

Omens

By NoWhere_Man

Prologue: Cheetara

"Okay, don't forget we have weapons training in an hour," she calls through to the other side.

The woman still stands by the door to Prince Lion-O's bedroom, her paw extended towards the door's handle. For a brief moment she contemplates closing her fingers over the latch and venturing inside to gain the answers she's seeking. Something was bothering her Prince and she realized duty, not to mention friendship, deemed that she should pursue its source. But after a moment of hesitation, she abandons the notion and continues her journey back down the hallway.

Friendship, it was an odd concept to consider especially when it involved someone of the royal line. The question of boundaries is always present, a fact that she's been reprimanded several times in the past by the current Head Cleric, Lynx-O. He was very vocal in his view that the role of a Cleric should be nonexistent to the members of the royal family. Their order was one of complete and utter servitude to the crown, which is probably why he closely monitored the proximity she held to crown Prince Lion-O. It was obvious he didn't approve of his predecessor's decision to allow her guardianship to the Lion prince.

The Cleric Cheetah takes a quiet calming breath as she expels her previous train of thought as well as the apprehension. She simply contemplates now what to do with the remainder of her time. She had already finished her morning meditations and prayers. It would be unwise to visit the kitchens so close to training. Not to mention she doubted that Felis would be up at this early hour to prepare her a meal.

Her fingers brushes her spotted mane of blonde hair back over her ear as she once again looks over her shoulder back to the hallway she just retreated from. It's gnawing at her. She tries not to pry, but from being his guardian all these years and since Prince Tygra had decided he wanted to take a more active role in defending against the attacks made by the Black Baron and the Lizards, Prince Lion-O had been left practically to his own devices in the castle.

This was another instant where the battle between the role of station and friendship inside her was waged. After some time she realized there was only one sure way to clear her mind of her fretting.

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The staff-head glides through the air, only to be wrenched back by a firm callused fist. It strikes down on the earth in rapid succession, each hammering drive pulverizing into the earth below her like a rhythmic drum. It lasts only till the next moment, where she commands her weapon back to her side in a low guarding stance.

She sends the staff into dazzling spinning array, completing at least a dozen cycling circuits, guiding the staff around her slender form before she snapped the weapon down hard against the ground. The snapping sound echoes through the air like crackling thunder. Her foot slides forward as she readjusts her weight to her rear leg. She's coiled like a serpent ready to pounce.

Her long limber legs launches her high into the air, at the apex of her flight she swings her staff. It comes crashing down with a mighty overhead slam that sends a small quake throughout the entire foundation of the training grounds.

A thin sheet of sweat mixes in with her sandy colored fur and her rich flowing blonde mane. Her spotted form, taut and sinewy from years of endless physical and mental training. The markings surrounding her eyes, on better occasions appeared to be like a rose-colored mask hiding her bright crimson eyes. But now the 'mask' almost narrowed like a vermillion visor, her brow pitched in complete concentration, total dedication to the perfection of her technique.

She was Cheetara, a first disciple of the Guardians of the Throne.

OoOoOo

Fifteen Years ago...

The things Cheetara remembered most about her Mother was that she was a Cheetah clan maiden who was tall, slender, and completely full of grace. She remembered Mama liked to dance for both her and Papa whenever Papa started playing his flute. Her skirts would flutter around her, like she was a spinning daisy, captivating everyone who looked upon her. For a long time all Cheetara ever wished when she was a little girl was to one day be just as beautiful and lovely as Mama.

Till this day Cheetara could still remembered the soft feeling of Mama's fingers as they walked paw in paw through the Lower Circle of Thundera's market place that fateful spring morning. Things around their home had been rough for some time, ever since Papa went to stay by the Ancients' side last summer. But her and Mama were strong and managed to get through the winter. Now she was four, which Mama deemed big enough for her to help make her birthday cake.

She still remembered telling her Mama that the cake they both were going to make was going to be bigger than the whole Thundera Castle, with Mama just smiling along with her daughter, agreeing with her. That was when they heard the first screams.

