

Wish

Chapter 1

By Knight Writer

Cheetara stood beneath the shadow of one of the Standing Stones, heart heavy in contrast with the eggshell blue of the endless sky above. No birds circled this isolated part of Third Earth, no animals large or small crawled along the mysterious collection of toppled and upright monoliths. She wondered, briefly, what purpose such a place could have possibly served in ancient times before wrenching her mind to the here and now.

I can't let myself get distracted, she thought while trailing her fingers through her black-spotted blonde hair. Lion-O would meet her soon, and she had to be ready.

She just had no idea of what she would say to him.

She knew how her body felt towards him, the number of cold showers in recent months had only increased, but was uncertain of where her heart and mind lay. Logically, she knew that there was little choice. Breeding candidates of the female persuasion were few and far between with a grand total of three females and only two of them of age. The odds of others of thier race finding Third Earth amid the plethora of worlds (habitable and otherwise) was a crapshoot of cosmic proportions as were the odds of finding more of their kind having ended up on the planet. Though Panthro and Lynx-O both scanned the empty reaches of space for possible signals amid the wash of static, that hope was remote at best.

But...

Was it love she felt, or mere animal lust? If she wanted, she could have her pick of the men in the Treetop Kingdom. Willa had told her so, rather matter-of-factly, that given any union would produce no children there was no harm. Even some of the women of that tribe of strange beings called humans had given her the eye, though she didn't lean in that direction. She had been curious in her younger years, and had satisfied that curiosity. It had even helped, years later, in her confrontation with Tashii and her doomgaze. Women, indeed, held no mystery for her. Whatsoever.

Too bad love does, she mused. Her muscles tensed, every sense rebelling from the horrible cold presence which suddenly carressed them. Cheetara whirled about to find Mumm-Ra behind her. Rotted bandages rippled along with his blood-red cloak in the unnatural wind. In his right hand dangled a bejeweled bottle, its flared bottom tapering up to a long slender neck with a diamond cork in the mouth. Sunlight glittered off of each facet of each jewel in the deep green jade. Such a work of beauty seemed defiled by being in Mumm-Ra's undead grip.

"Cheetara," he said, his voice a harsh and papery rasp, "so good of you to show up alone."

"Sorry, but I don't drink," she quipped, her staff in her hands and her mind racing. The demon had been waiting for her, that much was obvious from his words. The bottle dangling in his hand was meant for her. It was as far as reason could take her. Magic had never been her strong suit, and she was acutely aware that it was Mumm-Ra's. She strained her ears, hoping to hear Lion-O's pounding footfalls. The Sword had to have warned him, and she had to buy him time to arrive. Cheetara never let fear overtake her, but she knew her odds against Mumm-Ra alone were fairly low. She steeled her nerves, prepared to delay him until Lion-O could arrive with the one weapon that had proven successful against their archenemy time and time again.

But, she asked herself, what the hell is up with that bottle? And, why hadn't he transformed? Was Mumm-Ra THAT confident? Either he was being foolish, or he was certain he had her. Cheetara began stepping about Mumm-Ra's withered frame in a wide circle, wary and watchful. There was no telling what tricks someone of his caliber of evil had in store.

"You should be grateful, swift one," he said, lips revealing yellowed teeth as he spoke. "I'm about to bestow upon you power beyond your wildest dreams."

"Whatever."

"Well," he said with a shrug, "said power will also make you my slave, but who cares about the details. Am I right?" With that, he opened the bottle. Cheetara's muscles froze once the pinkish mists from the open bottle raced toward her and enveloped her legs. She wanted to scream at the energies raging through every cell in her being as the cloud seeped into her nose, her ears, her mouth. Corporeal sensation fled her as her vision faded into faint pink clouds and a sucking sensation dragged her body and mind down into an unknowable abyss.

