Gaining Perspective

By Lyngard

Aftermath

Lion-O

We moved as one, no words and single purpose: find out what in Thundera had gotten into Cheetara. I was on the landing of the secondary set of stairs when I detected it, fresh and metallic. Looking down I saw a large, crimson droplet shaped like a comet in flight. I stopped; Tygra halted directly behind me.

I bent down to take a closer look. My fingers came away smeared with still wet blood. “I scented it as well,” the tiger spoke, his tone matter-of-fact.

“Is this why she’s acting so strangely? Is she hurt?” I wondered out loud.

“There is only one way to find out,” Tygra answered, and we both began our hunt anew. “At least, we can track her more precisely.”

I remained silent at his observation. Tracking Cheetara from her blood didn’t make me feel any better. We followed her trail further up the stairs. There was a strong scent of blood mixed with the cheetah’s unique essence at the entrance leading to the dormitories, and we began down the hallway toward her room but stopped after a few short steps.

“She didn’t go this way,” Tygra growled; there was worry in his voice that hadn’t been there a few seconds ago. I felt myself stiffen at his tone.

“She must have lingered here for more than a moment deciding though,” I pointed to the small pool of blood at the hallway entrance. “Up?”

“Well unless she’s figured out how to teleport, I’d say so.”

“She must be heading to the Cat’s head. There is nothing else up here.” Tygra’s response was lost in the not-so-subtle growl of the Sword of Omens. I felt my jaw clench tightly. That was the sound to warn of danger. I removed the sword from my clawshield and raised it to my eyes. I swallowed hard to dislodge thoughts that were already streaming into my head and commanded, “Sword of Omens, give me sight beyond sight.”

A chaotic mist filtered into my head as I bade the sword to guide me to the source of its unease. Slowly, an image coalesced. *Cheetara stood at the observation point at the edge of the Cat’s mouth. A breeze ruffled her hair, and she grasped the safety railing tightly, leaning heavily on to it.*

“By the stars, is she thinking about jumping?”

“Lion-O,” Tygra exclaimed, anxiety lacing his voice, “What do you see?”

The cheetah slowly fell to her knees near the platform.

“Be calm,” I told Tygra. He could not see the images presented to me, and my words had probably inspired his own imagination to the worst of conclusions.

She ripped her cloak from her shoulders and wrapped it around her bloody hand. Her head bowed, and she appeared to shake uncontrollably.

I pulled the sword away and found intent, sienna eyes staring at me. “Cheetara is at the Cat’s head,” I confirmed. “She is hurt, her hand. It does not appear to be clotting.” I slid the sword into its sheath and started up the stairs. We had a destination now, so the hunt by scent was no longer necessary. There was franticness to my pace. I had not told Tygra all I had seen. The cheetah’s obvious distress coiled through my gut making it difficult to breathe. *What in Jaga’s name was going on?*

Cheetara

I paused on the landing leading to my bedroom. No, I would not be safe there. It would be one of the first places they would look. I half stumbled, half-ran further up the stairs. I didn’t have a destination in mind. I wanted to escape, escape my thoughts and escape my actions.

I found myself at the Cat’s head observation deck. I barely managed to grab the safety field before sinking to my knees. Exhaustion coursed through me. I had run my limit more than once today. I could go no further and would be paying for my actions for days.

You’ll be paying for your actions for the rest of your life.

“Shut-up,” I snarled, my breath coming out as a whimper. Pain, penetrating and angry, fought for my attention, and I looked to my throbbing hand. Blood ran through my knuckles and plodded in droplets on the ground. I opened my clenched, bloodied fist and studied my palm. Several vicious slashes welling with crimson ran its length. The cuts were deep; the blood showed no sign of slowing.

Blood on your hands. Our blood.