Cheetara turned with her Mother trying to figure out what all the commotion was about. A blood smeared black haired Terrier ran through the crowd frantically screaming, "**Lizards! Lizards are in the city!**" That was moments before a series of haggard raspy warcries ran out and a dark tide of green scaled fury descended upon the Thundera's streets.

The scattered remnants of the few City Guards present in the area were instantly cut down by the vicious spears and gleaming blades of the Lizards. Then with blood lust and battle rage still lingering in their eyes, the Lizards turned their sights onto the defenseless crowd.

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Even after fifteen years, it was still hard for Cheetara to recall all the events that occurred that day. She remembers the piercing sound of glass shattering. Milk and flour sprayed across the ground. Mama dropped the bag that held the ingredients to her birthday cake. Instead she yanked her daughter up into her arms and held her tight.

Cheetara could never recollect specific faces. But she remembers crying because she didn't understand. She was scared and so afraid. She didn't know why the green people were hurting all the Cats. She recalls the pure panic in her Mama's ruby eyes, which only made her more terrified.

Her memory splinters from there. She knows they managed home but not before some of the Lizards caught the fleeting sight of a long golden mane. Their home was modest in all sense of the word. It possessed mainly of a large common room which they usually ate all their meals, cooked, did housework, and various other chores. There were few places they could hide and there wasn't any time. Eventually Mama found the small cubby hole that was a favorite hiding spot for her daughter.

They heard a yelling, raspy shouts, and crashes from the house besides them, it sounded like the nice Leopard family that lived right next to them. Cheetara played with their daughter Ami all the time.

...That was Ami, they both heard suddenly. She was *screaming!*

"Cheetara!" her mother shouted her name, instantly getting her attention. "Ok Sweetie, we have to play a game, Ok? I'm gonna close this door and no matter what happens, you have to be quiet for Mama, Ok! Please, sweetie you have to be quiet for your Mama... You promise me!" her Mother demanded.

Little Cheetara didn't know what was going on, there were tears in her eyes but she nodded, "Ok Mama," she answered softly. And with an afterthought she added, "I love you..."

Her Mama's face nearly collapsed as she clutched her child again, pressing a dozen quick kisses to the top of her golden head. "Baby, I love you too. I love you soooo much! I'm sorry..." she said finally before closing the door and shutting it tight.

Cheetara heard her mother crying and it took everything inside her not to rush out there to go to give her Mama a hug to make her feel better. But she made a promise and she always listened to her Mama.

The door to their home held for another three minutes, before there was a final crash and the Lizards came through their front door. "This is for our children!" one of them hissed defiantly, before they entered the house.

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Cheetara was so scared that she remained in that cupboard all the way till nightfall. The house had been quiet for hours after the lizard's broke through, but she could still hear people shouting outside in the streets. But it didn't matter to her. Nothing matter to her because when she opened the door she found the remains of her mother.

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It was called the Green Massacres. Till this day people still have been seeking answers for what occurred those nights. How four dozen fully armed lizard soldiers seemed to appear right in the heart of Thundera's Lower Circle Market place, without alarming anyone. From there they carried out a three day reign of murder, destruction, and mayhem. In the end, thirty-eight cats, twelve dogs and nineteen various other species were slain in the streets before all of the lizards were finally routed out.

Of the majority of the Lizards that were slain during the last two days of the Massacres, only five lizards were managed to be captured. And only three out of the five, after duress, actually revealed the name of the person who was responsible for allowing them entree into the city. They all gave one name, Panthro.

There were many that still questioned how the famed war general was able to move such a large amount of lizard marauders into the city with no one seeing any trace of them, but ever since that night Panthro had fled Thundera. He would soon take up the name Black Baron and now he commanded the combined tribes of all the Lizard Clans.

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The next twenty four hours went by quickly but Cheetara hardly noticed. She managed to move her Mother to their bedroom. The screams and yelling was still going on outside, so she couldn't go get help, so all she did was just sit on the floor. She didn't eat or sleep. Her Mama had been her entire world and now she didn't know how to start. She didn't know how to move on.

On the evening of the second night, she prayed to the Ancients that now guarded both her Mama and Papa. She prayed for her Mama. She prayed for the other Cats and animals hurting and dying within the City. And she also made a special prayer for herself. A prayer for help.