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"Pink," Mumm-Ra muttered as the cloud returned to its bottle. Cheetara was no longer in sight. "Why in all the hells did it have to be pink?" He re-capped the jade jar and felt its renewed magics pulsing beneath the dessicated flesh of his hand. Having found such a relic had been a stroke of the purest luck, and the ease with which he had used it! He chuckled at the irony as he sensed the energies of the Sword of Omens nearing. He turned in the direction Lion-O was charging from with a leer on his leathery face to see the Lord of the ThunderCats crest the incline which led to the Standing Stones, Sword of Omens in hand and claw shield on his arm and frantically casting his gaze about for the imprisoned Cheetara.

"Welcome," he began, "Lion..."

"Cut the villain talk, where is she?!" Lion-O roared, his voice filled with raw anger. So, Mumm-Ra thought, I was right. He IS falling for the woman! The leer grew to a full rictus of evil glee. It was always fun to twist the knife a little.

"You must be so disappointed," he began, "coming here for a romantic rendezvous with your heart's flame, only to find me." He called forth his magic, his form twisting and cracking until feminine curves replaced withered flesh. The hate and pain in Lion-O's feline eyes caused him to laugh in Cheetara's voice after taking her form. "Is this better, my love?" he asked, spitting out the final word. He finally held the key to exterminating his enemies dangling in his hand, and the irony of it all was delicious. After so many humiliating defeats, to use one of their own as his ultimate weapon. Though dangerous, he had to gloat at least a little.

"What have you done to her?" Lion-O snarled, his eyes finally lighting upon the bottle.

"Why don't I..." Mumm-Ra paused in mid-sentence as the magical energies suddenly coalesced above him, amplified by the ambient energies of the Standing Stones.

Lion-O willed the Sword's blade to battle-length just as the swirling portal of wild energy opened above Mumm-Ra, though what happened next came as quite a surprise. The form fell from the vortex in a blur to land squarely on Mumm-Ra's shoulders and knock him flat to the earth. The bottle bounced end over end toward the jagged cliffs as the form did likewise in the opposite direction. Lion-O lashed out with the arm bearing the claw shield and his ring finger toggled the switch to send a single claw line toward the spinning container. Time froze as the line moved to neatly intersect it near the diamond-tipped cork and wrap tightly about it just before it could topple over the ledge. He jerked the arm toward his chest to reel the line back in and caught the bottle in his grip.

A young human woman tumbled off of Mumm-Ra's shoulders and was picking herself up from the fall. She was barely five feet even, runs showing in her sheer black stockings from her abrupt entrance. A plain brown skirt adorned her hips, leading to a white blouse surrounded by a short white cape. A pointed, wide-brimmed white hat adorned a head flowing with a river of midnight hair. Squareish spectacles slightly enlarged her green eyes atop a pert button nose and full mouth. The woman picked herself up, dusting at herself with hands whose fingernails had been adorned with emerald polish.

"Ow..." she said at length before taking stock of her surroundings. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of Mumm-Ra regaining his feet before those ember-like eyes searched frantically about and settled on the bottle now in Lion-O's claw-shield protected hand.

"Give that back..." he snarled, malevolent energies gathering about him. "NOW!"

"When frogs grow wings so they don't bump their asses when they hop," Lion-O replied. From the corner of his eye, he saw the human woman draw herself up and gape for a moment at the demon.

"I won't bother to make that happen," Mumm-Ra growled. "Give that to me... GYARRGH!" Mumm-Ra's cloak burst into flame as the human woman sent a spell searing into his side.

"Pyros!" she cried. "Sacred flames, BURN!" The flames jetting from a few inches beyond her palms redoubled their intensity. The outer edges of Mumm-Ra's cloak and bandages caught flame and the demon screamed in agony just as Lion-O readied the Sword.

"HO!" he shouted. The sapphire energies of the Eye of Thundera joined the burning flames, washing over Mumm-Ra in an inexorable tide. Mumm-Ra streaked skyward, trailing smoke and flame as he abandoned the battle.

"Well," the young woman said while brushing off her skirt. "I was told to expect perils on my maiden journey but I didn't expect Mumm-Ra himself!" Her eyes locked onto Lion-O's, widening for a moment.

