

Aria yawned sleepily arching her back into a long, muscle deep stretch. She rubbed at her blue eyes with her massive paws, her nose twitching and sending her whiskers bouncing. Her tail twitched back and forth making a constant *tick tock*. She sat up, grabbing the branch she was currently perched on and using it to dangle above the plains. She let go, dropping fast, and landed on the padded bottom of her feet with a soft THUMP. She was on the hunt.

Aria raised her head tilting it to the right and inhaling deeply. Her soft feline ears twitched ever so slightly trying to discern one sound from another. The grasslands were full of noises but she was listening to the shuffling she heard in the tall golden grass to her right and about 30 steps away. She crouched low, stalking her way to her prey amongst the tall grass. It provided excellent coverage and camouflage for her spotted coat. Being a cheetah she'd be able to outrun her prey easily, but she was still a little hazy from her cat nap and she would much rather take her prey by surprise.

The shuffling grew louder and Aria knew she was close. Carefully peering her head over the top of the grass she saw a gazelle laying lazily in the grass chewing on a large stalk of golden wheat. The gazelle's long limber arms were tucked behind her head and she was staring at the sky. Aria shuffled closer getting a better view of the gazelle. Crouching on her hind legs she launched herself atop the gazelle in one easy jump.

"Holy shit Aria you scared the life out of me!" the gazelle squealed.

"Sorry Fauna, I couldn't pass up the opportunity" Aria giggled, laying in the grass next to her friend. "What the hell are you doing out here anyway?" she asked.

"I was waiting for Adam to show, we were supposed to meet here at noon but I have yet to see him. You don't think he forgot do you?" Fauna's large doe eyes looked frantic and on the verge of tears.

Aria patted the spot in between Fauna's large thick spiraled looking horns "I'm sure he is just running a little late, there is no way he could forget about your date." Aria assured her friend.

Fauna raised a hoofed hand to swat away Aria's paw from the top of her head "Thanks" she smiled at Aria.

Fauna tensed up and she glanced around the grasslands suddenly aware of approaching steps. Adam appeared in front of them, a huge branch stuck in between his horns. Aria howled in laughter, grabbing at her spotted sides and falling to the grassy floor. It was the funniest thing she'd ever seen and she couldn't bother with Adam's hurt ego. Adam glared at Aria before turning his attention back to Fauna.

"Sorry I'm late" he frowned. "I got dared to see how far I could make it up a tree and I got my horns stuck." He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly with his hoof. "You must think I'm such a fool."

"Not at all" Fauna crooned, a small smile reaching her face, "but maybe next time wait to do your dare AFTER we've said goodbye for the day."

She reached up and grasped the branch with both hooves and pulled with all her force. Despite the fact that she looked like such a fragile animal she was quite muscular. Her constant running and leaping around the grasslands insured that she stayed very limber. Fauna yanked the branch forward while Adam pulled back. With a grating noise the branch popped free and Fauna playfully tossed it at Aria who was finally recovering from her

laughing fit.

Aria caught the branch and lazily threw it over her shoulder. Fauna leaned in closer to Adam wrapping her arms around him in an embrace. He tilted her head towards his own and they kissed passionately. Aria averted her eyes, feeling so out of place amongst this intimate moment. While Adam and Fauna were still in their embracing kiss she silently slipped back through the grass and made her way back to her tree. She felt a pang of sadness. She wished she had a lover of her own. Most of the other mammals in the grass lands left her alone. They stayed with their own species. But she had never seen another cheetah living on the grass lands. She'd seen plenty of lions but they avoided her like the plague. Aria shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts of sadness from her mind. She climbed back up her tree and laid sprawled back onto the sturdiest branch. She let her feet and tail dangle off the side. She watched as her tail ticked from side to side.

Off in the distance Aria heard the roars of the lions. They must be having another initiation for the newest cubs coming of age. Sure enough she saw them prowling about, whooping, laughing and clapping each other on the back. She watched as they raced through the plains. Random shouts echoed throughout the fields. Those young lion cubs had no respect for the other animal's privacy. Aria shook her head in annoyance. The lions neared her tree and she sat up watching them slink around underneath her tree.

As the lions got closer she realized they weren't all young cubs. At least two of them were older males, only a few years into their adulthood. They glanced skyward to her tree.

"Hey cheetah, why don't you come down here and celebrate with us?" One of the older two hollered up at her.

