

Chapter 18 of Signal in the Sky

Runaways

By Purrsia Kat

Bored with Snarf's coddling and insistence on bed rest to nurse what was to Lion-O minor injuries, the young Lord was restless. Even an idle conversation was out of the question as Felina and Panthro, his roommates in what had become their temporary Tree-Top post-flood shelter, slept nearby recovering from their own ills. The others, save for Cheetara and the newborn, were at the Lair cleaning up and repairing the fortress – which is where Lion-O wanted to be. His arm wasn't that sore.

Sighing heavily, Lion-O turned his focus to the gleaming jewel within the Sword that rested on a stand at the end of his bed. He began to think about how Jaga, his mentor, wielded the same mystic blade with not only utter confidence, but also the Eye and Jaga seemed to have a telepathic connection. He desired to live up to that legacy but wasn't sure how. Was such a relationship with the source of the ThunderCats' powers a natural gift or an earned rite of passage? If only Jaga would appear to him whenever he needed answers, not just when Jaga felt like doling them out – there was so much Lion-O didn't know! Even so, Lion-O considered, Jaga would likely only appear long enough to speak in vague riddles before disappearing into the Astral mists. If Felina were awake, he could ask her if she'd read anything in the Book of Omens on how one might improve their connection with the Sword and its power. Heck, if he'd paid half attention to the language lessons she'd been giving him, he might be able to pick up the old Book and see for himself. But alas, books and the study of them was never something Lion-O was able to focus on as fully as he knew he should, and so he wasn't as schooled on the subject as he ought to be. He half expected Jaga to appear and chastise him for wanting things to come to him too easily without putting in the work first. But then, Jaga couldn't read minds – could he? Lion-O hoped this wasn't so.

Perhaps if he concentrated long enough, something would happen. Staring intensely at the blade, Lion-O silently commanded it.

Come to my hand, his mind thundered, *Sword of Omens I command you to come to my hand.*

No matter how urgent his silent pleas became the Sword remained idle, its Eye resting as peacefully unaware of his needs as Lion-O's roommates. He glared at the blade fiercely as if expecting that the mere heat of his stare would coax the Eye out of its state of rest. Jaga had always said the Eye slept until needed. But would it know it was needed if Lion-O couldn't speak for some reason? Does it know what he's thinking or feeling? It certainly didn't seem to at the moment.

"You seem...intense."

Lion-O's concentration broke and he was startled to see Tygra in the doorway. Tygra regarded him curiously and such scrutiny flustered him a bit. "I suppose you could say that," he muttered at long last.

"Oh? Why so deep in thought?"

It was clear to Lion-O that Tygra wasn't just going to let it go, judging by the way the tiger

looked from the Sword to Lion-O and back again with a curious twinkle in his eye.

Even so Lion-O still made an attempt to shrug it off. “Snarf has me cooped up in here and I’m bored. So I got to thinking about, you know, stuff.”

The expression on Tygra’s face told Lion-O he wasn’t buying it. “Oh alright,” he relented. “It sounds stupid, but I was trying – I was trying to command the sword with my mind.” He half-expected Tygra to burst out laughing at any moment. Instead the tiger’s countenance turned soft and thoughtful.

“I see,” Tygra said at last. “But you realize that your father and even Jaga had worked with the sword for some time – forming a bond with it as time progressed. You haven’t wielded it long. Give it time.”

“I know but...well, you saw how deftly Jaga commanded the Sword when he faced the ghost of Grune. And all without saying a single word!” Lion-O knew he must sound like some kind of awestruck cub, but in a way he was. He didn’t recall ever hearing of his own father exercising such mastery over the Sword. But then they didn’t call Jaga “The Wise” for nothing.

Tygra nodded. “That was amazing. But then, Jaga knew secrets and had wisdom even the greatest Lords of Thundera’s past never knew. Even still, have patience Lion-O. Jaga himself advised that it would be some time before the Sword felt completely natural to you.”