"Oh, my," she said. "The Lord of the ThunderCats!"

"That's me," Lion-O affirmed.

"OH! Excuse me, please," she said after a short bow. "My name is Ari. I'm an Enchantress. Well... in training," she finished with a bow of her head.

"Enchantress in training?"

"I come from the Marble Towers," Ari said with pride in her voice.

"I just graduated, and I've begun my years abroad to see the world." She spun on her leather-booted right heel, stopping with hands on hips and a confident expression on her face. "Monsters! Perils! Learning experiences! But... I didn't think I would end up meeting a ThunderCat."

"Um..."

"I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"Not to be rude, but yeah."

"Sorry," Ari said before locking eyes on the bottle in his hand. "What's the story here?"

"I came here to meet someone, only to find Mumm-Ra holding this bottle."

"You mind?" Ari asked, holding her hands toward the bottle. Bereft of options, Lion-O handed it to her.

"Hmmm..." she said while running her hands along the outer bejeweled surface. "This is weird..."

"What about this isn't?"

"I've never seen the likes of this before," Ari said as she turned the bottle in her fingers. Fire glinted off each jewel that caught the sun's light, refracting it in near-hauntingly beautiful ways. "You say your

friend's trapped in here?"

"She's nowhere around, so it's the only explanation that makes any sense. Especially since nothing else about this does." He forced the rising anxiety to the rear of his thoughts as the strange young woman peered more closely at the jade bottle before she abruptly turned and marched to a collapsed monolith. Using one of her flowing sleeves, she brushed away the collected dust. "What are you doing?" Lion-O asked as she removed a small piece of white chalk and drew a perfect circle on the stone.

"Drawing a circle to contain some magical energy," she replied as she placed the jade bottle in the center and touched her fingertips to the circle's edge. Lion-O felt a subtle change in the air as the simple chalk glowed dimly in the afternoon light. "This place has a lot of ambient power, and I was hoping to do some research into it. I mean, it threw off my teleport spell!" Ari reached up to readjust the pointed hat atop her head. "This circle will cut off the random magical energies and keep them from interfering with my spell."

"Which is?" he asked, both curious and increasingly irritated. Patience was still a virtue he was working on, and the fact that Cheetara was in danger made dealing with the strange woman no easier.

"I'm gonna try to determine the nature of the enchantments surrounding this thing, get a feel for how they're constructed." Ari took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, her eyes narrowing in concentration. Lion-O noted that, despite her apparently eager - even bubbly - demeanor, when it came to magic she was all business. Or so he hoped, since she was the only person for Jaga-only-knew how many miles around who seemed to have any sort of mystical experience.

"Enchantress in training..." he muttered under his breath.

"I heard that," Ari nearly growled before a low chant issued from her lips. "Quaesitio..." she began.

"Invenio Veritas..." She repeated the same three words in that strange tongue before a silent hammer of air seemed to rush in from the borders of the circle...

Only to explode outward in a torrent of invisible force. It wasn't wind itself, yet a tide of displaced air rode before it to roil a cloud of choking dust before the wall hammered into him with slightly less force than a jackhammer. Lion-O felt his feet leave the ground a scant second before something rather soft hit him the chest. Sharp stones left shallow cuts along his back as he slid with that weight atop him before another of the Stones greeted the back of his head with a sharp knock. His vision swam for a moment, blurred greys and golds as his eyes fought to right themselves and he fought for a clean breath of air. Minutes passed before he was able to take a breath without a mouthfull of cloying dust. Ari rested on his chest, her eyes slightly unfocused. He looked from her to the jade bottle, still sitting where the sorceress had placed it though the chalk circle. Said circle was no longer in evidence.

"Owww..." Ari groaned as she pushed herself off of Lion-O's chest. "My everything hurts..." She rose unsteadily before offering her hand. Lion-O refused it as he flipped himself back to his feet. They returned to the fallen Stone and Ari's jaw dropped. "That's... That's IMPOSSIBLE!" she nearly shrieked. The look of abject fear on her face only served to make his heart sink.