I tried to ignore the voice, but it grated deeply, cutting more so than even my physical wounds. My good hand grabbed the cloak wrapping my shoulders and tore it from them. I balled the material around my hand hoping to stem the flow. I felt queasy and lightheaded. I shoved my hand, bandage and all, under my arm and increased pressure. *Stupid!* I yelled silently at myself. *How could you have been so stupid?*

They are going to find out, the voice taunted in singsong. *Murderer!*

Two sets of footfalls rang up the last of the stairs and onto the observation platform. Tiredly, I lifted my head to regard not only Tygra but Lion-O as well. A bolt of anxiety laced with pride ran up my spine, and I felt myself move to standing, although how I managed to stay upright on my two very uncooperative legs was a mystery.

“Cheetara,” Lion-O was the first to speak, sounding breathless from the trek up the several flights of stairs.

I did not return an answer. I stood watching and waiting. Anger at their pursuit of me began to burn in my stomach.

“You’re hurt,” Tygra spoke, indicating my hand wrapped in its blood soaked cloth.

“Clearly,” I said, pleased that my voice held strong.

“Let’s get you down to sickbay and have a look at it.” His suggestion came with several steps in my direction.

“Oh, yes, let’s.” The tiger stopped at the sarcasm dripping in my words. “And then, we can simply sweep everything else under the carpet. It is the ThunderCat way after all.”

Tygra

Cheetara radiated anger from every pore. I knew my spotted companion well enough to see that she was girding herself with that emotion. *She’s trying to pick a fight, but why?* I refused to be baited and simply looked at her. “That has never been the ThunderCat way.”

My calm, reasonable voice did not soothe her in anyway. In fact, it appeared to spurn her even further. An accusing hand shot out at me, and she spat, “You did this!”

“Did what?” I asked, keeping her attention focused on me while Lion-O began to skirt toward her out of her field of vision.

“If you had allowed me to take the watch duty, none of this would have happened. But, you dismissed me.” Even with the venom in her voice, I could see she didn’t believe her own words.

“If I had allowed you to take watch duty, I would have simply aided you in running away from this.” I wasn’t sure what the “this” was, but I needed to see if the topic would lead us to answers.

“Oh yes, a public spectacle is such a nice way to bring personal things out in the open.” Her glittering eyes caught sight of Lion-O, and she turned to regard him. “I’m sure Pumyra was thrilled to be part of the drama.”

“Drama, you inspired, Cheetara,” Lion-O’s voice was low, directing her attention on to him now, so I could start my way in toward her.

The cheetah felt us encroaching and took a step, backing into the safety field. I stopped my approach as her eyes gleamed with a sudden, maddened light. Cornering Cheetara on good days was never a great idea. Today would be worse; she was irrational either by injury or something else. Lion-O's words echoed somewhere in the back of my head, "*Is she thinking of jumping?"*

Lion-O must have had the same thought. He too stopped moving toward her. "You're hurt," he spoke gently as if talking to a newborn cub. "You've lost a lot of blood already. Please, let us help you."

Cheetara whirled at him. Had she been any closer, I would have expected a physical blow. "You cannot help me!" she screamed. Her makeshift bandage, the rich amber fabric stained a burnt orange from her blood, slipped, falling to the floor in an unnoticed heap. Both of her hands reached to her ThunderCat symbol and ripped it from her bodice. "Take this," she pleaded, holding it out to Lion-O, "I am unfit to wear it."

Lion-O froze, looking dumbstruck at the medallion. He made no move to take it from Cheetara's trembling hands. She threw it at him, and he had no choice but to catch it.

Lion-O

Even though I hadn't intended to take it, I deftly caught the ThunderCat medallion as it came at me with force. The smooth red surface was marred with wet streaks of Cheetara's blood that was still pouring from her wounded hand. I closed my eyes briefly as a wave of pain, not mine but hers, coursed through me. Just because I held the insignia did not mean that I would keep it.

"This is yours," I handed it back out to her, and Cheetara took another step backward away from me. Her back fell flat against the safety field, and she shook her head in denial, making no move to retrieve her symbol.

I swallowed hard, pushing away the warring emotions flooding my brain. "I refuse to accept this." Cheetara went still at my words. The fight simmering in her eyes vacillated to something that I couldn't label. Perhaps, her resolve was fading. "You earned this," I tried again.

