right now during such a serious time? My mind and judgement are obviously clouded from being around a lioness in heat.

I feel her hand against my cheek, and words don't need to be uttered as she nuzzles her nose into my neck, sending a jolt of electricity throughout my entire body as I gasp. I know that the decision to wed me to Laila is being investigated by the High Council but it can't happen quickly enough. I make a mental note to request that Laila be kept away from me for future days until the Council overturns the betrothal but for now, all that is of interest to me is sleep and the warmth of the cheetah in my arms. My eyes are incredibly heavy and my eyes feel so sore and dry from exhaustion.

Her lips press against mine, and I can't stop the loud purr of absolute delight that escapes my throat. Maybe tonight will be the night? No, we can't…I can't. Both desire and fear war deep within me at the same time, and I struggle to keep my composure as the cheetah's hands wander over my back, claws lazily trailing through my fur. The fear grips me suddenly, and I push the cheetah away as I gasp, trying my hardest to calm myself down before I have a panic attack.

"Hey, hey. Easy. Breathe. *Breathe*."

The cheetah soothes me as best she can and I eventually manage to calm down.

"I'm so sorry Cheetara, I had no idea I'd react like that…I'm not ready…"

"And Laila tried to force you…"

"She refused to take no as an answer and she kept biting me too…"

We pay back against the soft cushions, staring up at the ceiling as I sigh deeply.

"I can't do it, 'Tara. I can't marry Laila."

"So you keep saying."

"We're completely incompatible and she just treats me like a little boy, even though she kept trying to force me to drink alcohol. She wanted me drunk and there was definitely some nasty motive behind that."

I roll onto my side and take in the beauty before me. She looks at me then, her golden eyes showing nothing but love as I reach out and brush a stray lock of her soft blonde mane from her face.

"Fate dealt us one hell of a hand when we ended up in a relationship. The Gods blessed us that day."

"I was eleven years old when you and your brother were born. I remember holding you in my arms, you were tiny for a Barbary cub…"

She sighs before getting up again, and I go to follow until I realise that she's taking her robe off, revealing the red silk gown beneath.

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to but the invitation is there."

"I want to." I say, rather quickly, watching as she climbs back into bed. She moves some of the decorative cushions to make space for me, and so I join her under the covers, laying down on the soft pillows. Finally feeling safe. The cheetah cuddles close to me, resting the side of her face on my chest with a contented purr.

"Try to sleep, Lion-O. You'll feel better in the morning."

I hear Cheetara murmur, her voice like honey as I close my eyes. My body relaxes and it's only then that I realise just how tense I've been. I don't care about how much trouble I will probably get into with the Asiatic Elder or Prince Luthor and if they try to go after Cheetara for this then I swear I will give them an earful. I curl up, one of my legs placed between hers as I feel myself starting to drift away with her gentle purring in my ears with my chin resting atop her head, nestled in her mane…

…

I wake up to golden sunlight pouring in through the gaps in the curtains accompanied by the soft, quiet purring of my bedmate. I stretch out, banishing the dull ache in my joints with a lazy roar as I roll to my side and take in the beauty resplendent before me. Cheetara is seemingly fast asleep behind me, hands still loosely grasping my chest and I remember how we fell asleep in each other's arms. Her mane gently cascades down her back and chest, resting about her shoulders like a pool of the finest honey and I can't help but smile as I make myself comfortable once again.

"*Lion-O…*"

I give a soft smile at hearing the cheetah lovingly murmur my name in her sleep, and as I lay down again, she snuggles back into my chest. That is, however, until I hear the shouting from the corridor which unsurprisingly wakes her from her sleep as she looks at me groggily.

"Lion-O…What's happening?"

"I don't know…" I stretch again as I sit up with another lazily roared yawn, "But if I had to guess, I'd say Laila has just noticed that I'm not in my own bed."

I get up and go to investigate with Cheetara behind me. I stop dead in my tracks and turn around, seeing a very pissed off Laila marching towards me, eyes burning with rage. Her long red mane is tidily braided down her back and the near-sheer material of her gown clings to the curves of her body. Any normal man would be head-over-heels for a woman like her, but not me.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing, sleeping with my betrothed!"

I catch the lioness's fist in my hand before she has the chance to lay a finger on the younger cheetah, and I glare down at her with my own growl.

"You do *not* attack my friends, Laila; it will not end well for you."

The lioness just hisses wildly, her pupils the tiniest slits and her claws out fully – she is definitely enraged by this. She manages to wriggle free, and I feel the sharp pain of claws raking through my skin as I grunt in pain with blood trickling down my cheek. My anger flares uncontrollably from the pain and stench of my own blood and it takes all of my willpower to not lose my cool and lash out.

"Is everything okay, my King?"