Lion-O slowly nodded. In a way, the prospect scared him. Maybe it was merely a fear of the unknown but this much was true. He did feel an increasing bond with the power in the Sword with each passing day – almost like he and the ancient powers were becoming one. But like the title afforded by his birthright, it was both a blessing and a curse; as if his identity was being swallowed up by expectations and ideals bigger than he was – bigger than all of them. When thoughts such as these overwhelmed him, he couldn’t help but envy the Wolo farmer who was able to go about a simple life without the weight of the world on his shoulders.

It was then that Felina began to stir. “I’ll be checking up on Cheetara, then.” Tygra announced as he ducked into the adjacent room.

“How are you feeling?” Lion-O was grateful somebody was awake and able to help break the monotony of recovery.

After rubbing her eyes Felina offered him a meek smile. “Rested. Better.”

“Me too but Snarf won’t let me leave!”

Felina chuckled, shaking her head. “The mighty Lord of the Thundercats thwarted by a snarf.”

Lion-O took exception to her teasing. “I just don’t want to – it’s just that –” Bolting out of bed, he took on a determined air. “Aw, you’re right. I’m going. Besides, if I’m there to help Tygra and the kittens get the Lair back in shape the sooner we can all rest in our own beds.”

“I’m with you,” Felina replied as she rose to join him, pausing to give her limbs a mighty stretch.

Lion-O was about to second-guess her decision but quickly decided he didn’t want to give her a Snarf-style lecture. “Come on then. Snarf will be back any minute now so we best get moving if we want to avoid all the protests. Not that it would stop me, of course.”

Felina smiled knowingly. “Of course.”

The pair ventured out of the treetop hut and crept toward one of the thatched elevators that would take them to the ground. Once there, Lion-O paused to allow Felina to board first but found she was still some distance away, gazing over the treetops to the east. Following her gaze, he made out the unmistakable and ominous spire of Castle Plundarr jutting above the trees on the horizon.

“Felina!” He tried his best to be loud enough for her to hear but hushed enough not to alert any nursemaids lurking nearby. “Come on.” He gestured to the waiting lift.

As she drew closer, he noticed tears rimmed her eyes despite her efforts to avert them. Wordlessly, they boarded the elevator and as they descended, Lion-O studied her. “What’s the matter? Want to talk about it?”

For a moment, she continued staring at the floor as if she hadn’t heard him. Finally, she raised her glistening eyes to meet his. “Seeing the Castle off in the distance like that reminded me...” She trailed off, glanced away and sighed.

“Of Bela?” Lion-O’s voice was meek, almost apologetic about it. His mind flashed back to Bela’s cruel fate at the hands of a Mutant ambush and as much as he often joked about Snarf’s overbearing presence, he knew it would devastate him to be without the creature. Lion-O could only imagine how the loss of Felina’s own companion affected her.

Felina nodded. “And, also, Jax. What happened to him, Lion-O? At least with Bela, we know. But Jax...Mutant or not he’s just a kid.” Felina was by far the closest to the lost cub, given she was the one that had found and rescued him from the tunnels under the desert last summer, so it was little surprise that she was taking his questionable fate so hard.

The misery of Lion-O’s own failures came back in the form of a stabbing ache in his chest that laid upon him heavy and thick. “I don’t know,” was all he could mutter. They’d tried to rescue the kid with miserable results and since then none of their spies, contacts or any other data they could gather found any trace of the child. Jaga only knew what those wretched Mutants had done to him. Maybe they would never know what happened to the troubled yet somehow endearing jackal cub.

Conversation died as the two of them made the soggy trek to Cats Lair in silence.



While two Thundercats wondered about his fate worlds away, Jax was all too aware of it. Night was falling over the streets of Plun-Darr’s capital as the jackal cub huddled among the refuse cluttering an alleyway. He peered up the narrow path between the two tall brick buildings and out onto the street where the scavengers and other undesirables began to emerge in full force. As weary as the boy was of any of the multiple dangers that awaited him in the heart of the city, he felt it beat being at home. It seemed he was always doing something wrong - or at least just being in his parents’ way - and taking a beating as a result. So, it was into the city he ran, escaping while his father was out and his mother, though physically there, was out as well thanks to strong drink. He doubted they’d miss him anyway given the lukewarm reception his miraculous return home after being on Third Earth had been. Of course, he tried to tell them what had really happened, but it was too fantastic a tale for them to fathom. So, they simply assumed he’d run away thereby, the miraculous feel of it all was lost on them.

