

Impossible Odds

By karrenia

We met in the middle of a war zone, isolated pockets of fighting and catapults hurling their deadly fire power exploding like a deadly symphony all around us.

I can't speak for Grune, mainly because he'd get angry and sucker punch me in the shoulder blade, but I believe that we were both struck with an uncanny clarity of vision that neither of us ever spoke of but nevertheless sensed was there. It was the kind that you knew that we'd advance much further together than we would apart.

Of that I was sure of, because despite our youth we both were a couple of hardened career soldiers, and the way I figured it; when our number did come up, then and only then, that we would die with our boots on. That being said, it took a gradual building up of mutual respect and trust, along with the breaking down of walls that we had spent the better part of our lives putting up before either of us would recognize it.

That pivotal battle against the lizard came early on in Claudus's rule and it would soon bring us to the attention of the king and our skills in all things military would eventually bring us into the King's inner circle of advisers.

Grune was ambitious, of that there was no doubt. I believe that my nature is more what you would call a slow-banked fire, tempered like a sword in the heat of a forge and made all the stronger for it.

I've always believed that while a certain level of ambition and forward-thinking was healthy, his ambition saw the obstacles in his path and in his single-minded manner he more than likely saw them as things to ramrod his way through them in order to achieve what he felt was his due.

I could see it happening but I did not know what I should do about him. Should I have had it out with my friend? Or, should I let it go and hope Grune will find it within himself to temper his

ambition with level-headed patience and understanding?

It was a thorny problem, and I still cannot untangle it. More so than ever before, there had been incidents where I could sense an underlying current of tension; one day Grune's desire to rise up through the ranks and could very well outstrip his better judgment. Given enough time and stymied in achieving his desires, Grune could become like a plant growing in the shade; without adequate water and sunshine, it might grow stunted and eventually curl inward upon itself.

'For my part, I might say that while I respect and admire that finely honed blade that is Grune's warrior-spirit, and he had a lot more going for him than just muscle. He certainly does have a generous amount of muscle, he has good mind, too.'

'Then again, I'm ambitious, too, perhaps not to the same degree as Grune, but ambitious all the same, but I believe that I possess a trait the other cat lacks, and that's patience.'

You see, it's rather starkly simple when you get right down to it; there are two kinds of loyalty in this world:

The strength of one's convictions and loyalty to one's King. I do not believe that anything will ever change that. It is both a promise and a silent vow.

King Claudus was no fool, for he soon made Grune, and I officers in his army, for the King understood better than anyone how well we worked and fought as a team. Perhaps that was primary reason we had so rapidly achieved the coveted rank of general in the army faster than anyone imagined that we would.

Claudus is a shrewd statesman for all his gruff disavowals, an excellent tactician in all things military.

He was a family man, too, and loved his queen dearly, as well as the crown prince. They had taken in the young tiger cub without question. It was hardly my place to second-guess the matter.

It is possible that he took in the cub out of the kindness of his heart, or the prompting of his wife,

but I knew very little about the ways of parents and children, so I could hardly speak to that. What I suspect is more likely is the practicality of needing an heir, since they had no children of their own at the time.

It would be at least three years later that Claudus's wife and queen would die in child-birth but not before giving birth to a son from the royal line.

If those who did not know the king as well as I did, they might have said that her death did not touch him. But it did; if anyone thought the worse of the king for breaking down and giving way to his grief, a grief tempered by the joy in his heir, they would be making a dangerous error in judgment.

Grune and I had been the sole witness to the king, a strong man in the prime of his life, fall to his knees on the cold marble floor of his private chambers and sob uncontrollably, the tears leaving dusty tracks down his face, his big fists clenched until the knuckles turned white.

The only reason we'd been there to witness this display of grief on those strong leonine features because I'd been summoned to receive a commendation for valor in battle.

It had been a very close thing, during a skirmish on the grain fields we had been ambushed by a lizard platoon and while the tide of the battle looked to be turning in our favor, a lizard infantry soldier had managed to sneak in through our lines and get close enough to the king to cut the belly-strap of his mount.

Grune and I had cut through the enemy combatants that we'd been fighting and managed to save the king from worse damage, and then back onto a spare mount. I remembered that momentary flash of panic on Claudus's face, like a cloud passing before the sun: there and gone in the space of a heartbeat.

It had happened a while ago, and I looked over to where Grune stood arms akimbo and feet spread wide apart that customary look of confidence on his face, to see if he remembered, too. It

think he did, but if he did he did not give any sign of it.

Claudus quickly pulled himself together and recovered his considerable poise, straightened up and offered me one of his wry grins. “Hell of a thing to summon warriors to receive commendation for valor on the field of battle and then to break down like that. I’m sorry that this could not have come at a better time.”

“It's all right, Your Highness,” I replied sincerely. I meant it. While grief was admirable and I certainly did not begrudge anyone even a king to indulge in his grief or to let his emotions out. Much like everything else that mattered in this life, there was a time and place for it.

I never thought of myself as wise or possessing anything resembling insight or a deeper look into the souls of others, because I'm a realist and blunt-spoken whenever the situation warranted it. Its useful trait for a soldier and some might say I'm rough around the edges, but the fact of the matter is, it is what it is.

“Well,” Claudus huffed, once he had resumed his accustomed gravity and regal bearing, refusing to wipe away the tracks of his tears that had already begun to dry on his face, he added, “I trust that we can keep what you just saw between the two of us, Yes?”

“Of course, Sire. You can rely on me.”

"Yes, Sir," Grune added.

In the back of my mind, I suddenly wondered, 'Maybe I would one day meet that someone special and if I were to lose her, if I too, would grieve for her loss. It was a heady thought, but I quickly suppressed it. It was too soon and too dangerous to afford distractions like that. I'm a soldier and my duties to the crown and to Thundera come first.'

“I am relieved to hear you say that,” Claudus remarked as he offered another grave smile that twisted his strong chiseled features into the confident, and some might say even arrogant mask

that he showed to the world.