I look back and see Asila coming round the corner, followed closely by Prince Luthor and High Elder Lysander. The trio of Barbary lions come to a stop in front of me but before I get a chance to even begin to explain myself, Laila immediately begins on a tirade about how she woke up to an empty bed. Talk about jealousy.

"Laila, I told you multiple times last night that I was not comfortable with you sleeping in the suite, let alone my bed. I barely know you and I don't have any feelings for you!"

Before I can react, she lashes out and manages to go for Cheetara, and both women are on the floor fighting as I try my hardest to separate the pair. I grab hold of the back of Laila's nightgown and haul her off of the cheetah, who looks incredibly angry as Luthor steps forward, his expression that of scorn as he regards me.

"You were told of the traditions at last night's dinner celebrations, Lion-O, and to go running back to your sleazy previous mate is adultery in its finest. I should have Cheetara arrested for interfering-"

I let loose a roar which echoes through the entire corridor, shocking even Luthor into silence. My chest heaves as I try to calm myself, but the anger boiling deep inside is threatening to surface.

“Get out of my Lair and never return. Both you and your daughter, I never want to hear from or see either of you again.”

Luthor growls and squares up, preparing to question my authority.

“By law, you are not allowed to-”

“*Did I fucking stutter*? Leave. Before I have the ThunderGuard escort you from the premises like I should have done last night.”

“Lion-O K’al’iviryix, you listen here you spoiled little-”

It boils over.

It takes the combined strength and effort of both Asila and another ThunderGuard member to stop me from charging at and attacking the older lion, but I still let out a deep, threatening rumble of a growl.

“I will not tell you again, but thanks to your insubordination, you have left me no choice but to have you forcibly removed. Guards, please remove this man and his daughter from my presence and see to it that they are escorted off of the Lair’s grounds. I give you my full permission to perform an arrest should they refuse to comply…” I growl, breathing deeply as to not lose my cool in front of the Elder of my clan. Luthor and Laila’s protests can be heard as they are led out, and only then do I dare breathe out before turning to Lysander.

“Elder Lysander, what brings you here today, this early in the morning?”

“I decided that I would visit to bring the good news in person. The High Council have overturned the betrothal as it is plain that Laila is most definitely unsuitable and the agreement was forced upon your Father when he lost your Mother.”

“That explains it all…Thank you Lysander. You’ve saved me from a lifetime of grief and suffering.”

Cheetara glances up at me as the Elder leaves, and I see that her cheek is already starting to come out in a bruise. I gently pull the cheetah towards me and look at it as she sharply inhales from the pain. I gently grasp her hand in mine and lead her back into her suite, sitting her down at the small table by the kitchenette as I search through the freezer.

“What are you looking for?”

“Ice or something cold to help the bruising go down…”

“There’s a cold compress in the bottom drawer of the fridge…”

I find what I’m looking for and wrap it in a small kitchen towel before walking back to Cheetara’s side and gently placing it against her cheek as she gasps in pain. Her free hand rests atop mine, thumb rubbing the back of my palm as she glances up at me.

“I wasn’t expecting that from her…”

“Neither was I but it goes to show that she is most definitely the jealous type. I just can’t believe she demanded to sleep in your bed with you on the first night of meeting you. If anything, I think she was hoping to trap you in a relationship with a cub…”

I sigh as I check the bruise, and I notice the trickle of blood. I grab a square of paper towel and daub at the graze as the cheetah sighs.

“You’re going to make an amazing dad one day when you’re older.”

“Only if those cubs are mine and yours…”

The cheetah blushes, her cheeks turning red as I grin sheepishly. I’m not wrong though, as much as I would love to have kids, I only want them if they are a product of our relationship. After the little issue brought on by Elder Az’takvis, I definitely want to guarantee that nothing is going to come between myself and my mate.

“I need to go to the Parliament Building in the city later today to annul that betrothal in order to end it officially. I don’t know if maybe you’d be interested in joining me? We could pay a visit to that bakery that we both love?”

“The one run by that lovely human couple?”

“That exact one.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Okay then, we’ll leave shortly after breakfast.”

…

Here, I'll forgive my thoughts now
Steer it, 'cause I forget the dots now

Was it all any more faded after all?
I don't know, I don't know, I don't know
Are you sure, did you call, or did we ever really talk?
I don't know, I don't know, I don't know
I don't know, I don't

Dear, I wouldn't bet your heart down
Clear, but I couldn't get my head around

Was it all any more faded after all?
I don't know, I don't know, I don't know
Are you sure, did you call, or did we ever really talk?
I don't know, I don't know, I don't know

I've been awake in every state line
Dyin' to make it last us a lifetime
Tryin' to shake that it's all on an incline
Find me a way, I'll be yours in a landslide

State Lines – Novo Amor