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The morning of the third day of the Massacres, Cheetara felt her stomach starting to rumble. She was able to wrestle up some bread and jam and then ate her merger meal in silence. By chance she happened to glance outside and what she saw nearly shook her to the bones. Without

thinking, she quickly scurried over to her cubby hole, just moments before four large Iguanas rushed in through the torn remains of her front door.

Cheetara knew it was important to be quiet. She knew she promised her Mama she would, but a part of her wanted to see the faces of the creatures like the ones that took her Mama away from her.

The four Lizards seemed to be arguing amongst themselves. Each of them were adorned in sparse leather and hide armor. Two of them dragged spears with them, the rest carried jagged swords and knives. They were all green, but she noticed that they had different tones and scale variations that made it possible to distinguish them from each other.

"We've been cut off from Ranax and the others!" One of them cried in a whimpering hiss. Cheetara watched as he paced nervously back and forth across the floor. "We're gonna die. We're gonna die!" the Lizard nervously chanted.

"Shut up!" the dark green one thundered his large fist struck the table, causing Cheetara to nearly jump. "We all knew the risks when we volunteered," he continued, "You know what happened. What this is about," his large pale yellow eyes glared at him, "Don't get weak on us now."

"Guys! He's coming this way," a fifth and final Lizard called while, rushing in through the doorway.

The dark green Iguana glared at him, "What are you blubbering about, he's only *one* Cat."

The Newcomer shook his head, "It's not just one Cat," he pleaded while scurrying inside to stand besides his companions. "It's *him*!" he declared, his clawed finger pointing outside.

In the next few breaths the sunlight that was leaking in from the front door was shrouded in darkness as a figure stood in its wake. There stood the biggest Lion, Cheetara had ever seen. His total bulk was barely able to be contained within the frame of the door. His beard and mane were thick, crimson, and untamed just like the setting sun. He wore a breastplate of blue overtop of a dark leather jerkin, but the cords of muscles along his body were so tight, he very well could have entered battle armorless.

The Lion then narrowed his eyes and it almost seemed like the fury of a hurricane was contained within those two dusty bronze irises. "You miserable wretches..." his voice boomed as his lips curled into a snarl, "You dare enter my city and harm her people." The Lion took a step inside, instantly crouching down into a fighter's stance. He then reached over his shoulder, in within seconds, drew massive single-edge blade that was nearly as long as he was. Its hilt was covered in a web work of gold with letters of something language Cheetara couldn't make out, engraved along the weapon's blade. The Lion smoothly turned the blade so it was in a diagonal guard in front of him. "Let's see how you fair against the sting of Tonitrus-Fang!" he challenged.

Two of the Lizards shouted something in a raspy sounding slithering language, before they blindly charged at the Lion warrior. Both Iguanas managing to pull gleaming blades to their sides, covering the twelve foot distance in mere seconds.

But despite his large size, the Lion reacted even swifter. His hand dipped down to his waist and flicked it out in front of him. The glinting sparkle of steel danced into the air and in the next instant the one of the approaching Lizards gurgled a horrid cry. A golden dagger, hilt deep, was sunk into the side of the Iguana's throat. His partner spared just a moment to look at the fate of his comrade, only to turn back to see that mammoth Lion charging fiercely.

The Iguana hastily tried to put up a guard with his sword, but whatever steel it was forged from could not have withstood the might that was Tonitrus-Fang! It cut through the blade, cut through its hilt, and it cut through the marauding Lizard's sternum, leaving him split down the middle. But the Lion kept moving.

Reacting late to the demise of their companions, the remaining three Lizards with vengeance in their hearts stormed forward. The three ran a surprisingly well coordinated attack routine. Each of the three making sure to cover the other's flank with their assault.

The Lion retreated a few steps, moving his head out of the way to avoid the longer reach of the two spear holders. Tonitrus-Fang swiftly darting up and down to deflect any blows he wasn't able to dodge. He abandoned one more step before he blazed forward in a flourishing spinning display. And at the end of that motion the warblade Tonitrus-Fang feasted on the lives of two more lizards.