He then he strolled over to a gilt, ivory-topped black marble table and picked up a mauve cloth bag weighing it in his hands for a moment. Quickly undoing the undoing the string that held it closed, then turned to cross back over to where we waited.

“For uncommon courage, and uncommon loyalty, for service above and beyond the call of duty, I hereby present you with this medal of valor, to Panthro and Grune,” Claudus intoned in his deep gravelly voice and placed a golden torque around each of our necks.

“I am honored, Sir,” I said and I meant it. I bowed my head to accept the torque as my king placed it around my neck with grave solemnity that fit the occasion and our surroundings.

"You honor me, Sire," said Grune as he accepted his own golden torque.

I for one, I very much suspected that the morrow's ceremony of induction would be neither grave nor solemn.

Just because I did not care for elaborate formal affairs that was no reason not to allow others their chance at merriment.

The banquet that was laid on was more food and drink and sugar confections than I had ever seen in my entire life.

The walls of the main dining hall had been draped in clothes of gold and silver with the crest of the royal rampant lion taking pride of place. We were both given places of honor, on either side of the king. Grune made free with the goblets of wine that the servants kept constantly refilling each time he drained it. Grune on the other hand, showed no signs of exerting such restraint, laughing and downing the rich platters of food and drink with reckless abandon and offering ribald jokes with the other soldiers and servants as they passed him. I even once saw him pressing Lynx-O, the captain of the Home Guard to arm-wrestle with him.

As a decorated war-hero and a gruff soldier, I must admit to feeling a little out of place among the well-dressed nobles, and every now and then when I thought no one was paying the least bit of attention to me, I would yank at the bottom of the golden torque I wore around my neck. It was not that I begrudged the noble houses or even the common people any and all opportunities that came their way to celebrate their good fortunes, it was just that he knew all too well that peace, in his experience was generally the lull between the battles, and one could never relax one's vigilance.

Feeling it would be wiser to keep a clear head even in the midst of celebrating I made certain that I took minimal sips from my own wine glass and was thankful that it was well-diluted with water.

I wished at one point that the ceremony would end soon because I was never really one much given to pomp and circumstance.

On a more practical level, I planned to go back to the map room and study the terrain just outside the west wall of Thundera. I'd considered widening the range of our most recent patrol I'd sent out. I might be chasing after shadows, still I thought, 'Nothing ventured, and nothing gained. It never hurt to be too careful. At the same time, I don't want to make the mistake of not seeing the forest for the proverbial trees'

It would be at least several years before we had anything more serious than an occasional incursion along our borders, and having to put down some minor brush fires on Thundera's cropland, nothing too serious happened.

I've always believed that peace tends to be the lull before the storm; I could learn to not be so overly cautious.

Oh, and before I forget, I was due to meet the King and his sons in the Garden Plaza for a sparring lesson.

I stood off to one side of the sprawling Garden Plaza just off the western edge which was shaded by an over-lapping willow tree; the breeze brought the soft aroma of azaleas and early spring roses wafting through the air. It was not often that I had a chance to appreciate the surroundings; however, there was something about this day that made me want to soak it in.

Grune was also in attendance, seated on a marble bench alongside the King. He nodded to me as I walked into the plaza and took my place beside him.

The cubs were of an age now that we well on their way to developing their raw talents into something with a finer-edge to it, however, both still had a lot to learn.

"You're stronger, faster; use your advantages, Tygra!" If no one will give you what you want, then take it!" Grune exclaimed during one point in the sparring session.

If Claudus disapproved of this, he showed no sign of it. I, on the other hand wanted to smack Grune up side the head. It was plain to any one with eyes in their head that Grune was only adding fuel to the fire to a sibling rivalry that had been developing between the brothers and stoking it just now was the last thing either of them needed.

I elbowed Grune in the side and muttered under my breath.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Grune scowled and then shook his head and offered me one his devil-may-care grins, "You do things your way, and I'll do things my way. I like my odds better."

"This isn't a game," I replied.

"Oh shut up, Panthro, it's all in good fun," Grune griped.

Just then Tygra leaped forward his orange and black striped fur rippling with the effort. Tygra possessed a great deal of agility and speed, and showed it while he repeatedly hammered away at the younger prince's blade.

Lion-O was on the defensive action, absorbing the blows, instead of fighting back. Oh, Lion-O certainly was no slouch with a blade in his hands, and more than a little natural talent where his lack of skill and practice showed. Even as I observed his sword and footwork it was as if the younger prince was just going through the motions.

“Excellent thrust and parry, Tygra!” Claudus exclaimed at one point during the sparring.

Tygra paused, breathing heavily, and gave a curt nod of his head in acknowledgment of the praise.

“They're shaping up rather well, wouldn't you agree, gentlemen?” Claudus mused at one point during the proceedings.

“Very well, Your Majesty,” Grune was quick to reply.

“I agree. It never hurts to stay sharp,” I remarked.

“I certainly hope so,” Claudus said.

When they paused for a breather Lion-O stood with his sword dangling from his hand, a rather woeful expression on his face. It was a clear indication in his posture and in his expression that he would rather be anywhere else but here.

“Father, can I go now?” asked Lion-O in a hollow voice.

King Claudus nodded, and waved languidly, “Yes, you have my leave to depart. I do wish that you took your sword-practice a little more seriously.”

His last words were addressed to an empty doorway, as his younger son and heir to the throne of Thundera dashed away to return to his own diversions. Tygra, for his part, bowed to his father than to us, sheathed his practice sword. He, too, turned around and exited the plaza.

Claudus sighed, and then said in much more confident tone of voice, "I would be lying if I said that I relieved that the hostilities between Thundera and the remnants of the Lizard tribes is finally at an end, I still cannot shake the feeling that this is just the lull before the storm."

"I could send out additional patrols along our borders, Sire," I suggested. While I did not believe we had achieved a lasting peace, the current cease-fire did come as a welcome respite.