Leaning back against the hard brick, Jax closed his eyes with the intention of trying to get some sleep. Perhaps he’d try to leave the city tomorrow although he knew living in the wild on Plun-Darr wouldn’t compare to the lush forests and jungles of Third Earth. From what little he’d seen of Plun-Darr’s wilderness, it seemed mostly composed of deserts and unforgiving badlands.

Maybe he'd just venture a little way out, weigh his options and decide which place was worse. He knew he wasn't going home, ever.

Sighing, images of friendly feline faces swam in his mind and he felt a peculiar ache in his heart. It was something he'd never known before but if one had to put a name to it, perhaps homesickness was most fitting. He found the feeling strange for he'd been taught that Thunderians were something to be feared, that they were a menace that had finally been driven out of the Plun-Darrian's solar system by a tragedy on their own home planet. Jax had been young, but he remembered the celebrations and the frenzy on Plun-Darr on the Thunderians' day of exodus. At the time, he'd taken joy in the fact that everyone else was so happy but now that he'd been shown true kindness by the same people he'd been told to fear, he no longer understood the elation of that day. And he found it ironic that in his time of desperation and loneliness, he took comfort in the memories of his time with the felines by daydreaming of them often. But the comparative tranquility of the moment was shattered by the sound of drunken shout fest and breaking bottles emanating from the nearby building. Jax, deciding it reminded him too much of home, slinked out of the alley and attempted to make himself as inconspicuous as possible by quickly weaving in and out of the crowds on the streets.

After venturing several blocks virtually unnoticed the crowds started to thin out. Ironically, Jax found the growing solitude eerie and paused at a deserted intersection to ponder his next move. By the looks of the buildings with their large smokestacks jutting into the night sky it was safe to assume he was in the manufacturing district of the city. Looking down the cross street to the east, he thought he spied an area of houses. Perhaps he'd find an outbuilding to curl up in within someone's yard for the night. But before the cub could investigate the idea further, he was scooped up roughly by the scruff of the neck by an unknown assailant and carried off into the night.



Jax was right about one thing. Though he knew the boy was gone, his father was not looking for him. Rather, he was on his way to a meeting with some higher-ups in the Plun-Darrian military, a stack of papers folded into his fist. Exiting the taxi, he hurried through the chilly air to a nearby building its glowing windows stretching up into the night sky. In the lobby, several of his comrades stood sipping drinks and talking among themselves.

"This better be worth coming all the way out to headquarters in the middle of the night, Adustus" scoffed a vultureman among the group as the jackal approached.

"It is," he replied curtly while holding out the papers for the small circle of officers to examine.

Their reaction was a mixture of shock and confusion until the vultureman broke the silence with braying laughter. "You call showing us children's artwork important? You have to be out of your mind!"

"Look closer, simpleton!" Adustus thundered, even though it wasn't too wise of him to lose his temper among higher-ranking officers. He'd already spent enough time in military prisons to know it wasn't pleasant and when it came to the Plun-Darrian military, you didn't have to do

much to find yourself there.

Though he glared at Adustus, the vultureman peered closer at the drawings. Indeed, the hand of a child made them, but it slowly dawned on the men what the drawings were of. It was rather crude in some ways, but there was no mistaking that sword, its bejeweled eye, or the feline creatures drawn next to it.

“Who drew these?” barked a rat among the group.

