

*What the Chain* by Chiauve

Chapter 3: Stepping Up

Tygra came to to muffled explosions and cries, all around him was darkness. He sat up and was assaulted by dizziness. He moaned and a faint light suddenly appeared.

“Hush, young noble,” hissed a stranger, leaning over him.

What happened?

He must have spoken aloud as the stranger turned back to him. The spotted facial fur identified him as a male Lynx-O, well into his prime. He held a small candle up to Tygra, observing him. The only other light was a dim glow coming through the cracks of a window.

“You were struck in the head, young Tygra. One of the buildings collapsed.”

Tygra tried to remember that. He remembered seeing the ship descending upon the city, opening fire and raining down devastation. Of the screams of those around him, many panicking and running. Of knowing only one thought.

Get to the palace, protect his home and family.

But the panicked crowds pushed and diverted him. He too began to panic, and thrust himself from them into the wall of a near building. He swallowed, trying to take his fear back down. He recalled his father’s words, to maintain a sense of calm, to use the fear as a focal point to what needed to be done. Remember the Code.

After that was a mere flash of images and senses. Of a loud boom that echoed forever, the smell of fire, the shaking of the earth beneath him and vertigo, and of a large shape falling down upon him. There was nothing after that, but he felt the slight pull of hastily placed bandages on his forehead. How long had he been out?

“I need to get home!” he cried, jumping out of the cot. A momentary dizzy spell hit him but he shook it off.

Lynx-O stood aside but said gravely, “I cannot stop you, but there is not much you can do. Look.” He moved through the dark to the covered window and drew aside the wooden drapes. Outside the skies were dark and heavy with clouds of smoke. What light there was came from fires dispersed throughout the city. The great Plundarrian ship hovered above, hardly damaged by any returning fire. Much of the city burned, but the ship was focused upon Cats’ Lair.

“They come for the legendary Treasure of Thundera.”

Tygra looked up at the lynx. He was a strong man and did not look the type to remain hidden as his home was attacked. He was here because of Tygra.

“I can still try, those are my countrymen.”

Lynx-O nodded. “Then take this,” he removed a dagger from his belt and placed it in Tygra’s hand, “Good luck, young Thundercat.”

“Thank you, Lynx-O.” He wished he could say more, but there was no time. He didn’t even bother hunting for the door, but used his youthful size to his advantage and jumped through the window, out into the smoky streets.

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Whatever mutant forces had invaded, they were mostly focused on Cats’ Lair, leaving the streets relatively open. But the ship above still let loose a barrage of fire that scorched the streets. Skycutters buzzed about the skies like metallic gnats until the cowardly mutants spotted some helpless prey, like a lone youth running for the palace.

But Tygra was not helpless.

The skycutter, piloted by one of the lizardmen, dove low, raking the tattered street with laser fire. Tygra dodged, rolling to the side and flipping back to his feet in a crouch, waiting for another pass. Mutants were predictable at best and the skycutter dove low once more. Tygra bound for the near wall of a collapsed building and, using it as a springboard, leapt to the skycutter as it flew past. The lizard man shrieked in surprise as the Thundercat took hold of the grips and swung his body around, using his weight to throw the mutant from the vehicle. Tygra quickly set himself into the seat, trying to steer.

Plundarrian technology was as yet a mystery to him, and the awkward machine spun under him as its former pilot’s weight vanished. Tygra struggled with the controls, managing enough to turn the skycutter towards Cats’ Lair. He didn’t dare fly too high and be noticed, more worried about the return fire of the Thunderians than the mutants, but also not too confident with his own piloting skills.

“When this is over, I’m getting Panthro to teach me to fly!”

Unfortunately the mutant ship above had no concern for its fellows. A flash was the only warning Tygra had as a large beam shot from the ship. He threw his weight to the side, forcing the skycutter to roll, but too late. The right wing was struck. The machine jerked horribly and spun as Tygra fought for control. Knowing the machine was a lost cause, he aimed to land as best he could.

Tygra guided the skycutter down towards an already decimated cluster of buildings, its inhabitants long fled. He waited until the vehicle nearly touched down and leapt off, angling his landing to compensate for his continued movement. The skycutter did no such thing and crashed

into the skeletal remains with the sound of metal giving and the last sputter of the engine. He winced at the sound and quickly moved to the shadows, looking about him.

The skycutter had carried him far. He was closer to Cats' Lair and the city here was certainly suffering for its proximity. He saw figures approaching through the haze, large and armored. The sound of the crash had attracted them, no doubt. Gripping his dagger tightly, he waited for the mutants to approach. His hand was shaking slightly, but he tried to ignore it. This was not training or a simulation, this was real, and people were dying around him. Anger wound its way through him, and he stilled his hand. The mutants approached and he shifted upwards, positioning himself higher on the wall he hid behind. They were within reach.

With a snarl, Tygra leapt, dagger raised, all his fury behind the coming blow. It did not land. The supposed mutants turned at his cry and the closest grabbed his wrists and flung him to the ground, weapon raised.

"Stop!" a second cried and grabbed hold of the first, "It is one of our countrymen!"