The last remaining Iguana gazed at the rest of the room and saw before him the remains of his fallen kin. He instantly abandoned his weapon and prostrated himself before the great Lion Warrior. Cheetara couldn't make out what it was saying, but it constantly pleaded and begged for its life.

Cheetara then looked away from the lizard to the face of the Lion, who was like a marble statue, still and completely devoid of all feeling. Cheetara knew in that moment there was no mercy in that Lion's heart. Tonitrus-Fang suddenly came down one more time and then the whimpering stopped.

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"Your Highness! Your Highness!" a voice shouted from outside the home.

The Lion went to the door way and waved his hand, signaling to someone in the distance. "In here Grune..." he answered, while his eyes scanned around the home one more time. A few moments later a large saber tooth tiger then appeared in the doorway. Dark brown fur with a single tooth protruding from his mouth, he was adorned with a breastplate with the Cat's insignia on his chest. The Lion turned to the newcomer and asked, "What have you to report?"

"We are getting word in from all over the city. I think we've gotten them beaten. Every member of the Lizard raiding party has either been captured, fled the city, or simply destroyed. It appears we have won the day!" the cat named Grune stated proudly.

The Lion warrior cast a hooded glance towards the Saber tooth Tiger. "Victory? Does this look like a victory to you?" he inquired motioning to the dead lizards and the scattered remains of the destroyed home. The Lion's face crumbled as if a great pain was inflicted upon him. "So many Cats died in the last few days. And not only them. Hounds, Monkeys, Birds, Hogs, too..."

Grune narrowed his eyes. He visibly flinched at the mention of the other *lesser* races. "Begging your Highness' pardon but what does it matter about a few mangy dogs and Hogs dying." Grune instantly regretted his words as he saw the angry flash within the Lion's eyes. "Either way," he added hastily, "we both know who to thank for all this."

The Lion turned away from the Saber tooth Tiger and turned over a fallen chair. Besides it he noticed Bella, Cheetara's doll on the floor. It was torn a few places from the recent struggle, making Cheetara wish she gathered it up first. Seeing the doll seemed to do something to the Lion, he let out a heavy sigh, "All this devastation. All this death." he spoke out loud. He turned back to Grune. "I still can't believe Panthro, is the cause for all of this. I've known Panthro for years. He's a Cat of honor. We've fought together. Bled together..."

"Your Highness, I've know Panthro just as long as you have," Grune returned evenly, "But you' have to face facts. Panthro has been playing us all for fools. And for what? So he can cut side deals with the Lizards. And now they run rampant on our streets. Cats being murdered in their homes, just like one this one. The sooner you accept the truth, sooner we can see that traitor brought to justice."

"And you're certain of those reports?" the great Lion suddenly asked.

"I looked over them myself," Grune answered him, "Two of our city's patrolmen witnessed Panthro leaving Thundera with a company of Lizards."

The Lion stroked his crimson beard for a few moments then responded, "When the two of them have finished their shifts, I would have you bring them before me. I want to verify their stories. I will not have one of the City's greatest defenders slandered without investigation."

Grune paused for a long moment. Cheetara noticed that Saber tooth Tiger stroked a golden medallion that was hanging around his neck before responding. "Very well, your Highness. But tonight will be hectic to say the least. There will be many people that will want to have audience with you over the events in the city. Not to mention you haven't seen Lion-O or Tygra for two days now. I understand you don't want to take the charges against Panthro lightly, but in the end you are only one Lion. A Lion that has many subjects to command." Grune then placed a hand over his heart. "Allow me to take charge of the investigation. Panthro has been like a brother to me as well. If there is evidence to support his innocence I will find it."

The Lion pondered Grune's words for a long time. But eventually he sighed. A sigh that was more weary than sad. He then nodded his acceptance, "Very well old friend..."

An easy grin appeared on Grune's face as he clapped an paw on the Lion's should. Then as an afterthought he added, "Your highness, with all due respect, you don't have to be here. I mean, you shouldn't be here. With all the fighting, I mean."

The great Lion looked around, "These are my people, Grune. How can I say, I'm fit to rule them if I stand by and do nothing while intruders come into our homes. I've sworn to protect them till the last breath in my body has fled. Anything less and I wouldn't be fit to be King."