"Good idea, Panthro," Claudus replied. "By the way, I've spoken to Lynx-O on the Council of Elders recently and to Jaga from the Clerics. One of them dug up an old treatise on the travails of nations."

"What did this volume tell you?" Grune asked not really caring but eager to curry favor.

"It had a great deal to say, but one particular phrase leaped out at me; something about the price of freedom being eternal vigilance." Claudus smiled, which emphasized the fine lines around his deep set amber-colored eyes as he watched his sons at their sword-practice. "To that end I have a quest in mind that will suit both of your talents and intrigue you as well."

"What kind of quest?" I asked, determined to have it out and done with; I have never cared for half-measures.

"It's one that that only my two most experienced generals can undertake with any degree of success," Claudus answered.

"So, out with it, already!" Grune exclaimed.

"Not just yet, no, but it's one that will be the stuff of legends if you succeed."

Claudus was being unaccountably coy about the answers he gave to my questions. The future was ever uncertain, and I understood that as a given, but right now, I would definitely prefer much more concrete answers.

I was eager to press the point and had primed myself to do so when Claudus turned and said to us, "Later, gentlemen, I promise, but I must proceed carefully in this matter. You will find out all when the time is right."

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The time for privately letting us in on the full details came two days later in full formal style. King Claudus stood on the balcony that looked out over the plaza and the main gates fronting on parade ground, clad in his formal robes of state, embroidered with gold and black rampant lions and decorated down the flowing sleeves with silver lilies. As head of the Clerics, Jaga stood at his back and the crown princes on either side of him. It could have due to the slant of the light or the something else, but it was at the moment that I could see the toll the years and the strain of ruling were beginning to show, the fine lines around his eyes and a glint of silver in his mane and beard, but he still cut an impressive figure.

"Citizens of Thundera!" he began in his deep rumbling voice. "Today is a glorious day! A momentous day! For by taking this first step to learn more about our past, we also take the first step towards our future. "

He paused to allow the gathered crowd to let loose with a round of enthusiastic cheering, and then resumed his speech.

"We send our two greatest heroes out on this quest, and our hopes and prayers go with them. On their broad shoulders rest our greatest hope, and some might say our greatest danger, for we send them on this quest when we still stand in conflict with the lizard army.

“However, the hearts of our people are true, strong and resolute! While these two search for the Book of Omens, we who remain here at home will be more than able to take up the task of keeping the home fires burning, for the fire in our hearts, the will to endure will never, ever be extinguished!”

This time the roar of the crowd in the plaza was almost deafening.

“So we laud them for their bravery, my friends, and our own, as we stand together this day, as one people!” roared King Claudus as he wrapped up his speech.

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"We're setting out as heroes, my friend," I quietly remarked, turning to exchange a significant glance with Grune, "If we succeed and come back from this quest, we can ask any boon of the king we want."

Grune, never one to adhere closely to the rules of decorum, leaned forward in his saddle and smirked, adding in his booming baritone, "My friend, allow me to clue you onto a little secret. If we succeed, I could well become a legend, a legend fit for kings. I could have anything, anything at all!"

“Anything?” I echoed.

We had been riding pretty high on our own importance on that day. Why not? The collective feeling in the air that day made me feel as if I could take on just about anything that the world threw at me.

I never could recall what had happened to our baggage and ceremonial robes and symbols of office, more than likely they got jettisoned somewhere a few weeks into the quest.

Or perhaps they got lost fording a river during high tide and it wound up somewhere far, far downstream. In any case, those robes were nice to have while in court, but it would not serve us

well in the unmapped regions of the world.

At times some of the more practical items we would miss when the time came. The way I figured it, we would just have to make do. The warm woolen cloaks with the golden lion-head buckles would have been useful, especially when we were forced to take shelter underneath a tree that looked very much like an over-turned hut mixed with a turtle shell, for no cat likes to get wet.

Living off of the land was not an ideal situation, but then again, we certainly had not expected it to be and if Grune griped about missing the lavish banquet tables of the palace, or that sometimes that the meat was over-cooked, then let him. I had long since learned to tune it out.

We had departed in early spring and it was and by reckoning we paused the greater part of almost five months out in the unmapped wilderness. It was a good thing that we had both had more than a little experience in making do with whatever was available at the time because the provisions with which we had set out with had long since been used up.

The long-horned, furry and slow-moving herd beasts that crossed the land with the sound of thunder pounding across the terrain had proved to be not only good hunting, but also quite savory once one seasoned it with a little bit of our store of salt and pepper. Having learned to cook from another cat that I'd once served with, I usually ended up doing most of the prep work while Grune did the hunting and gathering. He didn't mind, but it would only be fair to divvy up the work.

On those days when meat was not available I discovered that there were numerous plants that made nourishing soups. However, I think I'm realistic enough to find those meals filling I too, longed for something more toothsome. Still, as the proverbial saying went, beggars could not afford to be too choosy. When meat was scarce and we had to go hungry, tempers were frayed and we argued.

Once Grune had calmed down we would laugh about it afterward. Or we would pretend that the argument had never happened in the first place.

One night Grune returned to the campsite with an armload of wood for the fire heaped in his arms, shaking from head to foot in a partially successful attempt to dry himself off.

“It's shaping up to be a wet night. I was hoping to find more wood for the fire, but this mist isn't burning off like I thought it would. We're bound for a wet night, and even wetter morning.”

I glanced up at the sky, and then back at Grune, “Looks like. I don't like getting wet any more than you do, but we'll make do.”

“Suppose so,” Grune replied moodily. “What's for dinner?”

“Black bean soup and water cress.”

“No meat?” Grune asked.

“Not today, we'll have to forage farther out of our established area, when the rain lets up.”

“Okay, hand me a bowl. I'm starving,” Grune said.

“Here,” I said, “But that means that you're washing dishes tonight.”

“Off course,” I said.