Cheetara laughed; the sound was incongruous with merriment and rang hollowly with despair. "I might have once earned my place among you," her voice graveled in a waver, "But I lost that honor a long time ago."

"Cheetara, please, you're not making any sense."

Cheetara

"I'm making more sense that I have in a long time. You know, I should thank you," I paused at the look of bewilderment decorating Lion-O's face.

"What? Why?" The two questions tumbled from his lips in rapid succession.

“You were the catalyst that brought all of this to light.”

Both Lion-O and Tygra stood mute with confusion. Tygra recovered first, “Brought what to light?”

“When Lion-O asked me to go back, to see, Pumyra, Bengali and Lynx-O, I did.”

“Yes,” Lion-O interrupted, “If it hadn’t been for you, we would have never known that others survived the explosion. It is we who should be thanking you.”

I held up my hand in order to stop the words coming from his lips, but he did not heed me. His gratitude burned me to the core. ”You don’t know the whole story.” My voice dropped an octave with the admission.

A certain dawning light entered Tygra’s eyes. “He was too young to remember, Cheetara, but I do.” The comfort the tiger offered in his voice was almost my undoing. “I remember,” his voice was like silk, pulling at me. I was feeling so tired suddenly. I felt my knees buckle, and Lion-O’s strong arms around me, keeping me from striking the floor.

“No,” I protested, pushing from his hold. I twisted out of his arms only to be caught again by Tygra. My sixth sense flared, and inexplicably, I found the means to forcibly push the males away from me. My strength at a bare minimum, I sunk to my knees.

“Let me be.” My demand sounded more like a plea as I tried to catch my breath from the effort. I settled my gaze on the dazed tiger. “You remember, but you do not know the whole truth.”

“Then tell us,” Lion-O urged.

“Do you remember when the mutants attacked us right after Thundera?” I asked.

Lion-O nodded his head slowly, giving pause as he always did at the mention of our doomed home world. “The mutants attacked our convoy of ships. They destroyed the fleet traveling with the flagship and then boarded our vessel. It was the first time I used the Sword of Omens.”

The clarity of Lion-O’s memory was better than I would have thought. But, what he remembered was so very disjointed. “Cheetara,” there was a soft pleading in Tygra’s voice; he knew more. “You don’t have to relive that.”

“I already have,” I answered, not missing the confusion in Lion-O’s eyes. “You are correct about the events,” I told the lion. “But, you are also missing gaps of the story. My clan, my entire clan, was on the ships that protected our vessel.”

“Sweet Jaga,” Lion-O’s sharp intake of breath caught me off guard. That he was able to piece so much together in that one sentence spoke volumes on how he had matured. He stepped closer to me in an attempt to offer support, comfort. However, the look of pity in his eyes gave me the strength to stave him off.

“There is more,” I warned, relieved to see him pause. “Things that neither of you know. It is this that makes me unworthy of your guard.”

I looked to Tygra. “This involves you,” I whispered, already feeling the tears stinging my eyes. “I had a secret. I hadn’t shared it with anyone, not my family, not my friends, and not even Kijani.” I could see Lion-O attempting to place the name, and I explained, “Kijani was my mate.”

Lion-O stepped back as if he had been physically struck. He had not known that I was once pledged to another. There was undisguised hurt on his face. If this revelation tore him, then my next one would certainly shatter him. “There was a reason I didn’t want to enter the stasis capsule. I almost told Jaga, but I lost my nerve. When you held my hand,” tears were streaming down my face, making my vision of Tygra’s face only a mismatch of orange and white streaked with black, “And you escorted me to the pod, I kept my silence.”

I swiped at my face, not noticing the trail of crimson mixing with tears tracking down my cheeks. “I never told Kijani,” I was mumbling now. My eyes fluttered closed as I swooned slightly. It was getting hard to concentrate. I was hot and cold and getting so confused.