Grune nodded his head, "Very well..." From in the cupboard, Cheetara who was listening intently gasped when she heard the Lion mention he was the King. From in the room, that small little exhale of air was enough to instantly alert Grune's reflexes.

The Lion King narrowed his eyes, "I heard it too..." The two shared a look for a moment then went into action.

From where she was, Cheetara momentarily lost sight of Grune, then suddenly a hand wrenched back the door to the cubby hole and she stared into the cold dark eyes of the Saber tooth Tiger.

Surprised from being found out, Cheetara let out a squeal of fright. She grabbed the first thing her little paws could get a hold of, which was her Mama's broom, and swung it with all her might.

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Grune was momentarily taken back as he discovered a little Cheetah kitten hidden in the small closet. That surprised was quickly replaced with stars as the brat girl smashed him in the face with a dusty broom. She then was a little more than a speedy tiny blur of yellow as she raced into another room of the home.

Claudus who had witnessed the whole exchange, took step closer, "Careful Grune or you'll scare her."

"A scenario I wouldn't lose much sleep over," his war General grumbled while picking the dust balls from his beard. He then collected himself and moved towards the door. "I'll leave this to you then, I'm waiting outside."

Claudus nodded. He knew Grune rarely had the patience for children. It surprised him sometimes the amount of attention he tended spare Tygra. But regardless he shook off the notion. The Lion King continued to move towards the other room. He made sure to make his footsteps sound loud and deliberate so he wouldn't surprise her anymore.

In no time he was at the door. He peaked inside and saw two huge crimson eyes staring back at him. He gave her a warm smile, one that she didn't return but he was fine about that. He just

didn't want her to run again. Now that he got a better look at her, he noticed she was a little slip of a Cheetah girl. Barely coming up to his thigh. Three, maybe four summers old if he could guess.

Cheetara noticed that the hurricane fury that was once in the Lion's eyes, now simmered down to a calm bronze breeze.

"Hello little one," the Lion's deep voice rumbled gently, "My name is Claudus, I am your king." She noticed he paused as his eyes ventured further in. He then saw the Cheetah maiden by the bed. Her form, forever still. He sighed as a look of great sadness crossed his face.

"They took Mama..." she finally said, in voice so small. She tried to blink them back but still the tears came anyway.

Claudus placed a comforting paw on her shoulder. He used his thumb to brush away a few of her tears. "I know Child and for that I'm sorry. But I promise you," he said fixing her with a determine glance, "As long as you're in my care, no one will take you too. You have a King's promise," he ended with an endearing smile.

It was then Cheetara noticed the thin golden circlet placed upon his brow. Symbols are an amazingly powerful thing. One image alone could mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. For Cheetara that slender image of gold alone stated that the Ancients heard her prayers and that they were answered.

It hit her all at once. Losing Mama. The fear. The pain. Everything she had been feeling for the last three days came crashing into her in that instant, like a tidal wave. Her small face crumbled up and she wept openly while clutching onto him so tightly.

Claudus enveloped the Kitten in a warm embrace. He couldn't imagine all that she had went through. All he could do now was allow the child to let her sorrow out. He whispered a few words but mainly just ran a comforting paw through her mane of gold. For twenty minutes she wept till the strength finally left her and she drifted off to sleep.

Grune returned into the home after hearing the girl's cries die down. He entered seeing his King holding the slumbering commoner Cheetah kitten, like she was one of his own. Looking pass them, Grune saw the girl's mother in the next room. The blue color of her lips meant she was way pass gone.

Claudus' eyes fixed to his General. "I want her mother to be given a proper burial," he commanded. He carefully cradled the girl in his arm as he ventured outside. As soon as his face touched the Sunlight outside his gaze crossed to all of the destruction that befell his beloved city. He then turned back to Grune, "I want *all* of the citizens slain to be given a proper burial." Again this wasn't an appeal, this was a commandment.

The Saber tooth Tiger bulked at the declaration, "Your Highness; I can't even imagine how costly that will be. Not to mention those funds will be needed for the retaliation we have to orchestrate..."