“Not that you'd notice the difference. You always did have a cast-iron stomach.”

“Oh, I'd notice,” replied Grune mockingly, “It's just that food tastes better when someone else makes it.”

“You're just lazy when it comes to anything remotely resembling domestic chores.”

“Am not, and stop arguing about it, or we'll never get anything to eat.”

“Fine, fine,” I replied.

I might have seen the signs earlier on, then again maybe not, but the longer the quest went on the more it seemed as if we were going around in circles and getting nowhere fast. I don't know what was going through Grune's mind; until about a fortnight into our travels when Grune let me know what he was thinking in no uncertain terms.

“This entire expedition is an exercise in futility!” Grune growled, kicking the pile of wood that he had just gathered for the evening campfire with the toe of one of his steel-shod boots. “It's a waste of time and effort that could be put to better uses!”

“Just how do you figure that?” I replied, folding my arms over my chest and leaning back against the trunk of the tree that had served as our shelter for the evening.

Grune left off his kicking at the inoffensive kindling and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, breathing in and out through his nose in order to control the churning emotions that surged through him before he would say another word. “Damn it, that's the beauty of hindsight. It gives you perfect clarity of vision when it's too late to do anything about. Claudus only sent me on this fool's errand because he's afraid of me.”

“I hardly think that was his motivation.”

“You would. He always liked you better,” Grune muttered bitterly under his breath, but still loud enough that his friend would not be deaf to the innuendo.

“Do you really believe that the King would deliberately play us off of one another?”

“No, but that does get to the root of the idea that I've been mulling over,” Grune mused.

“Talk to me,” I encouraged. “You always could bend my ear and get me to do whatever crazy scheme you had in mind. I doubt very much that anything has changed since we were raw recruits, and I doubt that it ever will.”

“It's that damn book. It always comes back to that damn book. Look, I won't go so far and say that some mystical mumbo-jumbo can't exist, but that was centuries ago." Who's to say that the book survived after all these centuries?"

“Who's to say that it didn't?" I countered reasonably.

“Maybe the Book of Omens is real, but we might never find it. It could be that whatever magic is inherent in the book means it will only be found when it wants to be found.”

“Careful, Panthro, my friend. That almost sounded as, I don't know, as crazy as anything else we've found out here."

“I honestly don't know, but I do know that we won't accomplish much of anything by standing around and jawing about it,” I said as I bent down to scoop up a pile of the discarded kindling and lumbered off in the direction of the campsite we had chosen for the night.

A light but cold mist hugged the ground which made visibility difficult at best. Grune had dropped the subject of the existence of the Book of Omens and the reasoning behind our quest for the moment, but I had the distinct impression that we would have it out again, sooner than later.

For almost a fortnight Grune had kept this his growing disaffection to himself, I felt it chagrined that I had begun to have doubts about my closest friend and the cat I would have trusted with my life any given situation.

However, I simply could not shake the feeling that something was wrong.

I had begun to eye Grune with a speculative look in my eyes dark eyes. For his part, Grune seemed not to notice or care to wish to make an issue of it; and for that I was thankful for.

However, if Grune did realize, with the certainty of a sucker punch to the gut that soon, perhaps sooner than either of them would be comfortable with that a day of reckoning would come. I did not relish the idea that when that day came if I would be the one the dictate the terms or it would be the other way around.

One night as we were lying beneath a pair of gigantic and twisted trees where we had taken shelter from a torrential downpour for the night. I woke up startled from a deep sleep only to do a double-take when I noticed that Grune's bedroll was empty. I called Grune's name and had went out a ways from the campsite to look for him, and then came back grumbling at the extra work, concern not yet turning to alarm.

My calls were answered moments later by his voice, nearer now, but oddly hollow. I was unable to pinpoint exactly from which direction it was coming from.

Figuring that I would head due east since that that was the direction where I had last heard Grune's voice the clearest, I shrugged into my cloak and reflexively feeling to make certain that my weapons were securely bond in their sheaths, I set out.

“Where the hell did you get off to now?” I yelled. “Grune, answer me!”

For a moment I feared that the only answer I would get in return would be the echoes of my own voice, bouncing off of the walls of the foothills that rose up above the shallow bowl of the valley. Sooner than I had expected I could hear Grune's grunting and swearing and talking to himself.

“I'm coming! I hear you!”

Grune redoubled his efforts, taking the narrow and jagged path, darting around obstructions with

ease for he had always been swift on his feet despite his size.

“Grune! This is no longer amusing! Whatever it is, you'd best come off it now, or so help me I will pummel you into next week!”

“Not if I get to you first,” Grune called back.

This was more like it, whatever the problem was, we would return to camp and we'd talk it out like we always did.

After a moment as this thought crossed my mind Grune called out, “Panthro, can't you hear it?”

“Hear what?” I gruffly demanded, wondering what it was that had so utterly caught him up.

The answer was completely unexpected. “The harmony, the melody, it's like a siren song. It's like nothing I have ever heard on this dry and wretched earth. It's a pure sound that I never knew I've been looking for all my life.

Forget the Book of Omens, this is what we, I need.”

“It's dangerous, whatever it is. You must be under some sort of spell.” I could feel the short hairs on the back of my neck and forearms tingling, and my belly muscles clenched in response.

“I thought that you didn't believe in that sort of thing?” Grune remarked.

I sighed and said, “I don't. But let's face it, we've both been around too long and been wandering around out here in the wild lands to be able to say that it might not exist.”

I cautiously said, reaching out to lay a hand on my friend's heavily muscled shoulder. Grune had a slow but cold temper, and one did not grab heedlessly at him.

“I wouldn't do this if I didn't care, and I think it's time we both had a little talk.”

“Let go of me, my friend, or you'll regret it,” Grune growled.