“I should have told him, you. I’m sorry.” I just wanted to rest, sleep. But, I had to complete my confession. I looked up to where the males had been standing, but I could see nothing. I barely felt myself rise from the floor. Strong arms, warm body held me close, the heartbeat strong and soothing. “I am the last of my kind,” my voice rasped. I could barely hear myself over the pounding in my head. “There were two, but no more; the stasis pod wasn’t meant for; I killed them; they died and I forgot…”

Tygra:

As Cheetara fell into unconsciousness, Lion-O moved quickly picking her up. His face was a cloud of grief for the cheetah, for all she had suffered and our inability to help. I tapped the communicator on my bolo whip immediately making contact with the control room.

“Snarfer, at your service,” the bright reply was such a contrast to the mood of our room that I had to swallow hard before I could speak.

“Snarfer,” I was startled at the deadened tone in my voice, but I plodded through with the communiqué. “We have an emergency. Please have Pumyra meet us in sickbay.”

“Right away, Tygra,” came the reply, suddenly somber and worried. I heard a few clicks of keys and the message being relayed to Pumyra. Terminating the call, I hurried alongside Lion-O toward the lift. As soon as I caught up with him, the elevator arrived. We entered, neither of us speaking, worry permeating the small space.

Things that didn’t make sense at the time lit with a clarity that was almost blinding. *How had I not known?* Everything clicked. Her hesitancy to enter the stasis pod wasn’t from worry about Jaga or even the claustrophobia for which she was famous, but because she was with cubs. And,

then she had been so sick after we crash-landed here on Third Earth. She had bled for over a week. We thought it was because of how the pod affected her circadian rhythms. *It hadn't been a complication from the pods at all. Gods of Thundera, she had miscarried!*

The realization struck so hard that I staggered under the weight of the knowledge that suddenly I would have given anything not to possess. The door to the lift slid open, and we moved quickly down the corridor to the bay. I stopped when I heard Pumyra running from the other direction.

"Tygra," she hailed, out of breath, "What's happened?"

"Cheetara," I pointed into the room where Lion-O had carried the cheetah.

"By the Ancients," Pumyra swore when she looked into the room. Her eyes traveled over the blood covering Lion-O and tracked further to the unconscious Cheetara. "What happened?" she demanded as she immediately began pulling supplies from various cupboards.

"I, we, she," Lion-O stammered.

I walked in and put a supportive hand on the Lord of the ThunderCat's shoulder. "We think she injured her hand when she shattered the glass on the table."

Pumyra immediately began examining the wound that was still hemorrhaging through the various lacerations covering Cheetara's palm. Grabbing a handful of gauze, the puma applied pressure to the wounds. "Hold this," Pumyra ordered Lion-O, replacing her hand for his. "Not gently," she growled, squeezing his hand firmly around the gauze already becoming saturated with blood.

"Tygra," I jumped at my name being used.

"Get her on O2, and where is the surgical hemostat?"

"Here," I opened a drawer and pulled out a container. I was relieved to be doing something. As Pumyra moved Lion-O out of the way and began applying the hemostat to the bleeders in Cheetara's hand, I set up an oxygen cannula. I knew that the cheetah had lost a lot of blood, and as I finished my task, I quickly moved to the small refrigeration unit. "We all have banked blood," I said removing a bag.

"Good thing," Pumyra practically snarled as she worked feverishly to stem the bleeding. "Gods, she clipped both veins and an artery."

Lion-O looked lost. Knowing that he needed something to do, I tapped him on the shoulder. He startled at my touch. "Here," I said holding out the bag to him, "I need your help with this. We need to warm it before we can get this into her." I showed him the machine and demonstrated with a bag of IV solution.

I looked back at Pumyra who was now washing the cheetah's wound with a sterile saline. She looked up at me, and I felt a brief relief slide through me. "I've got the bleeders to stop," she explained, "But I need to make sure there are no glass shards embedded. Will you stand by to help?"