"Why?!" he demanded. Ari shook her head briefly and took in a shivering breath.

"A circle is meant to contain magical energies," she began. "It keeps outside forces out, and inside forces in."

"Keep going," he said, unable to entirely hide the angry steel in his voice. Ari went on as though she hadn't noticed.

"Only something physical can breach a circle! An arm, a leg, anything thrown by a mortal. Magical energy just can't do it! If you put enough will into a circle, even one drawn in chalk can contain a demon! But, I'd prefer at least brass. Copper is even better. Silver..."

"I get the point!" he snapped. Ari's mouth closed with an audible click. "I'm sorry. So, all that dust..."

"I swept the area completely clean before I made the circle," Ari explained. "The dust that blew around was outside it."

"So, if I follow this right, the magic within that bottle was..."

"Far too much for a chalk circle and an enchantress who's only just earned her hat and cape," Ari finished. "Wow. What IS that thing?"

"Forgive my ignorance, but I was hoping you at least had a clue," Lion-O nearly snarled.

"I have a few," Ari said at length, "but the only way to know for sure is to open it."

"This thing just tried to knock us off the cliffs, and you want to open it?!" he said, incredulous.

"You don't find enchantments THAT powerful on just anything," Ari replied. "Yes, your friend is trapped inside, and warding spells like that are meant to contain something REALLY strong."

"Again, you want to open it?"

"I have an idea..." Ari said at length. "What did Mumm-Ra say before I got here? Anything?"

"Not as such, no."

"Then, here we go," Ari said before darting forward to un-cork the bottle. A cloud of pink smoke arose from it, bending with no regard for the winds toward the bare stone beneath their feet. The vapors coalesced into a bipedal form before Cheetara emerged into view.

And, quite a view.

Her leotard was replaced with an outfit that was barely a millimeter away from indecency. Her full breasts were almost fully exposed, barely enough gauzy fabric covering their tips with gossamer threads

stretching between them and over her shoulders and about her ribs. Gauze-like maroon fabric wound about her arms from the golden bracers on her wrists to her shoulders in defiance of everything science said about gravity. Her pelvis was adorned with the same material in a distressingly narrow patch with more of the material which adorned her arms winding about her legs. Her feet were bare, her face calm and serene. Her eyes opened, shining with an intense inner light.

"Oh..." Ari said. "Oh, stars..."

"Cheetara," Lion-O said, his relief drowning out the worried tone in Ari's words. Of all the words that jammed in his throat, only a few managed to escape. "What in Jaga's name are you WEARING?!" Cheetara looked down, then immediately back up with an expression that couldn't decide between horror and outrage.

"I'm currently asking myself that," she said, her voice wooden. "When I find an answer that has sufficient profanities, I'll let you know."

"This is worse than I thought..." Ari said. "We have to get her somewhere protected! NOW!"

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Cheetara asked while trying to cover herself as best she could.

"Name's Ari. Nice to meet you. And, trust me, this is really REALLY dangerous! Lion-O!" she snapped.

"Hold on to that bottle!"

"What?"

"Trust me on this!" she shouted. "Cheetara, did that Mumm-Ra mention anything about giving you power?"

"Yes," she said at length. "And it making me his slave."

"I don't know the details, but he was right about that! We have to get you, by that I mean that bottle, somewhere he can't get to it!"

"What are you talking about?!" Lion-O demanded.

"Just trust me on this! If he gets his hands on that, the whole WORLD could be doomed."

"Are you following this?" Lion-O asked. Cheetara only shrugged.

"No," Cheetara said, "but it sounds like a good idea, Master." That last word rang like a horrifically clear bell in the pale blue sky. Lion-O looked at her, eyes wide with disbelief.

"What did you call me?" he asked at length.

"I called you Master... Master..." Cheetara paused for a moment, her eyes widening in horror. "By Thundera, what has that bastard DONE to me?!"