I did as he asked, with a wary glance at the corners of my eyes. The fur on my arms ruffled and bristling, saying as I did so, "Something is obviously wrong. Tell what's been eating at you. I've got eyes in my head and I'm not stupid. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Grune tilted his head back and seemed to go elsewhere, although he stood quite solidly on the bare earth of their foothills his booted feet firmly planted. He crossed his heavily muscled over the breastplate of his armor and then he began to laugh, deep and effusive, but with just a hint of a hysterical edge to it.

"The heart knows what it knows, an undeniable argument that proves resistant to anything else that work against the attainment of what it wants, no needs."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded.

"If only you could hear what I hear!" Grune shouted at the top of his lungs, not in the least concerned whether or not under the weight of his heavy tread and the sheer volume of his own that it would knock loose a ton of rocky debris onto us.

Grune never so much as glanced to the left or right, or to see whether or not I would follow for the sole focal point of his concentration seemed to be concentrating on finding to find the source of the this uncanny siren song that lured him onwards.

I followed him. What else could I do? We were friends and if I had to follow him into danger if only to save him from his own folly, I'd follow him into anything, come hell or high water.

When he at last found the most deeply concentrated focal point of the voice that had been so long his silent companion Grune seemed to be only taken aback for a moment by the ominous aspect of the black pyramid capped by dire-looking triangular storm clouds. I did not have time or the inclination to think on them, or what might be lurking inside the pyramid for I was had only time

to think on my friend and the danger he was in. Grune's hesitation, if that was what it was, lasted only for a moment. He soon began to make the ascent of the pyramid's sheer sides, using the massive strength in his arms and legs.

When I caught up to my friend he had already passed through the maze that was the interior of the pyramid. I heedlessly disregarded my own safety, ignoring the tingling of the fur on the nape of my neck and my instincts that were screaming at me to get the hell out of there.

I caught up to Grune in an inner chamber, flanked on three sides by enormous black marble pillars veined with white, that did not so much provide a contrast to the all of the overwhelming blackness, but instead made the pillars look diseased, like the mottled scales of a lizard.

Those pillars were mesmerizing, but I forced myself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Grune was prying at the sealed front of some kind of sarcophagus, straining with every ounce of his considerable strength, exhorting for it to open and deliver to him what the voice had promised to him.

The events occurring inside his pyramid, his sanctum and the source of his immense power had not gone unnoticed or unremarked upon by its occupant. In fact Mumm-Ra had always been one to find a means of exploiting any given situation so it fit his own best interests.

This Grune fellow would more than likely prove to be no exception. Over the millennia Third Earth had been his to exploit, ravage and dominate as he saw fit. In the past handful of centuries, a blink of any eye to one who was essentially eternal, his very existence had been subsumed in harboring his power, nursing it like a fine wine, and thus he had been reduced to a myth.

Mumm-Ra had used all of the varied methods available to him to coax, lure and tempt the feline male called Grune to him, subtly at first, and then with increasingly more force, adding more

intimations of the power and control that would await him once his loyalty was assured. 'Now, at long last the moment that I have anticipated for so long that the anticipation has become the very essence of my being; its hour has come round at last!'

Soon, very soon Mumm-Ra would show the entire world that he was no myth, but a force to be reckoned with. It was a heady thought and his own churning emotions, dark and powerful as the pool of three depths in the pyramid's central chamber roiled within his shrunken breast.

Per the knowledge he had gleaned thus far about this particular individual it was that Grune respected, craved, and coveted power like a fire in his blood. And if the feline male were to show the slightest sign of weakening in his resolve to throw in his lot with him, then, and only then would Mumm-Ra make a show of force.

Grune gave one final heave to the doors of his sarcophagus and took several involuntary steps back, uncertain what to make of the physical manifestation of the being that had emerged; it's humped back and cadaverous body draped in ragged blood red robes.

"I've been expecting you, Grune," rasped Mumm-Ra.

"Looks to me like you've been waiting a long time," Grune challenged, quickly recovering his considerable confidence and swagger.

"That is immaterial," rasped Mumm-Ra, "What is of import is how long I've been waiting; I know how long you've been waiting to fulfill your ambition for power and glory? Can it be measured in the grains of the Sand Sea?"

Grune nodded his head, "Yeah, I could get behind something like that."

There was no two ways about it; I did not like any of this one bit. I didn't care for the gleam in Grune's dark eyes or the way in which this cadaverous being was flaming the flames of my best

friend's ambitions.

In a way I could not have explained, for the first time I was afraid that if I did not do something quickly to stop this, we would both be lost.

I was unable to wrap my head around the fact that a creature thought to be nothing more than a myth was here in the rotting flesh and in the process of trying to suborn my best friend. Instead, I had to focus on my primary task, namely convincing Grune to give up this madness and get out, preferably with both of our skins intact.

“Don't listen to him! It's a trick!” I exclaimed, as I rushed forward and grabbed at Grune's left arm, his shield arm, “Think about it! I'm saying because I care about you, because I would never lie to you!”

Grune heaved a sigh and then shrugged off my hold on his arm.

“Your friend over there is partially correct. Don't listen to either of us. Take a moment to listen to your inner voice, and then tell me what you really want,” Mumm-Ra coaxed.

I watched as Grune closed his eyes, and from where I stood I could tell that his thoughts were in turmoil. His pulse was racing and his heart beating double-time so it might have very well burst right of his barrel-chest.

When several tense moments had passed and it seemed that Grune was in control of his own churning emotions, and he had a tightly wound grip on his voice, he said confidently and quietly. “This is what I want, what I've wanted all along. Power. Control, and to finally become the master of my own destiny.”

“Look, my friend, I get it. I really do,” I implored, but this is not the answer!”

Mumm-Ra spun around and pinned the other male feline with his sulfurous gaze, and said, “You

can no more prevent this from happening than you can prevent the day from surrendering to the night."

"I can try," I growled, my hand folded tightly around the hilt of my weapon.

It was obvious that Grune had only been half paying attention to what I'd be saying to him, and when the tight rein he had held on his emotions finally broke, it was like the torrential downpour of the plains all over again.