Lion-O

Through the small observation window, I watched as Pumyra finished her tasks. She readjusted two IV lines pumping fluids and antibiotics into Cheetara. After checking the fluid levels, she made several notations on a tablet and placed the medical chart at the end of the occupied bed. I moved away from the door as Pumyra opened it.

A gentle smile played on the puma's lips as she regarded me. "Have you eaten anything?"

I barely shook my head in the form of a negative. "Come on," Pumyra coaxed, putting an arm around my broad shoulders. She had to stand on her tiptoes to reach. Even with her gentle persuasion and assistance to leave, I felt myself not complying. My eyes locked back to the small portal in the door. Only Pumyra's hand on my face forced me to look away.

"She's sleeping," the healer promised, dragging my eyes back to focus on her rather than the small window they had tracked back toward. "You're exhausted. You need sleep and food."

"I took the shower," I grumbled in defense.

She smiled at me and shook her head. "Just because you follow one order does not give you the right to ignore my other ones."

"I don't want to go," I admitted. "I don't want her to be alone."

"Who said she'd be alone?"

"You *have* to be here," I tried to explain, looking for answers even for myself.

"Tygra told me what happened," Pumyra confessed. I must have given her an ambiguous look because she continued, "The whole story, not just how she cut her hand. I was there for that; remember?" I must have closed my eyes against her words because I felt her hand gently squeeze my shoulder in response. "You didn't know."

"That doesn't matter," I growled, the anger in my voice directing back onto myself. "I do now, and that doesn't matter either!"

Pumyra stepped away from me, her copper eyes glistening with emotion. "I don't believe you just said that."

I ran my hands through my mane as I rethought my choice of words. The healer was right; I was so tired I couldn't formulate a sentence that made any sense. "Of course, it matters, but my knowledge of what happened doesn't change anything. I haven't been a very good friend." The admission cost me my composure, and I choked back the sob that almost made it through my clenched teeth.

"Do you want to stay?"

The fact that Pumyra was even granting me a chance to ask spoke volumes. "Please," I whispered.

Pumyra bent her head. "She'll be sleeping for awhile now. The anesthesia from the surgery on her hand will take some time to metabolize from her system. It is for the best that she gets as much rest as possible. Her body still needs time to repair itself from the amount of blood she lost."

A soft grunt from the doorway brought both of our attentions to focus on Tygra holding a tray filled with steaming cups. Pumyra motioned him to enter and gracefully took the loaded tray from him. "Snarf would be undeterred," the tiger explained as Pumyra placed the platter on a low table surrounded by a couch and additional chairs. The puma slid onto the sofa and waited for us to take our seats as well.

"Thank goodness for that," Pumyra breathed as she inhaled the aroma of savory soup and the equally enticing herbal tea next to it.

Tygra sent me a bemused look. It wasn't often that a ThunderCat showed his or her gratitude for our resident snarf. Tygra handed me a cup of each item and took a set for himself as well. After a quick sip from the steaming mug, he asked, "How is she?"

Pumyra looked up at him and smiled hesitantly. "Physically, her recovery looks good although I won't know until she wakes up the extent of nerve damage, if any."

Tygra nodded and sipped in silence from his mug. There was a lull as we all fell into our own thoughts. I closed my eyes realizing that this was the first chance I had to rest. I was exhausted. I heard Pumyra say something, but I kept my eyes firmly closed until the door leading to the sickbay room opened and closed again. I cracked my eyes to find Tygra looking at me with what I could only describe as a guarded look.

"I'm awake," I growled softly, pushing myself to an upright position from where I had slumped.

Tygra made a noncommittal grunt. I noticed his gaze shift back to the sickbay as well. Although I wasn't relishing the answer, I finally decided to broach the subject that we had all been dancing around or outright denying. "Tygra," the tiger's eyes locked back to mine at the seriousness projecting in my voice. "What she said. Is it true?"

Tygra took his time answering. He seemed to shift in his chair as he sifted for the correct words. “The Acinonyx Clan ends with Cheetara.”