It was then Tygra saw that they were not mutants at all, but Thunderian militia. They were of one of the lion sub-clans, the Barbaro, judging by their size and slight prognathism of the face. His new captor realized this at the same moment and immediately released him.

"More than that, hardly more than a kitten!" The Barbaro pulled Tygra to his feet, but barely gave him a chance to speak before they were pulling him with them. They were taking him the wrong way.

"Wait! I need to get back to Cats' Lair!"

"You must be taken to safety, young noble. The best thing you can do is stay out of the way."

Tygra snarled and yanked his arm free. He was a Thundercat. An untried one, yes, but one nonetheless, and he would not go hide somewhere. How could he when he was expected to uphold the Code of Thundera? Without a word he turned and sprinted back the way they had come. He could hear the Barbaro calling for him, but he ignored them.

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Tygra stared up at the sky, still darkened by clouds but blessedly lacking a ship or skycutters. He had barely reached the outer gates of Cats' Lair when the Plundarrian ship gave a great groan and began to ascend. He could only watch as it vanished through the clouds and, eventually, the great hum of its engines vanished.

They had won?

He gripped the large gate before him and sat down, adrenaline still rushing through him making him shake. He did not realize how long he sat there until a female Jaga took his shoulder and helped him stand. He said nothing as she took him inside.

He later learned that the mutant warlord Ratilla had breached Cats' Lair with the intent to steal the Treasure of Thundera, but Jaga the Wise had stopped him with the Sword of Omens. Ratilla was captured, and with his defeat the mutants had fled. Any who had been left behind had easily been taken prisoner. They were safe.

Safe... Tygra thought. Was everyone safe? He had to get home!

The Jaga had taken Tygra to the medical wing and sat him down to wait to be looked after. As he was not seriously injured, he had been left alone. He flung aside the thin blanket he had been given and hurried through the halls, seeking the way out. With everything that had happened, the adults paid him no mind as he ran past them.

Transports were all in use to move the injured and clear roads and he thanked the First Ones that the estates were so close. New strength burst through him as worrying thoughts gnawed at him. Was his family safe? He couldn't recall having run so fast in his life.

He did not stop at the gates and burst through the main doors. The hall was empty. He hesitated, unsure if that was a good sign or bad.

"Hello!" he croaked, his throat sore from the smoke, but was already running to the doors opposite without waiting for a reply. These doors led him to the clan council hall, if anyone was within the home they'd be there. He had not even traversed the hallway when someone short swept into his vision.

"Tygra! Shnerf! You're alive!" Snarfus leapt into his arms with an agility Tygra didn't think the old snarf still had and clasped his shoulders tightly. "Where have you been?"

Tygra stared at the snarf numbly, his mind rolling over too many thoughts at once. He finally managed to utter, "My family...?"

Snarfus dropped from his arms and began to lead the way to the council hall. He wagged his tail a bit and Tygra, dazed as he was, took hold of it and let Snarfus lead him like an infant.

"Your father is at Cats' Lair with the other nobles. They need to deal with the aftermath, shnerf, he is alright. Same with your mother, last I heard. Isaura knows more."

There were still others to account for. Most of his clan would have remained to defend the home and family, especially the young ones, but those of Thundercat class would have gone to defend the palace. His father and mother were among them, but they were safe, his aunt and uncle too, and Tassos and Corydon.

With them gone, it was he who had to take charge. First he had to get information from Isaura, then he would get complete accountability of his clan, those missing would be found. The sub-clans would have to be contacted and the same done for them, he would have to take account of casualties and injuries and then...

His head spun.

“Tygra?” Snarfus inquired. The usually quick boy had seemed out of it since he’d come in. “Are you injured? Shnerf, that looks like a nasty gash, we should take you back to Cats’ Lair.”

That woke Tygra up. “No,” he stated, “I’m fine.”

Snarfus continued his scrutinizing gaze, but then led Tygra through the doors to the council hall.

The council hall, a miniature of the one in Cats’ Lair, was packed with his clansmen. Tygra was relieved as he quickly surveyed them and guessed most were present. He heard a gasp and turned to see a distant cousin approach him.

“You’re alive!” she sobbed, taking hold of his shoulders. Soon many a Tygra had gathered around him, demanding to know where he’d been, what had happened, what they were to do. Their loud voices echoed in his head, pounding like a hammer and the room spun.

“Enough!” a sharp voice cracked, “Give him room!”

Another set of hands took hold of his shoulders and led him away to the far side of the hall where the great tapestry depicting their sacred First Ones hung. He’d always liked looking at it, the entire history of his clan was woven in its borders, and he saw more with every viewing.

Isaura pulled out one of the chairs from the council table and bade her cousin to sit. She was Karan’s elder daughter and had been left in charge while Cleatus and the other Thundercats had gone to defend the Lair. She had the misfortune of inheriting her father’s bad eyesight and decided to forego Thundercat training. Karan had been disappointed, but understood her decision. It was only recently he had corrective lenses made for his eyes, and they had a tendency to fly off in battle, despite cautions built into them to prevent such a thing. Isaura had no such things for her lenses, but they definitely seemed more comfortable. She knelt in front of Tygra and looked him over, but seeing nothing more serious than the gash on his head, stood up and sat in a chair beside him.