"You! How could you deny me this! How could you not understand!"

"I want to understand, and I think I'm getting closer, but please, Grune, we're friends. Please, don't do this!"

"Kill him!" coaxed Mumm-ra. "Slay him! Destroy him!"

"Why?" Grune muttered. Grune seemed to me like a man caught in a dense fog, knowing the correct path, but unable to determine in which direction it lay. He shook his head several times, then several times more, but it did not seem to be in negation of the contemplated deed, but rather in confusion.

Mumm-ra could sense that Grune was teetering on the brink of the cliff, all it would take was one push and he would go over, and like sharks scented blood in the water, he softly and insinuatingly, whispered, "Because he is now only your enemy."

Finally Grune said, "No, he's not the enemy. You're right, I have to do this. He was my friend, and because he's my friend I cannot allow him to stand in my way."

Grune fingered the razor-sharp edge of his broadsword and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then in a lightning quick burst of speed that belied his size lunged to the attack.

For my part, I anticipated the attack coming and parried the powerful blow before it could do more than land a glancing blow on my leather vest. All the same, the force of the blow sent me stumbling back several paces. From then on the fight began in earnest, having to use my own weapons to ward off Grune's increasingly more and more frenzied attacks.

I had borne witness to other warriors succumb to a kind of madness, in the heat of battle cross the line into a kind of blood fury known to the upper tiers of the warrior-castes as "berserker fury." It is a kind of madness where a warrior loses all sense of reality and became completely submerged in the totality of battle, unable to distinguish friend from foe. If it sounds dangerous, believe me, it is.

Until tonight, I have never seen anything like the raw hatred, and fury that was reflected in Grune's eyes.

It was as unexpected and undeniable as anything I had ever experienced. I never wanted to be forced into the situation where I might have to kill my best friend.

However, it would seem that circumstances forced my hand. At the moment, it was all I could do just to keep my own skin intact.

Grune was hammering away at me with a relentless fury, the sound of steel ringing against steel overlaid by our harsh grunting and gasping for breath. I could not afford to waste time over-analyzing the situation, for I was literally running out of options, but I felt that I had to try one last time.

"Grune, Stop it! I'm your friend, I always have been. If you won't give up this insanity for my sake, do it for you own."

"That's a laugh! Panthro, the noble warrior, the one everyone relies on, the one with all the answers. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

The raw hatred and rancor in the other cat's face and voice took me by surprise, and my concentration momentarily slipped.

It was a tiny slip, but Grune was quick to seize the advantage, and resumed his attack which forced farther and farther back on the slippery and narrow catwalk that ringed a balcony over a dark drop into unknown depths.

Just then, a wicked blow to my unprotected flank and temple, and then a shove, and I began to fall, and fall, and fall.

I scrambled frantically for something to halt my fall, but there was nothing for me to grab onto, just more empty space, more darkness, all of which seemed to become even more inky black as I fell, if that were even possible.

The last thing that I saw before the darkness consumed everything was Grune's face, his eyes glittering with a smoldering fire, and then, the black wave front came down over me and I knew no more, and my own consciousness slipped away.

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My recollection of that endless fall into what I shall, for the sake of my own sanity, refer to as The Bone Yard, had become a dim fog of distorted memories in my mind. I had to force those bleak thoughts to a back corner and concentrate on getting my bearings. Even as I struggled to break free of the prison wagon in which they had placed me in, I struggled and snarled, and threatened and heaped imprecations on the heads of the lizard guards. However,

I had been considerably weakened during the fight, and during my escape from the black pyramid, so much so that I was unable to escape the cage.

The platoon of lizards were heavily armed and armored, and seemed ill at ease. It took an effort, but I had to force down my anger and concentrate on listening in on what they were saying. Judging by the snatches conversation, apparently they were not going to kill me right away, since

they had gone to all the trouble of taking me prisoner.

No, instead, several had argued for sending me to the thundraium mines, but the most vocal and the one apparently in charge, a burly fellow whom they referred to as Slythe, had determined that they would ship me and several other captured Thundercats to the Pit.

I did not know what the Pit was, but it had to be a vast improvement over what I'd just been through. I subsided back to the floor of the wagon, letting go my white-knuckled grip on the iron bars, and took several deep breaths in order to calm down, thinking as I did so, 'Where there is life, there is hope.'

The route the lizards had chosen was not a short or particularly favorable one, and every time the convoy of prison wagons hit a rut in the road, or got stuck in a ditch, I could feel each and every jolt right down to my bones. It made sleeping difficult, but not impossible.

With that in mind, I figured that there would be little point in further exhausting myself with futile attempts at escape now.

Heaving a deep breath, I closed my eyes and lapsed back into a supine position on the floor of the prison wagon. There would surely be better opportunities to make a break for freedom either on the way to our destination or when we reached it.

The city was large. Not as large as Thundera had been, but still good-sized and densely populated, roofed over with awnings in the market district. The buildings constructed of a baked clay and stucco, and with red-tile roofs only stood about three or four stories high.

I did have to wonder, thought whether the lizards knew about what happened between me and Grune, or if they had only heard rumors of it, why I was getting off with a a small sentence?

The other prisoners, some cats, but a good mix of other animals as well, did not seem much

inclined to enlighten me as to the nature of the Pit or much of anything else.

For the first time since my capture, I felt that things were looking up.

The lizard soldier's escort split up, half going into the city, the other half, with the big, squat, but burly one they called Slythe, stayed with the prisoner convoy. He brusquely ordered one of his underlings to open the gates to the Pit which were a pair of massive wooden portals banded by huge iron bars.

While Slythe was waiting for the gates to open he causally sauntered over the wagon in which I rode. The big, hefty lizard tilted his head to one side and gave me a sly wink.

"Do you want to know something, cat?"

"No," I said, studiedly as causal as my captor, "but I have the feeling that you're going to tell me anyway."

"You're a big one, feisty, too. I have a feeling that you're going to be a keeper."