“My six-year-old son,” he answered matter-of-factly, knowing they’d realize what the implications were soon enough. It was well known that Thundera was destroyed years ago and that it was ensured by Plun-Darr that any survivors of the catastrophe went with it. The idea that a child of that age could draw such detailed likenesses without having seen the people or things himself was unthinkable. The rendering of the Eye was particularly impressive...few Plund-arrians had ever seen it and photos of it were rare if they existed at all, though its existence was legendary and power highly coveted. “He’d disappeared for some time and recently returned. He drew these shortly thereafter.”

The vultureman was still skeptical. “He could have gone to the library and saw pictures of it in a book,” he theorized.

The jackal regarded him levelly. “Not my son – he’s lazy and puerile. The damn fool wouldn’t know what a library is let alone how to use one. Besides, few Plun-Darrians have seen or been close enough to the Sword of Omens to take a good picture much less draw something like this – the only reason we recognize it is because of classified files. This means that he saw that Sword – and those Thunderians - with his own eyes.”

“Here on Plun-Darr?” a fellow jackalman questioned.

The rat snorted. “Not likely – we’d have picked up any ship that would have crash landed here and if it were Thunderian in origin, exterminated any survivors. No, somehow this boy traveled beyond Plun-Darr...”

Adustus nodded. “He did babble on about ships and forests and someplace called Third Earth. I thought he was just making up lies so I wouldn’t punish him for running away, but now...” He peered at the drawings, his beady eyes narrowing into menacing slits. “There might be some truth to his tale.”

The rat thoughtfully stroked his whiskers. “We did have the fleet that mysteriously disappeared some time ago...”

“Yes!” the jackal exclaimed, understanding washing over him. “I remember that, and it was around the time my boy disappeared.”

The rat nodded. “We did trace a few faint signals far out – maybe as far as the neighboring galaxy. We dismissed it as ghost echo at the time because it seemed physically impossible for the ships to be that far out that quickly, but...”

“It doesn’t make sense!” the vulture insisted, as his kind tended to be the logically inclined. “Who could live long enough to survive such a trip? Not to mention the time paradox!”

“If you shut your shrill beak, I’ll explain it to you birdbrain,” the rat spat. Adustus had to stifle a grin for vulturemen in general tended to annoy him. To see one put in his place was amusing to him. “The Thunderian ship that would have carried the Thundercats and the Eye would have been the flagship – the one that renegade no-good reptile Slithe tried to take and failed miserably.”

“So?” the vulture demanded impatiently, clearly unsatisfied with the story so far.

The rat shot him a warning glare. “Some of Slithe’s crew that did not pursue the ship beyond our astral borders reported that the Thunderian vessel had suspension capsules, which are

—”

“I know what they are,” the vultureman snapped. “I just didn’t realize they’d perfected them to the point where they’d work for such an enormous distance. Besides, from what the crew reported, the ship was damaged, and the Eye wasn’t there. We assumed they’d parish in space.”

Adustus shrugged. “They didn’t have a lot of choices but to try the capsules, it seems. But if these drawings tell us what I think they do, the capsules worked and the Thundercats along with the Eye of Thundera still exist. Speaking of Slithe...” He thumbed through the papers until he reached a sketch of what looked like Slithe and his crew of minions. There was also another paper beneath it that sported a drawing of a decrepit looking mummy with jagged bolts of lightning coming out of his hands as he stood outside a pyramid. None of the Mutants knew what to make of that, but the drawing of their fellow mutants surely had their attention.

“Of all the —” the vultureman began, too incensed for words at first. “That scaly coward knew the Thundercats and Eye survived the trip and didn’t report it? That traitor! Ratilla will have his head on a platter for this.”

The other jackal looked confused. “How did they make the trip? We don’t have age suspension technology even rudimentarily developed.” The Mutants were military minded and while much of their technology surpassed the Thunderians’ efforts, the ‘Cats did often surpass them when it came to the more fanciful sciences like cryogenics. If something couldn’t conquer a people or blow something up, the Mutants didn’t figure it as worth wasting funding on.

The rat shook his head. “No, but we do have some experimental speed ships that are said to be able to go fast enough to bend time, so to speak, if one dares push the upper limits. Perhaps Slithe is not such a coward — obviously, he dared. The disappearing fleet though — that’s the wild card in this. As well as how your son got involved.”