“They’re looking to you,” was all she said.

He nodded. “I know. Fill me in.”

And so Isaura told him how the attack had come unexpected, but that the Thundercats had swiftly left for Cats’ Lair. As they were instructed, the remaining Tygra came to the council hall, ready to barricade themselves in and defend if it came to that. But the attack never came and save for a few wayward mutants and laser blasts from the ship the estates were left alone. All were present save three who had been out in the city, one of them her youngest sister whom often stayed after school. They had only received word from Cats’ Lair that Cleatus and Edeline were alive and well.

That sent a shudder up Tygra's spine. No word on Karan and Sophia? Tassos or Corydon? What about Panthro and the others? There was little he could do about that, and Isaura looked as anguished as he, if not more so.

"What's the status of our communications?"

"I wouldn't count on them."

"Right." He got up and looked at his clansmen. They stood silently, waiting for instruction. He was about to speak and then, realizing his height disadvantage, climbed up onto the table so they all could see him.

"Clansmen," Tygra began, nearly jumping when his voice broke, "I need runners to go to our sub-clans and gather accountability reports, as well as runners to seek our missing kin. You will go to designated areas; no one is to wander."

The volunteers were selected and sent out into the city to the clans and to medical facilities or shelters. Snarfus volunteered to return to Cats' Lair and receive news on the Thundercats.

"Isaura, I need you lead the rest of our kin to check the estate and report damages to me. Structural, electrical..."

"I would rather go find Kalare, Tygra."

"No, I need you here."

Something akin to betrayal flashed in her eyes, then the smoldering of anger. He could understand it, she was grown, and he, barely an adolescent, had denied her to find her missing sister. But he could not heed it. He was young and would need her guidance and aid in taking charge of the clan until his father returned. Or what if he froze, unable to do anything? She would need to step up again. Instead he called over one of the few remaining Tygra and instructed her to go to the school that his young cousin attended. It was built from an obsolete fort to accommodate training simulations for young Thundercats who attended there, and so had an old bomb shelter beneath it. The children would be there, if anywhere.

Tygra stepped down from the table, weariness seeming to weigh him down. Isaura was angry with him, he could feel it. So he met her eyes and held them, waiting for her to challenge him on the matter. Muttering angrily, she turned away and gathered three of their clansmen to help search the estate.

When she left, Tygra sat down in his chair with a sigh. His head was pounding. The only people left in the hall was himself and those too old or young to help. He couldn't relax yet.

But he didn't know what to do with them, either.

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Isaura gazed down at her sleeping cousin. What anger she'd had had vanished as she'd scoured their home, noting all the serious damages. He was too young to have to do this now, and she couldn't leave him. They all would have to wait for news on their loved ones.

Tygra had apparently tried to calm the youngest of those that remained with him, he was fast asleep, slumped on the floor against the wall with a cub nestled in his arms, two others curled up beside him. She didn't want to wake him, and was tempted to take the reports from the returning runners herself, but didn't come to a decision before his eyes opened and he struggled to his feet.

"Sorry," he said, rocking the cub slightly when she began to squirm.

Isaura wasn't sure if he meant for falling asleep or something else. She just nodded instead.

"Some of the runners are back, they found two of our missing clansmen, one of them Kalare, the other is Myles who was injured, but it's not life threatening."

"Who's still missing?"

"Octavius."

A great-uncle on his mother's side. He was half Jaeva and visited that clan often.

"When the runner from the Jaeva clan returns ask him if they knew of Octavius' whereabouts."

"Shnerf! Tygra! They're back!"

Tygra and Isaura both turned as Snarfus came charging into the hall. The cub Tygra held woke and began to wail and he was relieved when she was taken by one of the elders.

Cleatus and Edeline entered behind Snarfus, both battle-worn but wonderfully whole. Cleatus' eyes fell on his son, also no worse for wear, and it seemed as if a great weight lifted from him, but not a great sorrow.

Karan followed behind his brother, his corrective lenses missing leaving the tear tracks on his face visible for all. Behind him was Corydon, supporting Tassos who was visibly shaking, his gaze on the floor.

Isaura gasped, she saw what Tygra saw: someone was missing.

Tygra approached his father and met him halfway across the council hall, then stood before him in a formal position, hands behind his back politely but with his feet parted in a strong stance. However, his words were not strong.

"Where is Aunt Sophia?"

His father's face told him all, and Tassos let loose a wail before crumpling to the floor, openly sobbing. Corydon tried to comfort him but was pushed away for his efforts.

Cleatus whispered something to Edeline who nodded, before he took Tygra gently by the shoulders and steered him out of the room. Tygra didn't remember the journey but his father led him to his office and shut the door. He knelt down to Tygra's level and said in such a steady voice that it could only be a mockery of Tygra's earlier words:

“Fill me in.”

And Tygra did, though he could feel tears running down his face the whole time.