"I feel so much better just for knowing that. This Pit, what is it?"

"Welcome to the Pit, cat," hissed Slythe. "I do hope you survive the experience, but guess what? I want you to survive, no, not just survive, I want you to do better than that."

"Careful there, Slythe, one might also think that you cared," I retorted, as I sat up on my haunches so that I was now on eye level with the stout but still strong lizard, holding and maintaining the eye contact, as if by doing so, I could show my captors that the wagon and the bars were not enough to deter me.

Slythe held the eye contact for a moment, and then glanced away, and then back, hissing, "I don't care. I just placed a little wager on you, and I always collect on my wagers!" Slythe hissed,

chortling and nearly choking on his own spittle as he walked away with perhaps even more swagger than he had displayed when he came over.

“This is shaping up to be a very interesting day,” I remarked sarcastically.

The following morning I woke up with a pounding head and a sensation on the roof of my mouth that felt like I'd been chewing iron ore. I tried to swallow and instead broke out into a coughing fit. Recovering quickly, I glanced around at my immediate surroundings in order to get my bearings.

I was in a narrow rather Spartan chamber, furnished with two narrow cots, some sort of tub that had been hammered deep into the bed-rock of the wall, and the only way out was through a door banded with an iron bar.

The only other occupant of the room was a tall, lean but well-muscled male dog with short wiry black fur, who had been watching me regain consciousness with a wary glint in his dark eyes.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” he greeted.

“Where am I?”

“Where else?” the other returned sardonically. “The Pit, or at least the quarters where they keep us until it's our turn to fight in the arena.”

“Great, just great,” I muttered “That should be interesting, and I bet it beats sweating to death in the thundrium mines.”

“I like your spirit, cat. You got a name?” the large dog challenged, “Or are you going to settle for being called 'hey you'?”

“Panthro. The name's Panthro.”

“Nice to meet you, Panthro, I'm Dabo. And as for your assessment about this being better than the mines, you might want to reserve that opinion until you get your first fight under your belt.”

“Any rules I should know about beforehand?”

“Rule number one, stay alive. Rule number two, follow my lead. Rule number three, don't talk back to the overseers no matter how much they provoke you or you want to stick it up their fat waddling arses.” Dabo grinned, showing the tips of his sharp canine incisors,” and then added. “And the most important rule of all...”

“Which is?” I asked casually. I don't know if it was the pounding headache or something else, or the fact that I was still emotionally raw from what had passed between Grune and I in that black pyramid; but despite all of that, I found myself warming to this Dabo fellow.

For his part Dabo simply nodded and remarked, “Don't show me up, or I might just have to kill you myself.”

I returned that devil-may-care grin with one of my own, and said, “Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You're welcome,” Dabo replied, and stretched out his arm, which I took and grasped by the forearm, shaking it firmly.

If the other fighters in the arena thought that an alliance between a cat and a dog was strange, well it hardly mattered to me what they thought. Hell, they could hang for all I cared. Dabo was a friend, and that was all that mattered. And truth to tell, I was sorely hurting for friends at the moment.

I had never much liked fighting for the sake of fighting, but I quickly warmed to the idea that if I

did not fight to survive in the harsh environs of the Pit I would not live to see the dawn of the following day. I didn't have to like blood-sports, which is what Pit essentially was, but as Dabo had quickly pointed out to me at least it was in the fresh air and sun, instead of the cramped confines of the mines, breaking my back.

And here, I had a choice, a chance that I would not only survive but thrive, and as time would prove, that he had been right about that.

It had taken much longer than either Dabo or I had expected to win enough bouts both as a tag team and alone in order to earn our freedom from the Pit but in so doing we had learned to respect and admire one another..

I had felt it necessary to extend an offer to accompany me but Dabo had declined, saying that he had his own mission to carry out. Namely that of seeing to it that his own people became masters of their own destinies, but that he wished his new friend well.

“You have your own path to walk, my friend,” Dabo continued, warming to his topic, “and I have mine. However a very unmagical wisdom tells me that we will meet again before we go into the darkness. Until then, I wish you the best of luck.”

“I never knew that you believed in the Sight,” I replied.

“I don't, but my old great grandmother had it,” replied Dabo.

“Good enough for me, I've seen some mighty strange things, and lived through half a dozen more, so I'm willing to give what you say the benefit of the doubt.”

“Damn, if that ain't the truth!” Dabo replied. “Trust me, my new friend, you won't regret this alliance, I swear it on my good right arm.”

I laughed, gruffly, saying, “Famous last words.” I took my leave of Dabo and walked away with

my head held high, wondering what else was out there and with the confident swagger and confidence that I not felt since I set out on the quest for the Book of Omens. It was a heady feeling and one I hoped would carry me through whatever else came my way.

Conclusion

The acrid smell of burning leaves and bare branches rose up to the clotted gray sky, twilight had fallen and the moon floating serenely overhead like an over-loaded ship in a formless gray sea was a pale orb, oblivious to the doings of the mortals on the ground below.

The machines of the lizard army had ground to a halt about fifteen feet from the forest's edge, far enough away to avoid sustaining any damage from the deadly blaze that was quickly consuming the fuel on which it feed, but close enough to bring their weapons to bare as soon as their prey dared to show themselves.

Concealed on top of the ridge to the left of the forest the new Lord of the Thundercats and his small band of fellow survivors crouched on the edge of the ridge and stared down into the milling mass of lizard soldiers and their war machines.

He had suggested going back toward the fire, and for a while it had seemed like the right thing to do.

For the Pretlars it had been, but for them, not so much. So, here they were, more or less back at the spot that they had first ventured into the forest. It did have one advantage to it, they held the higher ground and had the spine of the foothills that fronted on the burning forest concealed them for the moment from their enemies.

Cheetara felt that she should do or say something to mediate, or even suggest an alternative plan, but at the moment she was drawing a complete blank and settled for going over to the kittens, to provide whatever morale boosting or comfort that she could.