He could see the finality of his statement’s affect on me as my head tipped against my chest under the weight of his words. “What Cheetara said is true. The Acinonyx Clan was charged with the safe passage of the flagship. When the mutants attacked, they wiped out the clan. Cheetarta knows this first hand. The assault triggered her sixth sense. When they died, she felt it – all of them.

“Cheetara already told you that she was mated. When a mate-bond is established, it is both physical and psychic in nature. But the Acinonyx were a unique clan. They each possessed a gift of psionics, usually not as strong as Cheetara’s has the potential to be, but these powers allowed for an interwoven rapport with each clan member, a psionic kinship.

“It is traumatic enough when your life mate is ripped from you. Add to that an entire clan psionic bond, and the result is indescribable. I hope that you never see or experience such a tragedy.”

I attempted to digest all of the information that Tygra provided. I couldn’t even begin to understand the ramifications. There was so much of the clan system of which I was unaware. I suddenly wondered what other traditions and clanship information I was lacking. But, Cheetara had said more. Things I didn’t want confirmed but needed to be.

“Then when she said there were two but no more, she was talking about being pregnant?” The hesitancy and quietness in my voice were the only betrayals of my feelings for the injured cheetah.

Tygra’s head dipped in sorrow. “Yes, but it is far worse, I fear.” Tygra’s words sparked a gaping hole in my gut, and I sat sharply upright as he continued. “Long before any of this, the Acinonyx Clan was in danger. For some unknown reason, their numbers were already decreasing. They mate for life, yet their pairings usually only produced one set of offspring, twins.”

“Twins,” I muttered. Could the information get any worse? Had Cheetara not suffered enough? “She lost them both. How could *you* have not known?” The roar of my final statement took me off-guard. It was filled with rage, displaced and full of grief and directed at the only other person in the room.

Tygra bowed his head. I could see that he was having as hard of a time handling all of this as I was. He held his composure better than I. When he looked at me, the tears shimmering in his eyes were the only testament of how much guilt he was feeling. “We had no true indications. Cheetara never said anything. When she was sick, after the crash…”

Tygra’s voice broke as a memory washed over me. We had all been worried about the cheetah. She had insisted it was a product of the suspension capsule, and being the only adult female among us, we knew no better. “Did she know?” my voice was a hushed whisper.

“I don’t think so, not at the time. You have to remember, that of the adults Cheetara is the youngest of us, present company excluded. She was only twenty-two cycles when Kijani and the rest were lost to us. I can only guess that the trauma of losing her mate, her clan, buried the memories deeply in her subconscious.”

“And, when I asked her about Bengali, Pumyra, and Lynx-O, I tore open those old wounds and brought everything to light.” Bitter self-recrimination saturated my words.

“You didn’t know,” the voice was a soft wash of comfort coming from the door to the sickbay that neither of us had heard open. I looked up hoping to see her, but found the kind face of the healer instead. Pumyra walked further into the room and placed a gentle hand on each of us. “Neither of you knew. And, from what I can gather, at the time, Cheetara didn’t know either.”

Both Tygra and I bore Pumyra’s words stoically. Whether or not she spoke the truth, it didn’t absolve us of our guilt. And while we were not responsible for the events leading up to the tragedy, we were responsible for our actions following. I knew something was wrong, yet I could not coax Cheetara’s confidence. As if Pumyra read my thoughts, she continued, “You cannot help unless she asks for it.”

Tygra stood. “She did come to me. Or tried to. I was too intent on the ceremony what it meant; I didn’t think, didn’t see.” His words tapered off to a harsh whisper. Pumyra walked over to him and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. The tiger shook off the small token of comfort.

“You can’t blame yourself,” Pumyra began, knowing that her words were falling on deaf ears. “Do you think that Cheetara blames you? Or you?” the puma asked her eyes traveling to look in mine. Both Tygra and I lowered our heads bearing the truth of her words.

“I don’t. And, I’m sure she doesn’t either. Now, when you are done with your pity party, you,” the healer pointed at me, “can go inside. I put the cot in there for a reason. Use it. But don’t you set foot in there until you can offer support instead of guilt.”