No other word was uttered from Grune because for a short moment the deadly hurricane fury returned to Claudus' eyes. The Saber tooth Tiger's saving grace was the fact Claudus remembered the tiny life he held slumbering in his arms. Instead Claudus leveled a glare to his General and with a quiet but deadly voice he stated, "Grune, it was a tragedy that befell our city these nights and we as its rulers have a duty to protect our citizens. Panthro in his betrayal, has made us falter in that duty, and I *will not* renege on my responsibility to those that have suffered." His bronze eyes narrowed dangerously, "Have I made myself understood?"

The Saber tooth tiger frowned while stroking his dark beard, "Very well, your Highness." His gaze then went to the head of golden blonde mane in his King's arms, "What about the girl?" Claudus paused as he glanced to the young kitten. The pain and terror she went through, he couldn't image. His mind reeled in what to do with the young one.

"You plan on adopting her too?" Grune added in jest, but when Claudus didn't answer right away to rebuke the question, Grune stared at him incredulously. "Your Highness you can't. Jovan's Son, I can understand, but you can't adopt every stray child left alone in the kingdom."

The Lion King sighed, nodding to the wisdom of the statement, "Of course you are right Grune." But not a moment later a encouraging glint came to his eyes, "Actually, I had a very different idea."

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Three Days Later...

"Jaga, you know me," Claudus stated as he stood before the Head Cleric to the Guardians of the Throne. "You know I've never in the past interfered with the workings of the Guardians. I've always honored your order's practices. My bloodline owes a lot to the sacrifices your Clerics have made over the generations. But there is something about this girl..." Claudus ended while motioning to the young girl Cheetara that he found during the Massacres.

Cheetara sat quietly in one of the King's meeting rooms. She gazed as her King continued to speak with Head Cleric Jaga on her behalf. As far as Cheetara knew joining the Clerics was a long and arduous process. Days of self sacrifice, fasting, and humility was required before anyone would even consider you to be a candidate. A fact that King Claudus knew to be true, that is, he which added, unless you had a very influential benefactor speaking on your behalf.

The Jaguar stared at the Lion King. His eyes trailed from Claudus to gaze upon the Cheetah clan girl. Her bright ruby eyes stared back at him, waiting on abated breath for his decision. He then closed his eyes, his mind weighing the request in this thoughts for a moment.

Jaga then opened his eyes. He released a sigh before saying, "Although, it is not our custom, I suppose an exception can be made." Jaga maintained his passive face despite the fact his King just *whooped* in cheer. "But the opportunity must be earned," the Jaguar continued, his gaze now more fixed upon the young kit. "Do you understand me, young one? Your King has spoken very highly on your behalf, but the decision if you shall be accepted is ultimately up to you." Cheetara looked up to the wizen old Jaguar. "Yes, sir," she nodded in earnest.

"Well, I'll leave it to you then," Claudus stated before making his way to the door, to allow the two some privacy. As he pulled the door open he looked back and managed to give Cheetara a wink of good luck before finally departing.

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The Present...

All those events seemed like a lifetime ago for Cheetara. She was so confused and angry when she first joined the Clerics. For a long time she held so much hate in her heart towards the lizards for the murder of her Mama. And she constantly thought of nothing but the day when she could exact her revenge. But over time Jaga and the other Clerics gave her something, something other than allowing hate and anger to swell and grow with inside her, consuming her from within. They gave her understanding; they gave her direction and purpose, and also something she really desperately wanted, a home.

A young Lion of sixteen summers, let out a small roar of a yawn as he stepped onto the training fields. "Morning..." he greeted Cheetara before picking up one of the practice wood swords.

Cheetara looked over to her Prince as he moved, hair the color of sanguine pools, and eyes a blue as sapphires. "Good morning, Prince Lion-O..." she greeted him, while retrieving a wooden boken of her own. The Iron Sagewood staff, was normally her weapon of choice, but she knew enough of weapon's attack routines to be an adequate sparring partner.

"Ok, you can't go easy on me," Lion-O replied sincerely.

She smiled but nodded, "Of course, shall we begin?"

Years later there would be something else King Claudus would give her, besides her life as a Cleric. She would meet her very first friend.

End Prologue: Cheetara