A spirited argument was taking place in hushed tones between Lion-O and his brother Tyrgra. The younger cat was urging a retreat back into the devastated and denuded land of Pretlars, a

diminutive and courageous people who had been using an ancient map to return to the original homeland of their people. His reasoning behind encouraging a policy of retreat rather had much to do with the fact that they were outnumbered out-gunned and he frankly did not know what else to do.

Tygra was pressing for the attack, advocating that the best defense was a good offense, and that how it had been pounded into his head from the moment that they had been both of age to pick up a sword and learn how to fight, that their father would never suggest running away from a fight.

Lion-O felt as if he were pushed and pulled in several directions at the same time. His heart telling him one thing and his instincts were telling him quite another, and for a moment he wanted to do the opposite of what Tygra was saying, just to spite him.

Somehow, whether it was own inner voice telling him what to do when everything else had been rendered moot, but staring down at the eye of Thundera embedded in the legendary Sword of Omens Lion-O felt a hot surge of adrenaline that had nothing to do with the fire to his back and flanks.

”What do you say?” Tygra said.

“I say, if we're going to do this, we'd better do this right. Thundercats never retreat!” Raising the drawn sword out its sheath and holding it up above his head, he shouted. “Thundercats, HO!”

“I knew he had it in him,” murmured Cheetara to no one in particular.

With that they all stood up and charged into the milling throng of the lizard army, and for a while held their own, but it with the lizard's army advantages in both sheer size, weaponry, and numbers it would only be a matter of time before they would be over-matched.

Just when it appeared as if they would either be killed by one of the massive, slow-moving, but dangerous war-machines which was even now bringing its canons to bear upon their small group that had bunched together in a huddled circle with their backs to each other, a noise like lightning splitting the sky sounded, capturing the attention of everyone who stood upon the battlefield.

What appeared in a roar of grinding gears and powerful engines and a growl was something that neither side would have ever expected. A long, narrow, powerful and intimidating machine which hugged the ground on deep treads and it fairly bristled with weapon ports. Whoever was operating it began to open fire on the lizard army's war machines, routing them and sending the lizards running in terror as fast as their feet would carry them.

In the midst of the clamor they could all faintly hear the general of the lizard army laying cures and ordering his troops to hold their ground; but to no avail, for eventually even he turned tail and ran away.

Tygra and Lion-O exchanged significant glances with each other, wondering if either of them could shed some light on this new strange new development, for they had to wonder if this newcomer was either friend or foe, or even perhaps some rogue element that owed no allegiance to either side in the conflict between themselves and the lizard army who owed their total allegiance to Mumm-Ra.

Lion-O stood in the center of the plain where only moments before they had been fighting a pitched skirmish, out-numbered and out-gunned, and then this stranger had appeared and turned what had come within a hair's breathe of disaster into a full-blown rout. Yes, they were relieved to be alive, to fight another day, but what now?

He shuffled his booted feet in the churned up ground and shifted his weight from side to side, having made the decision to let the newcomer make the first move.

The machine came to a lurching, chugging halt only about a dozen feet from where they stood.

Just then, even as those thoughts crossed Lion-O's mind a hatch on the top of the machine

popped open and the operator emerged. A large male, tall and muscular, and whose arms were liberally laced with scars.

The cat's fur was a dark blue black, and he was older than anyone in his small group, but all the same, the male tom cat still seemed oddly familiar; however, neither Lion-O nor Tygra could immediately place where they had last seen him before.

The cat jumped down from his standing position atop his tank and stood appraising them for several moments, while no one gathered on that plain felt inclined to break the silence by saying anything. It felt like a moment poised on the brink of something momentous, something that would change the scope of what they knew to be true.

He had the look of one who had seen far too much, and been through too much to ever lose that wary look of someone who trusted easily, but he also seemed to have been looking for them, or why else had he gone to all the trouble of saving their lives?

Unable to stand the building tension in the air Lion-O at last posed the question that they had all been waiting on a knife's edge. "Who are you?"

The big cat slowly nodded his head once, then once more, and jumped down and strode towards the group, closing the distance in quick, powerful strides, before he replied,

"The name's Panthro. Remember it."

"I am Lion-O, Lord of the Thundercats."

Panthro gave him another of those impenetrable and rather disconcerting searching looks, a distant look in his dark eyes, tilting his head back as thinking the matter over.

He had known well this cub's father, and while he had missed much during his time away searching for the Book of Omens, and then fighting for his own survival after

Grune's betrayal, and subsequent time by himself, a part still longed for a sense of belonging again.

“Will you join us? Will you fight with us?” asked Lion-O.

“Hmm, let me think about it.” I paused for a moment, thinking the matter through while I used my right hand to scratch at a nagging itch his flank. With that done, I looked up and locked gazes with new, largely unproven new king and simply said, “Yes, I will.”

“What is that machine?” asked Tygra. “It's like nothing I've ever seen before.”

“It's called the Thundertank and there are just a couple of rules you need to know about it. One, you don't touch it. Two you don't touch it, and most importantly of all, no one touches it, drives it, or repairs it without my permission,” Panthro said as emphatically as he possibly could.

“Isn't that essentially the same rule?” Cheetara asked arching one delicate eyebrow.

“I guess,” Panthro replied with a shrug of his powerful shoulders, and then added, “But they're my rules and I'll stand by them.”

“Thank you for the save,” said Tygra sincerely.

“You're welcome; now let's get out of here.”

“You'll get no argument from me on that,” said Tygra, glancing around, adding somberly, “And the sooner the better.”

“Agreed,” replied Lion-O eagerly, his eyes bright with excitement, his fingers tapping against his side, adding.

“Now we've got a chance, a real fighting chance.”

“Careful, lad,” I cautioned, adding, “Let's not get too much ahead of ourselves. However, you're right at least about one thing; our odds of success just ratcheted up at least several dozen notches.”