“We need to get this information to Ratilla immediately,” the vultureman announced, swiping the drawings from Adustus before he could protest. “And bring that boy of yours in for an interrogation.”

Adustus smiled sheepishly but didn’t want to admit the boy was missing again. He’d just have to find Jax and when this was over, make damn sure the boy never ran away again. Adustus was in charge of troops and found it embarrassing that he couldn’t keep a mere child reined in. That was going to change. “Will do.” He had a good idea where to start looking for a runaway cub.



Jax was dragged into one of the filthy factories by a burly monkian that didn’t look too friendly, and Jax was certainly no match for him — his struggles were in vain. His eyes nervously darted about the room, which was little more than a sweatshop full of dirty and tired children. Of course, Jax had never heard of such places, but he could tell right away he wasn’t going to like this. Yes, this might actually rival his home for the worst place on the planet.

“Work,” the monkian grunted threateningly before dropping him unceremoniously onto the filthy floor and leaving the frightened boy. Scanning the room, he could see adult monkians milling around in the shadows — no doubt gurards. Escape wouldn’t be easy. Jax nearly jumped

when someone grabbed him by the arm.

He looked into the weary dark eyes of a young hyena girl. She looked younger than he was. “Here, I’ll show you what to do so they won’t punish you.”

“Uh – okay,” he relented, letting the girl lead him to a conveyor belt that was moving along what looked like miniature mortar shells.

“Just make sure no bad ones get through or they’ll whip your hide,” she warned.

Jax looked alarmed. “How do I know if they’re bad?”

“If they’re damaged looking in any way, get them off the belt and into one of the boxes,” she explained, pointing to a row of boxes at Jax’s feet. “But don’t throw them in or they might blow up.”

Panic set in and Jax felt an overwhelming urge to run. This is not what he wanted. “I don’t want to,” he blurted.

She motioned for him to quiet down. “You have too,” she hissed.

“No,” he insisted. “I don’t care. I’ll do whatever it takes to get out of this insanity!”

“We have nowhere to go, we have to.” To her it was true. Some of the kids were runaways like Jax. Others had parents desperate enough to sell them to the seedier industries. None of them earned a wage and sometimes they didn’t even get a meal.

The girl looked taken aback as he turned on his heel and started marching down the aisle toward the door. Of course, the monkian that had grabbed him initially was on him in a moment, insisting that Jax get back to his workstation or else. Jax could feel his mind start to slip into its darkest of places, making the following events feel like they were happening in slow motion. The monkian grabbed him roughly by the arm, but not before a gleaming object on the factory floor caught Jax’s eye.

The next thing he knew, he was sitting on a city street, near where he’d started out the evening before, bloody and shivering. A uniformed Plun-Darrian rat snapped him out of his trance and he squinted into the afternoon sun to get a good look at him. It was nobody Jax knew, though he did recognize the uniform as military issue.

“Vulmar, I think I found him,” the rat called out, and in a moment a similarly uniformed vultureman appeared at his side. Jax tried to scramble to his feet but surprisingly found his muscles too sore to cooperate.

The vulture eyed the boy closely, yet neither seemed to care about the boy’s filthy, disheveled appearance. “You’re Adustus’s boy, aren’t you?”

Jax said nothing but the nearly guilty look on his face likely gave him away.

“Take him to Ratilla for questioning,” the vulture ordered, while the rat clearly looked annoyed at his comrade’s bout of bossiness, even as he bent and scooped Jax up compliantly. “He’ll surely want to know –”

The vulture’s words were cut short thanks to a frantic jackal that appeared from a nearby alley. “I’ve found Adustus,” the slight man blurted. “He’s been murdered!”

The vulture and rat exchanged shocked glances before following their coworker back into the alley. Sure enough, there lay Jax’s father, stabbed and bloodied. A shiny object lay near his body, likely the murder weapon. Jax, still held tightly in the steely grip of the rat, looked away but his face showed no emotion – he simply felt numb or in a daze, like he’d just awoke from a

deep sleep and was still trying to process everything.