His mane was a deep red orange color and was unkempt. She growled low in her throat. His attitude alone disgusted her. She noticed his friend remained quiet, staring quietly up at Aria with his head cocked to the side in a quizzical way. He looked much nicer. His mane was well groomed and a dark brown.

"Leave me be" Aria snarled down to the lion boys. "I want nothing to do with jackasses like you." She slinked farther into the shade of her trees.

The younger cubs laughed and grabbed for her tail. She curled it upwards out of their reach before letting out a huge angry snarl at them. The boys quieted down and looked ashamed of their behavior.

"Alright its time for us to leave. Your parents would be ashamed to hear that you've been bothering the other animals." The quieter lion male scolded the rest of the group. They all hung their heads for a second before darting off through the grass again, the unkempt male herding them along. The other lion remained.

Aria hopped down from her tree landing quietly at his feet. "Thank you" she said.

"No thanks needed, I apologize for them bugging you" He kept his arms back behind him in a cute awkwardly shy gesture. "I'm Jake, and you are?"

"Aria", she smiled "would you like to watch the sunset with me?" She asked him, walking out onto the open feild 40 paces to the left of them. It contained no high grass and was the start of a sloping hill. It was perfect for watching the sunset. He shrugged his shoulders and joined her. She say down on the grass, patting the clear spot next to her. The lion sat gently

down beside her. His paws clenched close to his body and his eyes darting around.

"Why are you so nervous?" Aria inquired.

"Because our species are not known to spend any amount of time together." He mumbled.

"Who cares? We make our own rules."

She turned her head back towards the sky, sad about being reminded how alone she was. The sun was slowly disappearing past the edge of the plains. This was her favorite time of day. The animals grew quiet as the bugs started their orchestra of buzzing and chirping. The male lion kept glancing between Aria and the sky. He smiled the smallest amount.

Aria felt her stomach flutter. Jake wasn't like the other lions. They tended to be loud and quite obnoxious and tended to hang out with their own kind, never mingling or even associating with the other animals. They thought they were the better race and acted as such. Aria felt like she could be friends with Jake and that thought sent her stomach flutters in a fit. She put her hands behind her leaning back and sighing in happiness at the receding sun. She felt another paw brush hers and she looked down. Jake mimicked her posture, his paw accidentally brushing against hers. She cleared her throat and he glanced over. Realizing what he was doing he hastily let go of her hand and blushed pink.

"I'm sorry I honestly didn't realize I was doing that." Jake's tail swished around in embarrassment.

"It's fine... Really" Aria felt her cheeks flush pink and she looked down at their hands.

Jake scooted his in closer to her and touched her paw with his own. She felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She met his gaze and they both blushed scarlet a smile shared between them. They turned their attention back to the setting sun the color a mix of pink and orange.

As she watched the sun set Aria wondered what drew her to this male before her. She couldn't take her eyes away from him. The silhouette of him against the night sky looked absolutely breathtaking. She leaned in closer to him, breathing in the scent of him as she laid her head into the crook of his neck. His mane tickled her ears. Jake leaned his head down to hers, kissing the spot on her head between her ears. She purred in satisfaction. They kept in their embrace until the sun finished setting. The nighttime life was in full swing now.

Aria thought of Fauna and what she would say if she knew that Aria was falling for a lion. She would ramble on about species mixing. Even both being big cats it was still socially unacceptable for them to mingle outside their own kind. *Society be damned!* Aria thought. Now that she had met this wonderful man she didn't plan on letting anyone or anything keep them apart. Jake sat up suddenly, his ears twitching to some unknown call. He released himself from Aria, a sad expression on his face.

"I must get going, the pack is almost back to the den and they will be wondering where I've gotten to." He said, rising to stand on his back legs.

Aria felt a stab of sadness wash over her at the thought of being away from Jake. "Will you come back tomorrow?" she asked, surprised at the sadness in her own voice.

Jake must have heard it to for he grabbed her and held her tight against him. "I promise I will be back."

Aria watched as he crouched down to all fours and sprinted off into the night. She watched as he disappeared, with a heavy sigh she turned her back on the hill they had sat at. Aria crouched down, as Jake as done when he left, and sprinted back towards her tree. She reached it within two minutes and launched herself towards the branches.

She grasped the lowest reaching branch and swung herself up perching on it like a bird. She reached for the next one, hauling herself up. She climbed up higher finally laying between two intertwining branches like a natural hammock. She looked to the sky enjoying the twinkling of the stars. She thought of what would tomorrow would bring and she smiled a warm fuzzy feeling filling her. She closed her eyes and dreamed of Jake and what could be.