Pumyra then turned to Tygra. “You can relieve him later. Right now, we need to talk to the others. We respect Cheetara’s privacy on other matters, but everyone else is worried and would appreciate the update on her condition. Then, you’re going to get some sleep.” With an arm draped around the tiger’s shoulder, the puma herded him from the room.

Cheetara

Red, fiery hair splayed across the side of my narrow bed. Some of the tendrils were almost close enough to reach, if my hand weren’t wrapped in what felt like yards of dressing and gauze. Even if I could get the hand to move, I had already discovered that any motion caused enough pain to jar me fully awake. Something I was not quite willing to do to the slumbering lion resting on my bed.

My brain felt muddled. My other hand was tethered to two different IV lines pumping fluids into my body. Very carefully, I moved it into my field of vision. My Acinonyx markings contrasted vividly with the pallor of my skin. My clothing had been traded for a treatment gown.

Other than some throbbing in my bandaged hand, I had no other pain. Yet, at the moment, I wasn't sure why I was lying in Pumyra's sickbay. Tiredly, I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to drift. Perhaps, if I didn't try too hard, things would become clearer.

Thundera. Kinetic fireball. Electrical fire. Metal explosion. Pain. Crimson blood. Loss. Death. "She is not and never will be my sister!"

My eyes opened abruptly, stemming the overriding memories and emotions and replacing them with the sights and sounds of the Cat's Lair sickbay. I remembered. The lion at my side shifted and pushed himself from the mattress. My eyes locked with his worried ones.

"Hey," he said, his voice still laden with the last vestiges of sleep rumbling deeper than its usual cadence.

I managed a half smile; at least, I hoped that is what it looked like. I didn't trust my voice at the moment. Memories of the distant past mingling with those of the much too recent past were too fresh in my mind's eye to not be reflected in my speech. My eyes betrayed me though.

"Are you in pain?" Lion-O asked, checking the monitors and preparing to go get assistance, presumably from Pumyra.

I shook my head negatively and reached out my hand to stop him. I had forgotten about the bandages. I made an involuntary gasp of pain that stopped the lion in his tracks. "Yes, you are," he asserted, but instead of continuing on his way, he returned to my side.

"Only when I move," I admitted, my voice came as a fracturing rasp.

"Do you remember what happened?"

I thought about pretending I didn't. It would make life so much easier even if just for this moment. But, then again, those secrets had cost me so much already. "Cut my hand on the glass."

Lion-O nodded, but his eyes searched my face. He was trying to determine how much more I remembered.

I closed my eyes against his penetrating gaze. "I remember everything else too."

I felt a gentle hand slide against my cheek, catching a tear before it disappeared in my hair. I swallowed hard and brought my eyes to meet Lion-O's. "I'm sorry."

“You’re sorry?” his voice rang with incredulity. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. I, on the other hand…”

“Please,” the hand that housed the IV lines reached up and caught the lion’s hand, “Don’t. It’s over.”

Lion-O stared at our intertwined fingers and gently lowered his hand so that mine was once again resting on the mattress. “Do you want to talk about it?”

My heart hurt with the offer. Part of me wanted to bury everything in the past, and part of me wanted to pour everything out into the open. “Not yet,” was the only answer I could come up with that was truthful.

The lion’s grip tensed with my answer before resuming a gentle caress of my fingers. “You should get some sleep,” he suggested and began to pull his hand away.

I linked my fingers back with his and pulled gently keeping him by my side. “When I’m ready, will you listen?”

Lion-O’s grim face lightened at my request. “If that is what you want.”

I nodded, feeling sleep encroaching. It was suddenly becoming difficult to keep my eyes open. As they drifted closed, a brief image of two children, a boy and girl, came into focus. They were laughing and playing a game of chase. Their markings were clearly Acinonyx.

Chapter End Notes:
I’m marking this one as complete. I haven’t completely ruled out an epilogue, but I’m all right with leaving this as the end of this particular story too. After all, there is always room for another story, at another time, if the muse so strikes.