After a long silence the vulture spoke. “When he took too long to fetch his son, I assumed he hadn’t wanted to admit the boy was gone again...”

The rat snorted, “Whoever did this, their days are numbered. Adustus may have been an unlikable prick but nobody does this to an officer in the Plun-Darrian military and gets away with it.” It was then that he shook Jax and demanded of him, “What happened here boy? Did you see who did this?” Jax simply stared at the stout rat blankly.

Indeed, they had a lot to talk about with Ratilla.



Jax never did get to see the aged rat that ruled over Plun-Darr, the one known as Ratilla, in person. But he did spend hours being interrogated by the rat’s underlings, including those who found him and his father. They wanted to know a lot of things – like how he came to draw what he had, how he’d got to where the Thundercats were and what happened in that alley with his father.

Hungry, frightened and tired, Jax reluctantly told them how he’d stowed away on one of the ships in the vanished fleet – though he couldn’t explain how or why it had simply disappeared in mid-space and the theories the adults spouted were beyond his understanding. Though when he mentioned his method of return via that horrifying mummy creature’s magic, the Mutants wondered if this being wasn’t powerful enough to exercise magical influence on them this far away. The prospect clearly made the adults uncomfortable. None of that mattered to Jax, he just knew he ended up on a place the natives there called Third Earth and that among the dwellers there were a small group of Thunderians. He spoke nothing of how the ‘cats took him in and how he’d grown to almost like them...the boy was young, but smarter than most gave him credit for. Jax also told them about Slithe and his crew at Castle Plun-Darr. The Mutants seemed intrigued, intermittently scribbling notes or whispering excitedly to one another.

As for his father, Jax didn’t have a lot of details as his memory of the night before was all but nonexistent. He told them of the factory, the girl, the monkian...his break for escape. It wasn’t until they investigated that Jax later learned what they’d concluded. Other children at the factory reported that, seeing what he was going to do, the girl created a distraction that allowed Jax to break loose and flee the building, though the monkian thug soon pursued. For her part in the escape, the girl was missing and the worst assumed – the punishment for helping someone escape wasn’t something you lived to regret. Jax couldn’t help but feel bewildered that a stranger would sacrifice so much for him, but he also felt grateful.

The object he’d swept off the floor was a straight blade they used to cut boxes in the factory, and it was used in Adustus’ demise. Even though Jax was actually found not sporting ordinary filth but actually covered in his father’s blood, it was decided that one so small could not have overpowered and murdered a jackal of Adustus’ size and training. Therefore the conclusion was that the monkian thug that had pursued Jax and Adustus caught up with Jax at roughly the same time, and the two adults struggled for custody of the boy culminating in the murder of the jackal. Though traumatized, they figured Jax escaped while the two struggled. The

search was on for the monkian thug, but Jax always wondered if he had a larger role in his father's death.

At any rate, Jax was eventually released to his mother, who ironically sold out Jax's services into the same black labor market he'd fled to support her alcohol habit now that Adustus was no longer around to put food – or more importantly to her – drink, on the table. All the while the higher-ups in the Mutant military greedily made plans to use the information he'd supplied about Third Earth and the Thundercats to pursue them and hopefully, come away with the ultimate prize – the Eye of Thundera. For now it would seem Jax's role in this historic turn was over, and he was destined to spend the rest of a likely short life wallowing in obscurity and misery.

*You caught mum chasing dad with a knife,
(Don't cry, don't cry)
You ran away to escape from the fights,
(Don't cry, don't cry)
Now you're lost in a maze of neon light,
And she's worried,
He's worried
She's worried, oh...*

*Pacing street-lamps on the highway,
Haystack for your bed
(Please come home)
In the morning we will find you,
In papers to be read
(Please come home)*

*You heard screams from
The warmth of your bed
(Don't cry, don't cry)
You slumbered on without being fed
(Don't cry, don't cry)
Now there's no more tears to be shed*

-Runaways, XTC